

## BLACK & WHITE TV

When I go back home to Virginia, Vernell and I often talk of history. It might be the formal kind, written on papers that people, hers and mine, have kept or dug up over the years. It might be the more recent, anecdotal kind, like when she sang from the choir loft at my sister's wedding and some near-sighted lady whispered, "Who was that? She sounded just like a black person." It could be the momentous kind like how extraordinary it feels to vote for a biracial man for president. ("I never thought I'd see the day," Vernell says, smiling, shaking her head.) Or it might be the silly, nostalgic kind, like how tickled we used to get watching Erica in the kitchen at lunchtime.

I have a habit of poking at history, asking questions of it. And when Vernell says "Erica," I think maybe my habit began right then, the summer after fourth grade, when we started watching *All My Children* together.

Vernell tuned in while working, making my lunch, then whipping up a casserole or frying chicken for our supper. I sat at the table nearby and soaked up the story, my grubby bare feet hooked on the rungs of a cane-bottom chair. Erica Kane was our favorite. Doors slammed when she came on screen, people stormed out of rooms, wives yelled at their husbands, and businesses fell apart. One of Erica's boyfriends was sent to jail. I wondered aloud to Vernell if the jail where they kept Erica's boyfriend looked anything like the one where my father visited his clients. Vernell said she had never seen the inside of a jail.

During supper, we would often receive collect calls from men in the "pentinchree," asking for Lawya Harris. Defending alleged criminals was what my father most enjoyed. The other cases he took were just to pay the bills.

He kept a dull metal cell key in the desk drawer at his office. Sometimes he took it out, he said, and showed it to the younger guys, asking if they wanted it to open doors for them for the rest

of their lives. He said he hoped to scare them straight. And if he spoke to them in the booming, angry voice he often used in the mornings—*Vernell, where are my damn socks?*—I believed he did.

Erica had poofy black hair and thin, curving eyebrows. When she was talking about her friend's husband, she often lifted one brow. It surprised me how the arching black line changed everything about Erica's face. She looked smarter to me then, like she knew something we didn't.

For weeks, I worked at it. I began by lifting both eyebrows, then pressing down on one. Beneath my fingers the tiny network of brow muscles twitched and rebelled. The one I held down insisted on rising up to meet its match, but I knew better: I knew it could be trained. I tried the opposite approach, too. I lowered both brows into a fierce scowl and then worked, ever so gradually, to set one free.

When we finished lunch and Erica's story was over, Vernell left the kitchen to continue her chores, urging me to call a friend or read a book as my mother had advised. I didn't listen. I lagged behind longer every day, climbing onto the counter, rummaging in the high cabinet, where I could break off a waxy hunk of baker's chocolate that required much gnawing and sucking before it resembled anything like a candy bar. Meantime, I picked up the story that followed *All My Children*.

*Boor-ring*, I had said about the sports camp and the art classes my younger sisters were attending that summer. At eleven, I was looking for something more grown-up and exciting, and I had found it on the soaps. I soon discovered soaps that started before Erica came on. If I turned on the television in the den at noon, I could catch the two half-hour dramas that preceded *All My Children*. In the first one, a long-haired guy was making LSD in his sister's basement; after that came the story of the girl who cried a lot and threw herself on the bed.

While watching, I continued to work at raising a single brow. With practice, I learned that the left was more responsive than the right. The trick was to stay in constant contact with the upper-left corner of my face. Throughout the day, wherever I was, I would remind myself to will that brow upward, leftward. I was reaching and when I got there, when my heart felt like it

beat in my left temple, I would make the smallest contraction at the corner of that eye. I could feel the brow twitch then and I knew I had located the precise muscular mechanism. Gotcha, I thought. Right there, now *obey*.

At first, I achieved only the slightest difference in height, but gradually the left began to rise noticeably higher. If the expression I achieved was not as sharp and knowing as Erica's, it did give my face a mysterious new place to go.

Even when it looked as if I wasn't doing anything, I was busy working on these imperceptible contractions, preoccupied with this motionless inward yearning all the time. Even at the dinner table, when my face appeared sullen and slack.

Even then, while my father was raising his voice, telling my mother *for the umpteenth time* that he was going to talk to Linwood about painting the house.

"Linwood is behind bars," my mother said.

"He'll be out soon on good behavior," my father retorted.

We all knew Linwood: a skinny, nervous black man who talked so fast he tripped over his words. We saw him mostly in the summer when he cut the grass and did odd jobs around the house.

