

# Daisy Mae on the Bayou

## The Past Is Still with Us

We have helped to build America with our labor, strengthened it with our faith and enriched it with our song. We have given you Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Booker T. Washington, Marian Anderson and George Washington Carver. But even these are only the first fruits from a rich harvest, which will be reaped when new and wider fields are opened to us.

—MARY MCLEOD BETHUNE, NOVEMBER 23, 1939, "SAY IT PLAIN,"  
AMERICAN RADIOWORKS, AMERICAN PUBLIC MEDIA

The mood was festive, like a Friday afternoon before a three-day weekend. Trays of chicken fingers, meatballs, and assorted fruit filled the tables. My family was celebrating the sixty-first birthday of my mother, whom everyone called Peaches. But on Tuesday, November 4, 2008, the birthday cake was decorated in red, white, and blue, and carried the message: "Obama '08." Commentators had been buzzing all day long, and for months before that, that

Barack Obama was cruising toward victory as his Republican opponent stumbled through the final weeks of the campaign. The presidency, many at this party and throughout the nation felt, was now assured.

My grandmother Daisy Mae was among the handwringers, both fascinated and frightened by the campaign. She remembered vividly the day Martin Luther King Jr. was killed and wondered whether the country was ready for a black man and his family in the White House.

“I want him to win and I don’t,” she said. “I pray that he will be strong enough to clean up this mess, but I am afraid these people are going to try to hurt this man. Obama got a little white in him too, but he’s a black man. I want him to win, but thinking about what may happen to him, I am praying for him and his family.”

Two weeks shy of turning seventy-nine, the family matriarch had learned not to take anything for granted. Her life and her family were relatively secure by now, with steady jobs, houses they owned, and a feeling of confidence that her massive brood had advanced further than she had. The year Daisy Mae came into the world, 1929, the stock market crashed, plunging the world into the Great Depression. People her age remembered that even when the nation emerged from the fog more than a decade later, the vast majority of black people remained poor, subject to the whims of whites and certain only that equality with white people was a fantastical notion. So on Election Night, as history hung in the balance, Daisy Mae waited until the words flashed across the screen announcing that Obama would be the next president of the United States before passing out hugs and kisses and joining in the cheers.

*We won. We actually won.*

Daisy Mae grew up on a sugarcane plantation on the banks of Bayou Teche in southwest Louisiana, waking each morning in the same clapboard shacks where her bonded ancestors had slept. She cleaned white people’s homes, washed and ironed their clothes,

and pampered their children before going home to put supper on the table for her own. She married when she was fifteen, gave birth to fourteen children, and worked in the backbreaking sugarcane fields. Whites mistreated her because she was black, and her husband mistreated her because there was no one else to lash out at when he'd been called "boy" or "Uncle Tom" one time too many. He drowned his sorrows in liquor and women while she kept the family going.

Faith had seen her through, certain a better day would come. It did, though it came slowly. Her experience was not that of the angry South epitomized by George Wallace and Bull Connor, who unleashed dogs, fire hoses, and angry mobs on men, women, and children in Montgomery and Selma. People in Franklin, Louisiana, and in nearby nooks and crannies like Baldwin and the Alice C Plantation didn't buck the established hierarchy and sometimes seemed oblivious to the racial unrest in other Deep South cities, where blacks were sitting in at lunch counters, boycotting public buses, and marching to protest the systematic denial of voting rights through poll taxes and unfair tests required for voter registration.

But Daisy Mae, who knew her place in those difficult times, changed right along with the times. Blacks won the right to vote and to seek public office. One of her youngest children, Harrison Jr., won a football scholarship to Louisiana State University, which had been off-limits to blacks most of her life. Affirmative action and scholarships led to college degrees as her brood inched their way into middle-class lives in San Francisco, Atlanta, and Austin. And I, one of her oldest grandchildren, was a writer for the *Washington Post* and a budding author. Daisy Mae herself had risen far above her original station in life and was now living in a white brick house partially paid for by one of her sons, who had played nine years in the National Football League. But when a black man, about the age of her youngest son, walked across a stage in Denver and, to thunderous applause, accepted the Democratic nomination

for president of the United States, it was beyond her wildest dreams. Now he was president.

“I never thought I would see it,” she said. “Not in my lifetime.”

“Not in my lifetime” became a cliché during the campaign. Everybody said it.

