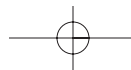
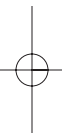
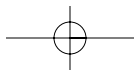
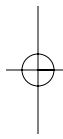
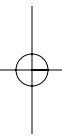




PART ONE





1

My Mother's Voice

THE FIRST sound I remember is the sound of my mother singing. Hers was a rich, full lyric soprano voice that seemed to soar when she sang certain notes, but could be soothingly mellow in the lower register. I suppose at some point I started to imitate her because the quality of my adult voice bears a similarity to hers. Mother called some of the songs she sang all day “long meters.” Others were church hymns. I am sure my affinity for singing spirituals is related to these expressions of her spirit. It was the basis of a profound bond between us.

When I was about five, Mother realized I could hold a tune. I imagine she paused, pleased and thinking that there was something special about what I was doing. So she taught me my first song, “Jesus Loves Me.” I sang it in our Seventh-Day Adventist church one Sabbath. I felt I sang it well. Dad really paid attention to what I was doing. I saw in his eyes that he was focusing on me with a seriousness beyond the usual. He leaned forward and put his hand to his chin, nodding his head and smiling slightly. Dad loved music. He conducted our church

choir. He also had a smooth baritone voice, though not as rich as Mother's soprano.

"Do you know you have a very lovely voice, little girl?" he said after the service. Suddenly, I felt a foot taller. I think it was at that exact moment that I became a singer.

MOTHER LOVED music, but spirituality and family were her deepest passions. She passed these feelings on to me, though not quite in the way she anticipated.

Mother's Catholic ancestors arrived in New Orleans in the late eighteenth century from Haiti, in the first wave of refugees from the 1791 Haitian Revolution. One of them, my great-great-grandfather Paul E. Morel, nicknamed "Deauville," fought in the American Civil War, initially for the Confederacy in 1862 as part of a volunteer group of blacks. Later that year, General Benjamin Butler persuaded the group to switch sides and fight for the Union. They were known as the Native Guards. According to family history, every Sunday Grandpa Morel dressed in his Union uniform and shouldered his gun. He received a government pension until he died in 1915.

Grandpa Morel's daughter Eugénie Morel, known as "Mamal," married a man whose surname was Joseph. Mamal's first child, Grandma Rita, was born and baptized in 1883. Mamal had another child, born in 1893, who died in infancy, and a daughter, Emily, born in 1895 after the death of her husband. Great-aunt Emily, whom we called "Malie," was very light skinned, while my grandmother Rita Joseph was dark brown. Like the rest of her family, Grandma Rita spoke French or patois, with English as her second language. Mamal made sure she had a strict New Orleans Catholic upbringing.

But Grandma Rita broke with Mamal's religious tradition when she decided to marry Walter Harris from Covington, Louisiana. He was a very light-skinned man, most probably a mulatto, what New Orleanians then called *passant blanc*. In other words, he was able to pass for white. More important to Mamal and Grandma Rita, how-

ever, was the fact that he was a Methodist, and the Catholic Church did not officially recognize a marriage outside the faith.

Grandma Rita and Grandpa Harris eventually had seven children, Noella, Elvira (Mother, born August 1, 1906), Gladys, Vivian, Hilda, Walter Jr., and Hazel. They spoke English instead of French as a first language, the first generation of Mother's family to do so.

Although the Catholic Church did not officially recognize her marriage, Grandma Rita raised all her children as Catholics just as she had been raised by Mamal. But in the early 1920s, after being rigorously recruited during what was called a "tent effort" of the Seventh-Day Adventist faith, Grandma Rita left the Catholic church. In time, I learned the story of her conversion to the religion that shaped my life.

When the Adventists came to New Orleans, Grandma Rita was moved by their marathon preaching sessions under huge tents. There she learned about the second coming of Christ. The preachers declared that Christ would appear in clouds coming from heaven, that God's law was still set out in the Ten Commandments, and that the true Sabbath was Saturday. Adventists held that although they were in the world, they were not of the world. This, of course, presented many restrictions. Adventists rejected divorce and lawsuits in general. They disapproved of opera, theater, and movies. Jazz, blues, or any hybrid of these traditions was taboo, as were card playing, gambling, and dancing.