"You just don't want to spend the money for a *real* painter," my mother said, pointing out once again what was plain as day to all of us: the paint was peeling off the front of our stucco house in large, unsightly patches.

"Damn right, I don't," my father said. "Linwood does a good job."

"When he comes. *If* he comes," my mother said, but her voice trailed off. Sensing the downturn in my father's mood, she let it drop.

Silently, I took my mother's side in this debate. I cared about the condition of the house only because if she cared, then I figured it must be worth caring about.

My mother was logical, alert, and consistent; my father was not. My two sisters and I moved primarily within my mother's magnetic field. She kept track of us and we of her. The same was not true of my father. He could never quite remember where we were supposed to be or when to pick us up. We had to remind him repeatedly of just about everything. His presence among us was more like a weather front; he was always there but never

the same. Prone to extremes of mood, he might determine the pattern of the water with choppy laughter or trouble us with a brooding undertow; he might instigate a splashy tickle fight or send us asunder in the riptide of an all-out screaming match—but my mother, aided in her constant motion by the ever-present Vernell, kept the waves rolling regularly ashore.

Noon was still too early for Vernell to justify any sit-down time. She might watch a scene or two of the midday soaps while pausing to check on me, but she would soon say, “Oh, I can’t be studying all that foolishness now.” She would make to leave then, crossing the room with a measured gait, punching up a pillow or running her rag over the bookshelf and glancing back at the TV. Her wide-set caramel eyes often had an uneasy, distant look, like she was watching another story, too, much longer and farther away than the one on the screen. When she dusted, she hummed and there was a little jerking motion she made with her elbow. As she moved toward the next mess in a far part of the house, I wondered if her muscles were reaching for something on the inside, too.

It was a wet June, and I spent enough time indoors for a serious obsession to take hold. When the rain let up, when Vernell shooed me outside and told me to get some air, I would often ride my bike around the neighborhood and end up next door at my grandmother’s house.

Entering the cool, dim calm of that house was like visiting a museum. The bright, humid day, the noise of cars on the avenue, the calls of children playing—all that quickly receded, belonging as it did to the unruly, modern world.

Decorated with pale, crisp fabrics and furnished with formal antiques, the house next door was always as I had last seen it. There was no such thing as haste or change. Everything was in its place. Belle was always back in the kitchen making something that smelled good. The red-checked tin on the counter was always full of her homemade cookies. And my grandmother, if she was home, would call out, “Yoo-hoo,” in her high trill, and I would find her, no matter what she was doing, in a fresh dress and stockings, perfectly turned out every time.

Our houses—my grandmother’s in brick and ours in stucco—sit side by side, two roomy, three-story dwellings, facing

the central avenue that cuts across our small Virginia town. The houses have always been in the family, twin-built in the early 1920s by my grandmother's parents and grandparents. My grandmother would spend most of her life in one or the other; my mother has as well.

By the time I came along, the floor plan was about the only thing the two houses had in common. In contrast with my grandmother's, our house was in perpetual disarray. With everyone's comings and goings, clothes and books and shoes were routinely tossed every which-a-way. Once you put something down, you were lucky to see it again. It was all Vernell could do some days just to clear a path to the door. My mother, less than a generation away from hats and gloves, could often be seen dashing across our front yard in some version of a leotard. A modern dancer, she was forever running between classes and rehearsals, making a quick change before some meeting or reception at the local arts center. Belle, who had cooked for my grandmother since my mother was a teen, called my mother "Miss Betty." Watching her rush away from our house, Belle once said, "Sometimes I think that car starts going 'fore Miss Betty get in it good."

Belle cooked breakfast and lunch and served those meals to my widowed grandmother at the dining room table, set with starched linens and silver. Before she went home, Belle fixed something for my grandmother to heat up for supper, and if there was company, she stayed to serve that meal as well. Sometimes Belle read the paper at the pantry table, but mid-afternoon was the only break she took outside the kitchen.

My grandmother was often away in the afternoons, and I would follow Belle into the sunroom, where she was going, as she said, "to look at my story." Stout and dark-skinned, Belle wore a loose, white uniform that came down nearly to her ankles. Only when she sat could I see that her stockings, rolled on elastic garters, stopped just below the knee. When she watched *Love Is a Many Splendored Thing*, Belle put on her black cat-eye glasses. She never settled back in the chair, but perched her wide backside on the edge of the seat, ready at any moment to stand right up and get back to work. Which is exactly what she did if my grandmother happened into the sunroom.