Ever since I was a small boy, my grandmother and I had one continuous conversation that always involved my pushing her and her pushing right back. I would say things like, “When I grow up, I’m leaving this place and never coming back.” She said I would change my mind, that I was just young. But I was adamant. Franklin always felt too small, an accidental stop on the road to somewhere else. I never got too attached. I never had a girlfriend in the town because I didn’t want to be one of those people who had children young and got stuck. Most days, after school, I walked the few blocks from her house to Bunche Branch Library at the corner of Fourth and Willow streets. It was my personal portal to New York, the Kremlin, or wherever Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, or the Hardy Boys would take me.

I jumped out of the car when my parents dropped me off at LSU and was at home immediately. With all the new people and the wide-open spaces, the sprawling campus was everything that Franklin wasn’t: a daily intellectual adventure. I traveled the two hours home when prodded to do so or on holidays. After I graduated, I would visit four or five times a year to see my people, mainly my parents and my grandmother.

When Daisy Mae was diagnosed with cancer of the ovaries in July 2006, those trips acquired a new sense of urgency. My grandmother asked God why he’d given her the disease she had long dreaded. She suspected the answer lay in the foods she’d eaten, so she started juicing, tediously grinding up and drinking carrots,

spinach, and apples. She prayed for a miracle and wondered when she would die. We encouraged her to focus on life. Dying, we told her, would take care of itself.

Her mind remained sharp, and she followed the 2008 election closely. Like most African Americans, my grandmother considered the nation's forty-third president a clown. Louisiana and the Deep South as a whole make up the most reliably Republican voting bloc in America, with most whites taking a dim view of the Democratic Party's stance on such issues as affirmative action, gun control, and the rights of states to determine their own course without interference from the federal government. These issues have remained essentially unchanged since the post-Civil War Reconstruction era, and it's no surprise that blacks see things quite differently. In St. Mary Parish, where my family has lived for generations, snug against the Gulf of Mexico, whites and blacks work side by side and clamor for good-paying union jobs at carbon-black plants, in the shipyards, and on oil rigs. But like the rest of the nation, they go their separate ways when they socialize, worship, and vote for governors and presidents.

"George Bush is a fool," Daisy Mae told me, spitting the name like it was rancid. "He looks crazy."

"That's the president of the United States. George W.," I said, egging her on.

"The one that got us in this mess we in now," she said.

"He said he was going to smoke 'em out, get 'em running," I said theatrically.

"I hope they smoke him out first," she said. "Look at those poor people, no legs, no arms, can't do a thing for themselves, or for their family. A lot of people say he's trying to get revenge for whatever happened to his daddy. Whoever gets in there next is going to have to clean up the mess he made."

At the time, in March 2007, she didn't think Barack Obama had a chance, nor did I. Within months, his African name would

come easily and often to her lips. She would become familiar with his policies. She would pray for him, even though she could hardly recognize the world he spoke about, a world in which white youth by the thousands shouted, “Race doesn’t matter.” It had always mattered in Daisy Mae’s world. Barack Obama was not black like her. She couldn’t imagine his Indonesian childhood or the Kenyan village of his father. But she understood quickly that he was black enough for some whites to want to kill, black enough for her to see her own children in him, and black enough, surely, to be proud of.

For most of Daisy Mae’s life, free expression was not an option. On the plantation, everyone understood the rules: white people talked, black people did what they were told.

Alice C Plantation was named for Alice Calder, the wife of the man who once owned the property and the black slaves who worked in its fields. The main plantation, or Big House, is an 1850s Greek Revival–style structure with a grand foyer and august columns.<sup>1</sup> At the rear is a sweeping lawn that rolls right up to Bayou Teche. Stately oaks, dripping with moss, oaks that shaded my grandmother, my mother, and me as we each played under them as children. We all hid from the sun under those trees, ran up those steps, and rolled in that dirt, oblivious to all that had gone on before.

This is the Deep South, its principal cleavage that between black labor and white wealth. In 1860, St. Mary Parish was home to 13,057 slaves, more than just about any other parish in the state.<sup>2</sup> My grandmother was born there on November 22, 1929. There are no records of her birth, but she knows that to be her birthday because a family friend remembered that her own daughter had been born the same day. When she was two months old, my grandmother was given away by her mother, who worked for

a white family that was moving to New Orleans and forbade the young woman to take the child along.

Daisy Mae ended up with Willis “Papa” Jones and his wife, Ma Bertha, who died when my grandmother was five. Ma Bertha was a faint memory for my grandmother, but Papa’s second wife, Kizzie, remained a source of raw contempt more than a half century later.