To be an Adventist, Grandma Rita knew she would have to dress modestly. She could no longer wear clothes that accentuated her hips or breasts. Nor could she wear lipstick, jewelry, or elaborate hairstyles, because they called attention to her beauty. Dietary observances prohibited "unclean" foods like pork and shellfish. If one could not be a strict vegetarian, meats like beef, lamb, chicken, and fish (but not shellfish) were allowed. Of course, alcoholic beverages were forbidden, as was tobacco. After sunset on Friday evenings, she could no longer attend certain kinds of musical performances. Instead, she would have to prepare for the Sabbath.

Yet this was the faith she embraced. Several of those practices have

changed now, but under the tent Grandma Rita converted from one strict religion to a stricter one and brought her children with her, though not all at once.

MY MOTHER, in her late teens then and nearing marrying age, was allowed to make her own decisions about religion. Apparently, she liked what she heard from the Adventists because she joined the church after marriage, along with her sister Noella. Mother's sense of spirituality ran deep. Not only had she been raised as a Catholic, but, because of her Haitian background, she also knew something about the voodoo practices in New Orleans and strongly disapproved of anyone who practiced those negative arts.

MOTHER MET Dad at a house party in 1925.

In later years, Dad liked to say that he already knew her name was Elvira, because he had had a dream about her. He had also seen her a few times before but hadn't spoken to her, perhaps because he was only seventeen, two years younger than she was. At the party, he apparently seized his opportunity to meet her formally.

Young as he was, Leon Solomon Verrett was already a person of substance and action. He came from a line of builders and carpenters with a long history in Louisiana. According to Dad, the name Verrett originally belonged to a large family of carpenters and builders who had emigrated from France in the early nineteenth century and lived and worked on a plantation in Louisiana, close to where Dad was born years later.

Dad's father was named Joseph Verrett. He was born in the mid-1870s outside New Orleans. Around the turn of the century, Joseph married a woman named Mary Lee, who was definitely an African. "Lee" was obviously a plantation name. Joseph and Mary Lee Verrett settled in New Orleans and had eight children. Their oldest son, Harrison, was born in 1906. Dad was born in 1908. Then came Walter, Gus, Alphonse, Joseph Jr., Rosemary, and Selena. I knew them all very well.

Granddad Joseph Verrett was a master builder and carpenter. He could hang wallpaper, build beautiful furniture—you name it and he could do it. If a project had anything to do with construction or carpentry, my grandfather did it. He also loved words. He used to read the dictionary and correct people if they mispronounced anything. The man was a walking dictionary.

Granddad was also apparently a soft touch and sometimes did not get paid on time for the jobs he completed. When that happened, Dad went to demand the money.

Grandmother Mary Lee Verrett, who had learned to look up to this son, was well aware of this scenario and began saying to her husband, "If you can't get the money, let Leon do it. He'll get it done." This created some hard feelings between father and son, but not enough to disturb the business. Dad helped train his younger brothers as carpenters, painters, paperhangers, or all-around maintenance men. By the time Dad met Mother, he was already on his way to becoming a well-respected carpenter and painter, with increasing contact with the white world.

Since Dad and Mother were then both still in their late teens, they courted for more than three years. After they married, on January 30, 1929, they joined the Seventh-Day Adventists. Their firstborn, my brother David, arrived on November 13, 1929. I was born on May 31, 1931, at the Toureau Infirmary in New Orleans. Mother and Grandma Rita said I looked like a little Turk, with straight hair sticking out of my ears. Leon Jr. was born when I was two. Elvira came along in 1935; two years after that came Milton. Within eight years there were five of us.

Following in the path of Grandma Rita, Aunt Noella, and most black women of the New Orleans of her day, Mother had worked as a domestic in her youth. Proudly now, she managed her own home and family. Before we left home for any occasion, David, Leon, and I lined up for her inspection. My hair had to be neatly braided or combed and my teeth brushed. There could be no ashy knees, hands, or elbows. Mother was equally particular about her own appearance,

setting out her dress and shoes the evening before, to make sure everything matched. All of her life, she was conscious of what she wore and how she looked. Mother and Dad were both big on dressing appropriately. Dad often said, "Clothes do not make the man, but they can open the door."