I once complained to Belle that I had to go home and clean up

my room. My mother was making me do it, and I said how unfair I thought it was since her room was usually an even bigger mess than mine. Concisely, Belle pointed out a fine distinction between our generations: "You best learn to take care of yourself, 'Lizbath, cause times are not what they used to be. Your mama, she never had it to do."

Belle had little patience with me. She often told me I was spoiled and impossible, and she was right. From a young age, I had been instilled with an appalling sense of entitlement. The eldest child and grandchild and the fourth Elizabeth in the line, I was my grandmother's (and her mother's) namesake, and as such, I was also a miniature, if unkempt, version of the exacting, imperious woman who told Belle what to do. The fact that we lived in a state named in honor of a virgin queen whose name I shared did nothing to humble my attitude. In public, I was often self-conscious and becoming more adolescently awkward all the time, but at home I acted much less like a child than like some would-be member of the grown-up club. I was always looking for ways to distinguish myself from my sisters, to gain entry, currency in the adult world. The soaps were giving me another leg up.

Some days, Alice came to work next door, too. Where Belle was the cook and the mainstay, Alice belonged to the second string of part-time help that kept my grandmother's house in order. This also included two gardeners who tended the famous roses my great-grandmother left behind, clipped back the stone paths and terraced beds, and maintained the pool and tennis court at the bottom of the yards that stretched out behind our houses. (The small, weedy patches on our side featured a few stringy tomato plants.) Those days, Belle cooked a hot lunch for all the help and served it around the pantry table. She would sometimes call me over and send me back with a covered plate or a bundle of warm rolls for Vernell, saying, "There ain't never nothing for her to eat in that house. I don't see how she stays over there."

Alice cleaned and did the laundry. When my grandmother was out, Alice would set up her ironing board in the sunroom toward the end of Belle's story. A slender woman with a quiet manner, she would linger after Belle had returned to the kitchen, working her way through the pile of linens and glancing up

at *her* story, the one that followed Belle's. Alice and I didn't talk much, but I took some lonely comfort in the puck-puck sound of the steam iron and the rhythm of Alice's swaying hem, while adding yet another batch of scandalous deeds to my would-be repertoire.

On the soaps, just like at home, appearances mattered. But behind and beneath them, everybody in soap land was breaking the rules. Going too far was how people got in trouble; wondering just how far they would go was what made the story interesting. There were numerous parallels between the soaps' small-town settings and the actual town of Lynchburg, Virginia, where I sat watching them. In my world, as on the soaps, white ladies dressed up for luncheons, organized charity events, ran into each other in shops along the avenue, then went home and talked about each other.

I don't think the fact was entirely lost on me that most of the characters on the soaps were white, and most of the people I knew who watched them were black. At the time, this did not seem so much a contradiction as another extension of the color line I saw everywhere around me.

At night, my sisters, my parents, and I regularly tuned into (and heartily enjoyed) the new "black" shows like *Flip Wilson* and *Sanford and Son*. Within a year or two, *Good Times* and *The Jeffersons* would appear as well. We were all fans. That we saw fewer white characters on these shows didn't mean we liked them any less. The hard and fast rules of southern segregation were a decade behind us. Integration was a relative term at best, especially in a small southern town. Where I stood in the summer of 1973 was on a spit of in-between land where old mores were not entirely obsolete and new ones had yet to evolve. That fifteen years later, I would marry a Latino of mixed race would have been quite unthinkable to either of my grandmothers at that moment in time. But the desire as well as the ability to see over the fence in all directions was becoming more apparent.

I happened to converse recently with a stranger in a New York City park. Noticing my accent, he asked where I was from. When I said, "Lynchburg," the man—African-American, late fifties—replied: "Don't sound like anywhere *I* wanna go."

The unfortunate connotation is not entirely coincidental.

Lynchburg grew up around the site of a ferry, established in the 1750s by the Lynch family, who were Quakers and therefore opposed to slavery. Their son John operated the ferry for decades and went on to found the city of Lynchburg in 1786. John's brother, Charles Lynch, left the Quaker faith, becoming a colonel in the local militia and a magistrate in outlying Bedford County. During the American Revolution, Colonel Lynch became well known for his vigilante justice. Accounts and interpretations of Colonel Lynch's actions vary, but some facts appear consistent: Lynch's court often took matters into its own hands, meting out extralegal sentences, particularly to Tory sympathizers. The terms "Lynch's law" and "Lynch's rough justice" spread widely in the early nineteenth century and were used to refer to many kinds of extralegal punishment without regard to the race of the victim. In the years following the Civil War, the term "lynching" came to define the heinous racial crime that it signifies to this day. That the term "lynch" (and the town that shares its name) would come to have such sinister connotations is a stroke of historical irony. Both the crime and the town take their name from brothers who were reared in the house where their mother, Sarah Clark Lynch, founded the South River Meeting House, one of the earliest Quaker outposts in the region.