“She was an old devil,” Daisy Mae said of her stepmother. “That old girl was mean. She never had any children of her own. I was just something that if she felt like she wanted to beat on, she did it. Papa didn’t know about all of that. I never told him. I don’t blame him. He was a good old soul.” Papa’s house was “down the quarters,” in the vernacular passed down from slavery, referring to the original slave quarters. Their house had two rooms, a bedroom and a catchall room where Daisy Mae slept on a sofa bed and the family ate its meals and socialized. The black farmworkers—like Papa, my great-grandfather—raised a little of everything. “Mustard greens, turnips and okra, chickens, hogs, and turkey,” my grandmother said. “Most of the time, we had meat to go along with gravy and rice.”

Big families were the norm. Schoolchildren walked an hour each way to attend school in Franklin, the closest town. My grandmother wanted to be a nurse but quit school in the eighth grade to help out on the plantation. At Alice C, the sugar-grinding mill churned nonstop October through January until it was dismantled in the 1950s. During grinding, every hand was needed to bring in the crop. Slavery might have been outlawed after the Civil War, but life on the plantation for Daisy Mae moved to the same cyclical rhythms that her ancestors had known.

On the plantation, long after slavery had ended, blacks were treated like children, with whites as their wiser guardians. Workers paid no rent or utilities. If they got sick and went to a doctor, the bill was sent to the office manager at the plantation, who took it out of their pay a little at a time. At the company store the store

clerk decided when the unannounced credit limit had been reached. Discrepancies involving pay or store charges went unchallenged, and workers were not expected to know or care about politics. It was not until 1968—three years after the Voting Rights Act—that a majority of black citizens participated in a national election. But participating, for Daisy Mae, did not necessarily mean free choice.

“The overseer would say, ‘There’s an election coming up and this is who you’re supposed to vote for,’ ” Daisy Mae told me.

Now, she was free, no longer a washerwoman, her body failing but her faith intact. Obama was proof, living proof, that God answers prayers and that he does not want black people to ever abandon hope, to ever surrender to despair, because in his kingdom, change is possible, and as imminent as the sunrise. In 1961, as Obama entered the world, Daisy Mae could not even imagine the five-mile journey that would take her fifteen years later from the plantation of her birth to a home that she owned. She doesn’t know quite when the light turned, but by the spring of 2008, my grandmother began to dream the impossible. It changed her. Where once she took in only game shows, baseball games, and the local news, she began watching CNN, Fox, and MSNBC religiously, hoping to get her daily fix of Barack news. Where was he? What did he say?

For eight years, she had been told that the number-one threat to America was terrorism. But in her lifetime, the people who terrorized black people didn’t have foreign-sounding names, and they didn’t wear masks. Their dirt was done in the light because their authority was exercised with impunity. It wasn’t physical abuse she feared, but being stuck, as a poor black woman with little education, on the bottom rungs of society, dominated at home and an afterthought to politicians and policy makers.



The Franklin of my grandmother's formative years was much the way Obama, in *Dreams from My Father*, described the empty plains towns that reared his grandmother, "a place where fear and lack of imagination choke your dreams so that you already know on the day that you're born just where you'll die and who it is that'll bury you."<sup>3</sup>

Daisy Mae could relate. "I never watched that much politics," she said. "There was always something else to do. This is the first time I have had time to watch and listen to comments, just to show these people who never did give black people that much credit. I just didn't think he would do well enough to have a chance to win this election."

She had always voted, or at least for as long as white folks allowed, but she had never felt really vested in the outcome, and with good reason—Louisiana politicians like Representative Hale Boggs, who headed the Dixiecrats, the white, southern Democrats who vehemently opposed desegregation and equal rights for black people. But during the final stretch of the 2008 campaign, she proudly wore a bright multicolored Obama T-shirt proclaiming "Change." She began rethinking race, and she marveled at the unbridled enthusiasm of Obama's youthful white supporters and his endorsement by the Kennedys. Conversations with one of her closest neighbors exposed a rift—Daisy Mae realized that her long-time neighbor was a not-so-closeted Republican, a black woman who actually felt sorry for Sarah Palin when she was criticized by the media.

Harrison Francis was born in 1906 on the nearby Oaklawn Plantation, but when he was in his teens, he found work driving trucks and running errands at Alice C. He didn't read much but was pretty good with numbers, and at the sugar mill, he blew the

horn to mark the shift change. Unlike the other workers who were tied to their posts, he occasionally traveled the state on errands and was allowed to take a work truck home with him at night and on weekends. All in all, it was a pretty good job for a black man. Other blacks on the plantation took a more dim view: Uncle Tom.

He met Daisy Mae Jones when she was thirteen or fourteen years old. Anxious to get away from her stepmother's abuse, she quickly took up with this man who was twenty-three years her senior. "The condition I was in with that woman, I was ready to get out of there," she said. "I thought maybe he was the one who was supposed to take me out of the situation at home." A year later, they were married by a justice of the peace.