As far as I know, Mother's only regret was never finishing high school. She often said that if circumstances had been different, she would like to have received her high school diploma and gone to college. At Dad's insistence, she remained a homemaker, but she wanted us to have all the opportunities she had missed. Her dictum was "Learn all that you can, because you never know when you'll need it." As our first teacher, she taught us to spell, recite poetic verse, and do simple addition and subtraction before we started school.

We also learned that outside our family, the world was not to be trusted. For our protection, Mother decided that we were never to eat in anyone else's home. Fearing New Orleans's old occult tradition, she never let anyone other than a close relative cook in her house, because they might put something in her cooking pots. When we children visited other people, we would generally go after dinner. And if we hadn't eaten, we were to politely say, "No, thank you very much, but we won't have any." We were not even allowed to drink water away from home. In case someone pressed us, Mother taught us to say we had to eat at home.

BY 1935, Mother and Dad had moved to 2135 New Orleans Street, between Miro and Galvez. My best friend in the neighborhood was Iris Charles. We did almost everything together, playing jacks, hopscotch, and with our dolls. Iris was also one of the few children Mother allowed to come into our home because she was so well behaved and polite.

It was an integrated neighborhood, not unusual for New Orleans in the 1930s, filled with working-class blacks and whites, many of them blue-collar laborers. Outside our neighborhood, however, the racial lines were more clearly drawn. Even if we rode on the same bus

as a white neighbor who had just borrowed some sugar from us, the white neighbor still sat toward the front of the bus while we stayed toward the back.

I got to see another side of the skin color issue through the eyes of a best friend and playmate from church. Jacqueline Mathieu and I were the same age and remained good friends up until her death just a few years ago. Her family had also left the Catholic Church to become Adventists. We didn't live in the same neighborhood, so we saw each other mostly on weekends or at church activities.

Both of Jackie's parents were very light-skinned. Her father was *passant blanc*. Several members of Mr. Mathieu's family passed as white. It was hard even for us to tell. Jackie, on the other hand, was darker than either of her parents or her brothers and sisters, who were also very light. Jackie's hair texture was closer to mine. Her other brothers and sisters had what was called "good hair," which was softer in texture and closer to white people's. This reality chafed Jackie throughout childhood and into adult life. When she visited her father's people, they treated her like a second-class citizen—unlike her brothers and sisters, who enjoyed a much warmer welcome from Mr. Mathieu's family. It got to the point where Jackie refused to see them. To compensate for his family's disgraceful behavior, Mr. Mathieu spoiled Jackie. He not only gave her material possessions, he allowed her to speak to him in an unheard-of manner. Even in front of me she called him names like "stupid" or told him, "Shut up!"

If I had ever tried that with Dad, he would have strapped me on my legs before I got out the "sh" of "shut up."

I WAS always a bit of a renegade. I barely escaped from one particular misadventure with my favorite uncle, Dad's brother Harrison. Ironically, music was involved. Uncle Harrison had left the building trade and become a full-time jazz musician. He had once played the banjo and piano with Papa Celestin's band in New Orleans. Sometimes when he came to our house to baby-sit, he played boogie-woogie tunes on the piano. Uncle Harrison encouraged me to dance and I complied. I would

shake, shake, shake, shake, shake my little hips to the music. Sometimes I even put my hands on my hips and shook like a grown person.

I knew it was against my religion. Mother and Dad did not approve of such music, much less dancing, even though Dad had once been a good dancer and had won a few community contests in his youth. So neither Uncle Harrison nor I ever said anything to Mother and Dad about our boogie-woogie dance sessions.

One day when I was alone, practicing my hands-on-the-hips shake, Mother came up behind me. She didn't punish me. She just stared at me, which was more than enough to make me stop. I wondered if she knew I had learned the dance from Uncle Harrison. She never said a word about it to me, but I wouldn't be at all surprised if she mentioned it to Dad. They were always very close.

