

Excerpt: 'The Warmth of Other Suns'

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"The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration"

(Random House)

Chapter 1

1

Chickasaw County, Mississippi, Late October 1937

Ida Mae Brandon Gladney

The night clouds were closing in on the salt licks east of the oxbow lakes along the folds in the earth beyond the Yalobusha River. The cotton was at last cleared from the field. Ida Mae tried now to get the children ready and to gather the clothes and quilts and somehow keep her mind off the churning within her. She had sold off the turkeys and doled out in secret the old stools, the wash pots, the tin tub, the bed pallets. Her husband was settling with Mr. Edd over the worth of a year's labor, and she did not know what would come of it. None of them had been on a train before—not unless you counted the clattering local from Bacon Switch to Okolona, where, “by the time you sit down, you there,” as Ida Mae put it. None of them had been out of Mississippi. Or Chickasaw County, for that matter.

There was no explaining to little James and Velma the stuffed bags and chaos and all that was at stake or why they had to put on their shoes and not cry and bring undue attention from anyone who might happen to see them leaving. Things had to look normal, like any other time they might ride into town, which was rare enough to begin with.

Velma was six. She sat with her ankles crossed and three braids in her hair and did what she was told. James was too little to understand. He was three. He was upset at the commotion. Hold still now, James. Lemme put your shoes on, Ida Mae told him. James wriggled and kicked. He did not like shoes. He ran free in the field. What were these things? He did not like them on his feet. So Ida Mae let him go barefoot.

Miss Theenie stood watching. One by one, her children had left her and gone up north. Sam and Cleve to Ohio. Josie to Syracuse. Irene to Milwaukee. Now the man Miss Theenie had tried to keep Ida Mae from marrying in the first place was taking her away, too. Miss Theenie had no choice but to accept it and let Ida Mae and the grandchildren go for good. Miss Theenie drew them close to her, as she always did whenever anyone was leaving. She had them bow their heads. She whispered a prayer that her daughter and her daughter's family be protected on the long journey ahead in the Jim Crow car.

“May the Lord be the first in the car,” she prayed, “and the last out.”

When the time had come, Ida Mae and little James and Velma and all that they could carry were loaded into a brother-in-law’s truck, and the three of them went to meet Ida Mae’s husband at the train depot in Okolona for the night ride out of the bottomland.

2

Wildwood, Florida, April 14, 1945

George Swanson Starling

A man named Roscoe Colton gave Lil George Starling a ride in his pickup truck to the train station in Wildwood through the fruit-bearing scrubland of central Florida. And Schoolboy, as the toothless orange pickers mockingly called him, boarded the Silver Meteor pointing north.

A railing divided the stairs onto the train, one side of the railing for white passengers, the other for colored, so the soles of their shoes would not touch the same stair. He boarded on the colored side of the railing, a final reminder from the place of his birth of the absurdity of the world he was leaving.

He was getting out alive. So he didn’t let it bother him. “I got on the car where they told me to get on,” he said years later.

He hadn’t had time to bid farewell to everyone he wanted to. He stopped to say good-bye to Rachel Jackson, who owned a little café up on what they called the Avenue and the few others he could safely get to in the little time he had. He figured everybody in Egypt town, the colored section of Eustis, probably knew he was leaving before he had climbed onto the train, small as the town was and as much as people talked.

It was a clear afternoon in the middle of April. He folded his tall frame into the hard surface of the seat, his knees knocking against the seat back in front of him. He was packed into the Jim Crow car, where the railroad stored the luggage, when the train pulled away at last. He was on the run, and he wouldn’t rest easy until he was out of range of Lake County, beyond the reach of the grove owners whose invisible laws he had broken.

The train rumbled past the forest of citrus trees that he had climbed since he was a boy and that he had tried to wrestle some dignity out of and, for a time, had. They could have their trees. He wasn’t going to lose his life over them. He had come close enough as it was.

He had lived up to his family’s accidental surname. Starling. Distant cousin to the mockingbird. He had spoken up about what he had seen in the world he was born into, like the starling that sang Mozart’s own music back to him or the starling out of Shakespeare that

tormented the king by speaking the name of Mortimer. Only, George was paying the price for tormenting the ruling class that owned the citrus groves. There was no place in the Jim Crow South for a colored starling like him.

He didn't know what he would do once he got to New York or what his life would be. He didn't know how long it would take before he could send for Inez. His wife was mad right now, but she'd get over it once he got her there. At least that's what he told himself. He turned his face to the North and sat with his back to Florida.

Leaving as he did, he figured he would never set foot in Eustis again for as long as he lived. And as he settled in for the twenty-three-hour train ride up the coast of the Atlantic, he had no desire to have anything to do with the town he grew up in, the state of Florida, or the South as a whole, for that matter.

3

Monroe, Louisiana, Easter Monday, April 6, 1953

Robert Joseph Pershing Foster

In the dark hours of the morning, Pershing Foster packed his surgery books, his medical bag, and his suit and sport coats in the trunk, along with a map, an address book, and Ivorye Covington's fried chicken left over from Saturday night.

He said good-bye to his father, who had told him to follow his dreams. His father's dreams had fallen apart, but there was still hope for the son, the father knew. He had a reluctant embrace with his older brother, Madison, who had tried in vain to get him to stay. Then Pershing pointed his 1949 Buick Roadmaster, a burgundy one with whitewall tires and a shark-tooth grille, in the direction of Five Points, the crossroads of town.

He drove down the narrow dirt roads with the ditches on either side that, when he was a boy, had left his freshly pressed Sunday suit caked with mud when it rained. He passed the shotgun houses perched on cinder blocks and hurtled over the railroad tracks away from where people who looked like him were consigned to live and into the section where the roads were not dirt ditches anymore but suddenly level and paved.

He headed in the direction of Desiard Street, the main thoroughfare, and, without a whiff of sentimentality, sped away from the small-town bank buildings and bail bondsmen, the Paramount Theater with its urine-scented steps, and away from St. Francis Hospital, which wouldn't let doctors who looked like him perform a simple tonsillectomy.

Perhaps he might have stayed had they let him practice surgery like he was trained to do or let him walk into the Palace and try on a suit like anyone else of his station. The resentments had grown heavy over the years. He knew he was as smart as anybody else—smarter, to his

mind—but he wasn't allowed to do anything with it, the caste system being what it was. Now he was going about as far away as you could get from Monroe, Louisiana. The rope lines that had hemmed in his life seemed to loosen with each plodding mile on the odometer.

Like many of the men in the Great Migration and like many emigrant men in general, he was setting out alone. He would scout out the New World on his own and get situated before sending for anyone else. He drove west into the morning stillness and onto the Endom Bridge, a tight crossing with one lane acting like two that spans the Ouachita River into West Monroe. He would soon pass the mossback flatland of central Louisiana and the Red River toward Texas, where he was planning to see an old friend from medical school, a Dr. Anthony Beale, en route to California.

Pershing had no idea where he would end up in California or how he would make a go of it or when he would be able to wrest his wife and daughters from the in-laws who had tried to talk him out of going to California in the first place. He would contemplate these uncertainties in the unbroken days ahead.

From Louisiana, he followed the hyphens in the road that blurred together toward a faraway place, bridging unrelated things as hyphens do. Alone in the car, he had close to two thousand miles of curving road in front of him, farther than farmworker emigrants leaving Guatemala for Texas, not to mention Tijuana for California, where a northerly wind could blow a Mexican clothesline over the border.

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