They moved to Houston to live with my grandfather's aunt, and Daisy Mae had envisioned a place where she would have her own room and new adventures. But this place was even more isolating than the plantation. The aunt lived in a home far from the city center and, to make ends meet, had boarders moving in and out of the house all the time.

"You'd wake up and two new people had replaced the people you'd met the day before," Daisy Mae said. "We were on top of each other. You always think the grass is greener. But when I got the letter from Papa telling me that he needed help because his wife had taken sick, I was never more excited to get back to the plantation."

Her first child, Harold James, was born in 1945, followed by the rest in quick succession: Carol Ann; my mother, Louise (Peaches); Raymond (Blackie); Michael (Weechie); Wallace (Boley); Octavia (Taye); Willie; Samuel Joseph; Harrison Jr. (June); Herman; Gerald; Darrell; and Ray Anthony, who died at birth. In the family's early years, they lived a meager existence without electricity or indoor plumbing. Water had to be fetched from a well. The children recalled that white people would stop their cars and take pictures of them all the time.

With both parents working into the late afternoon and evening, the older kids took turns skipping school to care for the younger siblings. From early on, the power relationship was clear: Daddy—even his grandchildren called him that—came and went as he pleased. Daisy Mae raised the children and kept quiet. She leaned on her two oldest daughters to help with the chores. Carol Ann was a Daddy's girl, getting him to give her special meals or win her favor with moon cookies, pig's feet, and soda. Peaches, meanwhile, stuck close to her mother. She was the only one of Daisy Mae's children never to move away.

Society was in turmoil. The landmark Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. the Board of Education* was followed by the Montgomery bus boycott, the murder of Emmett Till, and the budding civil rights movement. Blacks' anger and frustration had reached a boiling point. Daisy Mae didn't join the protests; no one on the plantations did. They had work to do and kids to feed, and cities like Selma and Montgomery and Birmingham seemed far away from Alice C. Daisy Mae worked in the cane fields for a while, but when she saw a snake lurking in the rows of cane, it was her last day. The following morning she went looking for work in white people's houses. She took whatever pay they offered.

Daisy Mae and Daddy—his friends called him Bruh—were disciplinarians at home. They loved their children but didn't spare the rod. Tree switches and belts often left welts. For some reason, Blackie was the one who most frequently caught whippings. Once when he was young, Blackie ran from Papa instead of submitting to a whipping. Papa picked up his double-barreled shotgun and fired. He missed but sent a clear message: respect your elders and take what's coming to you.

For girls at that time, the primary goal was to marry someone who would take them away from their parents' house, where they had an inordinate share of the household duties. For fun, they jumped rope, played hopscotch, and braided tall blades of grass,

adorning them with ribbons or barrettes to make dolls that they played with for hours. And all of the children worked. Boley, for instance, had part-time summer and weekend jobs in the cane fields and the salt mines. He worked as a bricklayer's apprentice and a construction worker, and after work he would go to the local segregated high school to run bleachers to get into shape. His dream was to play pro football. "If I didn't get a scholarship," he said, "I was going to the marines. I didn't want to work on the plantation. I didn't want to be a welder. I wanted to get away."

He did get away, following two brothers to the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff. He got a scholarship and starred in football, sometimes with family members watching from the stands. But one moment from Boley's collegiate career is seared in Daisy Mae's memory. She had received a letter from the university and needed to respond. Postage was three cents at the time. She had two.

"I searched all over the house and couldn't find a penny," she said.

After that, even as the value of the penny diminished to nearly nothing, she said could never pass one without picking it up. As a result of her penny-pinching ways, she became the equivalent of the family banker, telling each of us to always put something aside and bailing out many of her children and grandchildren when they had spent beyond their means. No matter how tough times were, she always had a stocking, a coin purse, or a bank account somewhere with a little something in it.

President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society programs had an impact on Daisy Mae's family. The passage of minimum wage laws meant that white women who normally kept her working from early in the morning until six at night began to dismiss her hours earlier to avoid paying extra. Food stamps were a big help. Around the same time, the family moved from the brown clapboard plantation houses that all the black farmworkers lived in to a large boarding house right next to the big white plantation house, which everyone called the office. It was painted white,

with an expansive porch. It had been used for seasonal workers and to dispense meals. The kitchen had two large metal sinks and an industrial stove. It had an indoor bathroom and running water in the kitchen, and had served as a gathering place for people up and down the quarters.