One of my earliest memories is of Dad singing love songs to Mother. The most memorable was a delightful, simple little tune, "Just a Cottage Small by the Waterfall." Mother always smiled in silence while he sang to her. I heard that song so much, I memorized some of the words. Dad also played the saxophone. When I listened to him practice, something about those notes made me feel I could float away on the sound.

Music captivated me. After I sang "Jesus Loves Me" in church, Dad became my voice teacher. We started with simple church songs. As I became better at memorizing them, he taught me others that were more difficult because they required communicating more feeling. In one song, "I Stood on the River o' Jerdan," there was a passage, "just to see the ships com'a sailing over." I had a hard time singing those words as expressively as Dad wanted. We worked on that passage for a long time before he felt I was ready to sing it publicly.

Soon, I was singing at other Adventist churches in the New Orleans area, as well as at our own, at socials, or at regional church meetings with large audiences. Leon Jr. also had a very beautiful voice. Although we were young, we occasionally had family sing-ins, where all the children joined our parents to sing songs like "Dry Bones"; "Certainly,

Lord”; and “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” We sometimes sang for little parties at my parents’ home.

Dad taught me rituals to observe on days I performed. He said I should minimize my talking and not eat anything that could produce phlegm. He also told me to drink a lot of pineapple juice, because it contains a good digestive agent. I still find that’s a helpful thing for me. The performance-day rituals set me apart from my brothers and sister. I liked the attention I received when I was getting ready for an engagement.

Sometimes after my voice lessons, Dad rehearsed the church choir. Curiously, this was my introduction to opera, even though the church did not approve of opera performances or the stories from operas. Years later at Juilliard I discovered that many of our church songs came from operas. Melodies from opera arias or choruses were given sacred words and adapted as four-part choir hymns sung in the Adventist church. When I first heard the melody of the Pilgrims’ chorus from Wagner’s *Tannhäuser*, despite knowing nothing about the opera, I envisioned large numbers of people praying.

Dad also belonged to a choral group affiliated with Dillard University that was directed by a certain Dr. Hall. Dad learned a great deal about the mechanisms of the human voice from Dr. Hall. Dad carefully explained how to position my mouth, how to enunciate the words, and how to hold my diaphragm. I had no idea what a diaphragm was in those years, but I followed his example. When I sang solos in church, he sat in the audience. My eyes were glued to him, and I followed any gesture he indicated, including standing upright with my chest out, with fingers interlaced at the midsection. This was the singer’s stance. You can date singers of a certain generation by that stance. I broke many of Dad’s rules as I learned more about voice production myself.

Once, I was supposed to sing in church but had a cold. Dad told me I shouldn’t sing, but I wanted to do it anyway. I sang and the performance went badly, as far as I was concerned. After I finished, I walked out of the church and climbed into the backseat of our car, to

be alone with my disgrace. The next thing I recall was Dad opening the car door. He got in, sat beside me, and, after keeping silent for what seemed like an eternity, finally spoke.

“Shirley, you knew you had a cold and wouldn’t sing well, but you did it anyway. We won’t go over that again. But you did some good things in the performance.” He told me what he had liked and was very specific. He even demonstrated it for me right there, on the spot. He was always my greatest fan.

Dad was absolutely adamant about my having a career as a recitalist. He would not permit anyone to touch my voice. He told me I had a mature voice for my age and predicted for me a career like those of the great African American concert singers Dorothy Maynor and Marian Anderson. He was a big fan of Dorothy Maynor’s expressive soprano voice, particularly her interpretation of spirituals. He played Maynor’s and Anderson’s recordings for me. Even though I was a child of seven, the sounds of their voices fascinated me.

When I was a little older, Miss Maynor and Miss Anderson came to New Orleans to give recitals. I was in their audiences with Dad and Mother. Many other wonderful black singers delighted me in recital, but I have forgotten their names. I also enjoyed choral groups like the Wings Over Jordan and the Fisk Jubilee Singers, both of which specialized in singing spirituals.