But before the family moved in, the plantation owners made one significant change to the house. They enclosed the porch, converted it into a bedroom, and moved the main entrance to the other side of the house. No one said so, but the message was clear: a white house and a huge porch filled with black children would've offended whites with business at the plantation. For years it was the only house on the plantation without a porch, and years later, when Daisy Mae's family bought their first home and left the plantation, the original porch was restored.

On moving day, Daddy initially refused to go. He had lived on the plantation all his adult life. When he needed an advance on his paycheck, he shuffled to the office to ask Mr. Mac for the money. As the move got closer, Mr. Mac asked him a pointed question: How much did you pay for the house? Daddy hadn't put any money into the deal, but he knew how much the house cost, and he told Mr. Mac, "Thirty thousand dollars."

Daddy was a hard drinker of cheap liquor. He smoked Pall Malls and could be assertive, even abusive, at home. But change scared him. As a boy, I wondered why he said "Yes, sir" and bowed his head in the presence of teenage boys not much older than me. Once, much later in life, when one of his sons introduced him to a white woman he was courting, Daddy shuffled away apologetically, afraid that someone would kill him for such an offense. In reality, he thought very much like a slave, so when his boss told him that the new house was too good for him, he told his family to make the move without him. That was in 1975. "You shouldn't have told him anything," Boley scolded his father. "He didn't pay a penny on it." When the old house was emptied, Daddy went along with the last load.

Two years earlier, the family had hit the lottery, or at least it felt like it at the time. My uncle Boley, an all-American receiver in college, had been selected in the fifth round of the National Football League draft by the Buffalo Bills. Weeks before the draft, on January 5, 1973, the *Franklin Banner* ran an article that filled an entire inside sports page. The headline read: “The Francis Family—An Athletic Legend.” On the page were nine of the ten boys, seven of them wearing letter jackets from high school or college. Harold, the oldest, had been an all-American in track at the University of Arkansas—Pine Bluff for four years. He had broken the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics record in the 440-yard dash and was the sixth-best quarter-miler in the world in 1968.<sup>4</sup> At the Olympic trials, Harold ran his best time ever, but failed to make the team.

In the middle of the newspaper photo was a proud but unsmiling Harrison Francis Sr., standing tall and lean next to his boys. “There was no football around for me when I a kid,” he told the newspaper. “I did play baseball, and I guess ever since then I wanted my kids to participate in athletics. I pushed them hard, but I believe they are glad of it.”<sup>5</sup>

At the time, Daddy was still on the plantation, rising early to drink black coffee next to the gas heater with white-hot bricks. He was responsible for keeping up the yard, and he would take us with him to tidy up around the office next door, which never seemed dirty when he took me along. But all around him, the world was changing. Several of his sons had gotten athletic scholarships to college. Blackie had gotten married. Carol Ann was overseas in England with her husband, a local boy. Now Boley was moving the remaining family members off the plantation and into town. He would play nine years in the NFL, for the Buffalo Bills alongside O. J. Simpson and later for the Atlanta Falcons. During his rookie year, he led the league in kickoff-return yardage and ran two back for touchdowns.

His first contract was for \$35,500 over two years, with a \$6,000 bonus. One thousand went for a down payment on a bright red Toyota Celica, \$3,700 to purchase a lot next to Park Avenue High School, where he planned to build his parents a new home. Instead, more than a year later, he put \$6,000 down on a \$30,000 home that he bought from his former high school football coach. It was the first home anyone in the family owned. Daddy was proud but didn't like that his son had taken to giving him advice. On one weekend trip home, Boley told his father, "You have to stop that drinking. You been wrecking cars. Slow down on that drinking." This was the same son who had ruined two cars, one in a car accident, the other by driving twenty miles to Jeanerette in low gear. Daddy nodded, pretending to agree. No sooner had his professional-football-playing son pulled away than he grumbled to the other children: "Goddamn boy come here telling me what to do. Think he some kinda goddamn Philadelphia lawyer." Daddy kept drinking, and running into things, for another decade.

"Poor Bruh," Daisy Mae said. "He never got out of that slave mentality."

But to the family, he was no caricature. Later in life, he would take the grandchildren fishing and hunting on Saturday morning, pointing out things to avoid, like snakes. He was a binge drinker on weekends but a breadwinner who rarely drank during the workweek. He never missed work, and his bosses trusted him more than they did the field hands. "He never drove tractors," Daisy Mae said. "He never worked in the fields. There were a lot of people who would have liked to have had that job. But for whatever reason, he got the job. I don't know how he got the job. It was a good job. They trusted him. He did whatever they told him to do."

. . .

Daisy Mae could justifiably have complained about the way my grandfather treated her. Daddy rooted for the Dodgers, and my grandmother rooted for the Atlanta Braves. He took particular glee when the Dodgers beat the Braves. It's unclear whether his love was a nod to Branch Rickey's decision to bring Jackie Robinson into the fold or just another petty dig at his wife. But two decades after his death, she took a more compassionate view. His bedroom, across the hall from hers, remained much as it was when he died. It was the only one with an attached bathroom, but she never moved into it. Their relationship was never all it could or should have been. They talked at, not to, each other, about the children and about money.

"I'd get so angry," she said. "I'd be sitting there counting on my fingers and he'd come up with the answer. He worked it out from the top of his head and I would get angry. I think about the old boy all the time. I think that I could have helped him through what he was going through. But I didn't know how. There were things we should have talked about. You're supposed to be able to talk."

The move from the farm to town was a life changer for Daisy Mae.

"It was great," she said. "It was a joy. The one thing I appreciated about that was you could have hot water. Before, you had to heat up your water. It was a different way of life."

She was no longer isolated on the farm. She still didn't drive, but now she could walk places. One of those places, just across the street, was Willow Street Elementary, the former Negro school she had attended as a child. She was hired as a cook. Her boss was a black woman. "I never dreamed of that," she said.

White people in town were jealous of her house with the soaring picture window. A white woman who had once hired her to clean her house was shopping in St. Mary's Hardware Store, on Main Street, on the day Daisy Mae went in to buy a new vacuum



cleaner. It cost ninety dollars. She paid cash. The woman, who had never telephoned her before, called shortly afterward. “She asked if I knew anyone who could clean her house,” Daisy Mae said. “She said, ‘You’re probably too busy with your new house.’ I told her yes I was and that I didn’t know anyone. She wanted to put me in my place.”

Daisy Mae was no longer a washerwoman. She could pull in a hundred dollars on the days she baked sweet potato and apple pies. Daddy still worked on the farm, doing less and less but still collecting his paycheck every two weeks. They still needed the money to pay the mortgage of \$234.34 a month. The plantation owners continued to pay Daddy years after he had stopped going to work. But when he died in 1986 of prostate cancer, Daisy Mae was on her own.

Her life had been put nearly on hold as Daddy languished in bed, shriveling into nothing in his back room. Once he was gone, she traveled more, visiting children and grandchildren all over the country, including a trip to Hawaii to visit her granddaughter Rhonda and Rhonda’s husband, Fred. It was a bittersweet trip. She and Rhonda’s mother, Carol Ann, had planned the trip to celebrate a new addition to the family. The baby died at birth. Both mother and grandmother knew Rhonda’s pain, as each of them had lost a child at birth.

For Daisy Mae’s seventieth birthday, family members came from all over the country for a surprise party at the Broussard-Harris Recreation Center in Franklin. It had been named for two young black boys who drowned in 1972 while swimming in the bayou. They had gone there because the recreation center with a pool—the white rec as it is still known—didn’t allow black children to swim there. But on November 22, 1999, the place was decked out for a party. There were balloons, white tablecloths, and a deejay. Her children and grandchildren gave her money, delivered tributes, danced, and recited poetry in her honor. She cried,

posed for pictures, and cried some more. “I had never had a birthday party before. I didn’t think that would ever happen to me. I just remember all the family, all the food, everything that was done. I enjoyed every bit of it.”

Daisy Mae was an elder, a deaconess, at Triumph Baptist Church. People would flock when she arrived to take her seat, stage right, front row, one pew in front of the pastor’s wife. She was a member of the pastor’s aid society and helped to cook dinners for funerals and celebrations. Her favorite pastor for many years was Reverend Moore, but in 1990, just as the prayer service was about to begin one Wednesday night, his estranged wife shot him in the head as he exited the pastor’s study. He died in the hallway. Church members were traumatized.

By the fall of 2008, Daisy Mae was thinking often of her own mortality. As always, her thoughts returned to the sacrifice of Jesus, who spilled his own blood to wipe away her sins. It had become difficult to rise in the morning. Her right side, where the bulk of the tumor was located, ached. The tips of her fingers and toes felt like they’d been stuck with needles. Her right ankle was chronically swollen. Still, she would put on black dress shoes, stockings, a stylish grayish white suit with an ankle-length skirt, and a shiny brown silk hat. When we arrived just before eight in the morning, the church was nearly empty. The organist was setting up, the deacons huddled in the back. She hummed and nodded her head to one of the first songs highlighting the trials of a Christian, who, through good and bad days, remains steadfast in his beliefs, unwilling to complain.