I ENTERED the Adventist school when I was five. I didn’t want to be at home alone, so my parents let me go to school with David. My third-grade teacher was Miss Bradford, a tall, light-skinned young lady of about twenty. It was her first year in the classroom. One afternoon, Miss Bradford assigned the entire class an eight-stanza poem to be memorized and recited the next day. She said any child who didn’t learn that poem would be in trouble. I timidly protested that it was too much for us to learn overnight, since we also had math and other homework to do.

She said, “You can do it. Especially *you*, Miss Shirley Verrett, who are always reciting poems in church.” The tone of her remark didn’t

seem friendly, so it put more pressure on me. That night, Mother coached me. She always loved to drill me.

"Shirley, can you say this? Now give it a little more emphasis on some of the words," she used to say. She would give me a clue.

"I got it, I got it!" I'd reply.

As a result of all her coaching, I became a very good speller in my youth, in addition to learning the art of memorization. Eventually, when I entered college, I was told I had the highest scores in English of any freshman. To this day, I get very involved when I'm reading a book. I could never be a speed-reader, because I get bogged down in the beauty of words. As I read, I listen to the words in my head, painting pictures as I go along.

The following day, no one in the class knew all eight stanzas. When Miss Bradford came to my desk and asked me to recite, I looked at the floor and replied shyly, "Miss Bradford, I learned six of the eight verses, but I couldn't do it all." I looked up and saw in her face that she wasn't going for this explanation, and I didn't plan to take my punishment lying down. The standard punishment for misbehavior was a rap on the hands with a ruler. Miss Bradford gave me one rap. When it appeared that she intended a second one, I pulled back my fist, punched her in the stomach, and immediately began crying. The other children looked around at each other in disbelief.

Mother came to school immediately. She told Miss Bradford that the assignment was too much for a child to master overnight, because she herself had coached me through the material. But when we got home, she administered my punishment anyway, strapping me on my legs and hands, and made me apologize to Miss Bradford.

ONE DAY Aunt Noella, Uncle Walter, and Aunt Hilda arrived at our house and seemed unusually quiet. I couldn't hear what they said to Mother, but her hands flew up to her head as if she were shocked. She fell on Aunt Noella's shoulder and began crying softly. Aunt Noella hugged her and patted her back. I got real quiet and watched. Mother got her coat and left without saying a word.

“It was pressure,” I heard one of the grown people say, but I had no idea what it meant. Then David whispered to me that Grandma Rita had died.

She was one of the most important people in my life. I remember Aunt Noella’s wedding in August 1935, because Grandma Rita made my flower girl’s white dress and took me shopping for white shoes and socks. It mattered to me that she let me pick out the shoes and that we went out to eat afterward. When the day of the wedding finally arrived, I carried out my flower girl assignment without a hitch, and Grandma Rita was proud of me.

The sense of security I felt holding her hand still warms me. She was such a beautiful woman, tall and regal, with dark chiseled features and marvelous hair pulled back so you could see her striking face. Mother told me even then that I resembled her.

I don’t remember the funeral well, but I know I was there. It was the custom in New Orleans for children to go to wakes and funerals. Sometimes children were encouraged to touch the dead person, but I never did. There wasn’t a lot of talk about Grandma Rita’s death, but I understood that I wouldn’t see her again. A picture of her appeared on our fireplace mantel, tied with a black ribbon. For a while, Mother wore black dresses, as did my aunts. I often saw Mother looking at Grandma Rita’s picture. Even though she said nothing, I felt her sadness. One day, I went to her and hugged her. Tears rolled down our cheeks.

THE FOLLOWING year, Grandma Rita’s mother, Mamal, died. She was living with us at the time. She always called me Baby and told me what a pretty and well-behaved little girl I was. She slept in a brass bed with shiny knobs that I believed in my mind had once belonged to a royal person. When I waited on Mamal and brought her tea, I imagined that she was a queen and I was her servant.

Mamal died in the brass bed I loved so much. I wanted to keep it in our household, but Mother gave it to one of her sisters. In a brief time, I saw two generations of our family pass away.