“Thank you, Jesus,” she said, nodding her head.

It was pastor appreciation day, and the pastor, Clarence Stewart, was about the same age as her eldest boy. She loved him like a son, but at the moment, she was at odds with him. He was

leading the charge to build a new sanctuary, and my grandmother and several older members felt it unnecessary. The guest preacher that day might have been talking to her.

“Church members going one way,” the guest preacher said, “Pastor going another. That’s disobedience. That won’t be tolerated. The pastor is the overseer of the flock.”

She had dutifully done what she was told for so long that now Daisy Mae had become a bit of a maverick. This “overseer” talk was the language of the plantation, of masters and slaves. She had always been more of a peacemaker than a rabble-rouser, but in the sunset of her life, her tongue loosened to speak. And later she confided that she doesn’t like it when people—authority figure or not—don’t tell the truth. She didn’t like it when people got up at Daddy’s funeral and talked about how nice he was. We loved him, but he was just as likely to curse you out as look at you. She didn’t like it when George Bush told lies. And she didn’t like being bullied from the pulpit into thinking a certain way. That’s why she was so enthralled by Obama’s promise of change and hope. She had become resigned to the reality that her days on earth were numbered, that perhaps she wouldn’t survive another year. She gave away things that she treasured most, including a blue and white ceramic bowl that belonged to Papa. It now sits atop a cabinet in my kitchen.

“When I first discovered that I had cancer, I was amazed at myself,” she said. “I have always been afraid of cancer. Oh, yeah, I was upset at first. But I don’t worry about this because it’s there. Worry is not going to remove it. And when the time comes that I got to, well hey, I gotta go.”

It’s not that she wanted to die. But she had an abiding hope that she would go to heaven, and that her family would prosper after she was gone. Obama represents part of that hope. With his victory, her life has come full circle. Her life embodied his message. She understood that lives and countries can be transformed over time and with determination. As a little girl with a lazy left eye, she was made

to feel like a nobody by her peers. Her dreams of becoming a nurse were doused by the reality of an early marriage, children, and piles of ironing for white people. But in her later years, she had a seat in the front pew at church. She flew first-class in airplanes. Her thirteen children all have owned homes. Her children and grandchildren—her blood—work in jobs that take them all over the world. Even those who’ve faltered, she once said, have had opportunity.

Daisy Mae was most thankful that she was not alone. Peaches, my mother, picked her up every evening and took her to our home five miles away. She would eat dinner there every night, sleep there, and then spend the daylight hours in her own home, receiving visitors and taking phone calls. She was no longer a lonely plantation girl. When those in authority spoke, she no longer had to submit. Her pastor thought they needed a new church. She wasn’t so sure. Her president said the Iraq War was a good and necessary thing. She vehemently disagreed. When either of them spoke a truth that wasn’t her truth, she would call them on it. Obama said a change was going to come. For her it already had.

Election night, November 4, was Peaches’s birthday, and about twenty relatives and friends arrived for the festivities. Applause, cheers, hugs, and tears flowed as the returns came in, and shortly after ten o’clock central time, Obama was projected to become the forty-fourth president of the United States.

The next afternoon, the headline in the *Banner-Tribune*, the one that years earlier had trumpeted her family’s athletic prowess, read: “McCain favored by state voters.”<sup>6</sup> The article did not mention that Obama would soon become the next president. There was no picture of Obama and his family, only a sidebar that said he was to begin receiving intelligence briefings. The local news program, *Teche Talk*, didn’t mention Obama’s victory at all the next morning.

It was a reminder to Daisy Mae that the past was still with us. A week later, Louisiana was again in the news for the wrong reason. In Bogalusa, sixty miles north of New Orleans, eight people were arrested after an Oklahoma woman was shot to death when her initiation into the Ku Klux Klan went awry. Photographs of white robes, large Confederate flags, and confiscated weapons were beamed across the airways as a stark reminder of how the South's racist and violent past was still present.

Daisy Mae couldn't get over her hometown newspaper.

"They're not admitting that he's president," she said. "It shocked me. I didn't think they were that bad. I don't know if it's racist, but they didn't mention it. If it would have been McCain, it would have been all over the front page."

She canceled her subscription to the newspaper, even though her son continued to buy single copies and bring them to her.

In February 2009, a month after the inauguration, Daisy Mae had just returned from the wedding of a granddaughter in Atlanta. Remarkably, she was still able to travel and to feed and bathe herself. She had begun wearing adult disposable underwear as a precaution, and her navel bled periodically. But her oncologist, who had long ago said there was nothing more he could do, had invited her back for return visits, marveling at the vigor with which she was living life. He had wanted to debulk—or surgically remove—as much of the tumor as he could when she was first diagnosed, but he didn't spare his grim prognosis once the chemotherapy had stopped holding the tumor at bay. Now when she visited, the doctor couldn't stop smiling, and he even called in two other oncologists to take a look at what to him seemed like a medical anomaly. But on the day of a scheduled visit in late February, she woke up in pain at her daughter's apartment in Houma, Louisiana, halfway

between Franklin and New Orleans and serving as her regular pit stop for doctor visits. But instead of going to New Orleans, she went to the nearest emergency room for a steady pain.

A doctor took a look and said there was nothing to be done: the pain was the result of the cancer. All he could do was prescribe pain medication. It was a turn, family members realized, for the worse. It was the first time she hurt too much to take all of her calls. She began spending large parts of each day in bed, getting up only to use the bathroom and to eat. She took the pain pills that she'd vowed not to take. Her children decided to hire someone to sit with her every day and began regular weekend conference calls to get updates on her progress. Daisy Mae got on the phone each week to give updates and listen to her thirteen children clown around like they did when they were all under a single roof. "Is Blackie on the line? What about Taye? Now don't y'all start all that joking around already. Is anybody coming to visit this weekend?"

"It felt like we were all in the same place," she said of the calls, looking forward to them and commenting when a week or two went by without one. Even when she wasn't feeling well enough to talk, she popped on to say hello and tell everyone she loved them. Peaches also stopped taking Daisy Mae home to her house each night. As they had done when she was first diagnosed, Peaches started living with her again, even though her husband—my father—has heart problems, diabetes, and liver disease. Weechie stayed with Daisy Mae each afternoon while my mother went home after work to cook and relax for a couple of hours.

One afternoon, when Peaches was at work, Daisy Mae fell asleep in the tub. She woke up disoriented, with water all around her, and immediately yelled, "Peaches! Peaches!" A granddaughter who had come to stay for a few days came running to calm her. At that moment mother and children officially switched places—the protector of her brood for nearly eight decades was now in their hands.

On good days and evenings they continued their campaign routine of watching the news. All around Franklin, McCain/Palin signs still dotted yards. But most of the world, like Daisy Mae, had settled in to the reality that Obama was president. “Everywhere you look,” she said, “Obama, Obama, Obama.” But more important, each day brought some new, or at least more pronounced, sign of her ailment: her fingers felt like there were pins sticking in them, her left side was sore all the time, her stomach protruded now as the unwelcome guest pushed against her organs. She felt full all the time. She felt constipated. She could still laugh, but her mind, now, was stayed on Jesus, an oft-repeated phrase in the Baptist church and gospel songs. One Sunday, when she was too sick to go to church, she gathered everyone for a small service in her room. After a Bible reading, she sang this old spiritual, in the drawn-out way of the Baptist Church:

Jesus, keep me near the cross;  
There a precious fountain,  
Free to all, a healing stream,  
Flows from Calvary’s mountain.

In the cross, in the cross,  
Be my glory ever,  
Till my raptured soul shall find  
Rest beyond the river.

A steady stream of children and grandchildren began to make what felt like final trips home. But Daisy Mae’s mind remained sharp as she counseled one grandson to get his anger problem in check and work things out with his estranged wife. She lamented that two other grandsons continued having babies without, she felt, considering what it took to raise such large broods these days. A daughter and a granddaughter were supposedly dieting, but she noted, “I looked every whichaway and I can’t see where they lost

weight.” She had long lacked a filter for her words, but her directness grew as she aged. She spoke without malice, saying exactly what she saw. “I could never look down on anybody,” Daisy Mae said, her body racked with pain, stomach bloated with a cancerous growth and fluid buildup. “My mother gave me away. I had a husband who was there when he was there and when he wasn’t, well, he wasn’t. I had low self-esteem. When somebody said something about me, I would cry.”

But her days of crying over idle talk had ended. Her children were still alive, none of them in jail. She owned her own home. She was debt-free and kept her taxes paid. She marveled that in all her years as a daughter, wife, and mother, she never thought she’d have days when she had no one to cook and clean for and didn’t have to feel guilty about it. She spent days lazing in her front yard, looking at the flowers or, when the sun was scorching or rain pouring, sitting in the shade of her screened back porch. She had done all she could. Even her funeral, when the time came for that, was paid for. She had never wanted to be a burden. And, to boot, a black man had been elected president in her lifetime. Lying in her bed in the wee hours one morning, unable to sleep, she thought back through her good days and her bad days and concluded confidently, “I had a good life. I’m satisfied.”