According to statistics collected by Tuskegee University, 4,743 documented lynchings were committed in the United States between 1882 and 1968 (3,446 victims were black, 1,297 white) and 100 of those occurred in Virginia (83 black, 17 white). Historian James M. Elson, author of *Lynchburg, Virginia: The First Two Hundred Years 1786–1986*, finds no evidence, however, that a lynching ever took place within the city limits of Lynchburg.

My father's mother lived ten miles from town in a rambling old house that dated to Colonel Lynch's era. Although it had the formal name of "Boxwood Lawn," the place was known to us in family parlance as "the Country."

That summer, my sisters and I spent a couple of nights a week at the Country with my recently widowed grandmother Harris. A more casual woman who often wore pants (rarely seen on my

grandmother in town), she was a more hands-on caretaker in general. While we played outside, she was usually nearby, poking around the garden or reading in a lawn chair with one dog in her lap and three or four others dozing at her feet.

Drawn to the Country's considerable outdoor attractions—tree house, fishpond, pastures of horses and cows—and hindered by unreliable reception, I abandoned my usual slate of midday programming. At best, I might glimpse a random scene or two. Come late afternoon, though, I made up for the lost stories in the kitchen with Geraldean. She was a devotee of *General Hospital*, which she watched on the small black and white TV while working her long, frosted fingernails through a bowl of ground beef, making a meatloaf for our supper before going home. With expert adjustment of the antenna, Geraldean introduced me to the fuzzy team of nurses and doctors who met in supply closets and stole kisses in the scrub room.

When she wasn't watching a story, which was most of the time, Geraldean was ready to tell one. More attuned than ever to the satisfaction of a good narrative turn, I hung on her every word. As soon as Geraldean started cooking, I left the other kids outside and headed for the kitchen so as not to miss another installment of her stories before *General Hospital* came on. When the boy across the road asked why I wouldn't come out to play, I crossed my arms and raised a lone brow as best I could. I told him it was none of his beeswax.

Watching him leave, Geraldean said, "You gonna have to have at least two husbands, sassy as you are." (On this point, among others, she has proved right.)

Geraldean wore the shortest uniform of them all, cinched at the waist with an elastic band. While her extra-long Benson & Hedges burned a pale gray worm in a Waterford crystal coaster, she went off on lengthy tangents involving members of her large family, her sisters, her cousins, and her own children: three daughters—one in DC studying for a PhD—and her twin sons, Ronny and Johnny, who were still in high school.

She told me about her great-grandfather, who told her he remembered standing on a hill at the age of five, when they came to tell him he was free.

Talking about her great-grandmother, Geraldean waved her

cigarette toward the mountains and said, “She’s still living, up by Coleman Falls.” At one hundred and eleven, Geraldean’s great-grandmother was the longest-lived person I’d ever heard of. “Two years old the spring they shot Lincoln.”

At times, Geraldean’s accounts went over my head. I couldn’t always follow, for instance, the motives of her minister who made eyes at the deaconess, or decipher the intricate politics of her positions on the board of the NAACP and the voters league. But the more I listened, the more nuances I caught. In the kitchen one afternoon, I came upon a friend of my grandmother’s from the garden club, a petite lady with a stiff cloud of gray hair, talking to Geraldean. When she left, Geraldean stood for a moment with her hands on her hips and stared after her, saying, “Mm, mm, mm.”

A little later, as eggs clicked against the side of a boiling pan, Geraldean looked out the kitchen window to watch the woman drive away. “What do you know? That lady says she gonna *let* me devil her five dozen eggs. Not gonna *ask*, gonna *let*.”

She looked at me to see if I got it. I did.

By midsummer, between Vernell, Belle, Alice, and Geraldean, and the soaps I picked up on my own, I carried upwards of nine plot lines in my eleven-year-old head. If uninterrupted by bike rides or play dates, I could sustain the marathon from noon till half past four. And I had channel-changing down to a fine art. From twelve till two, I would watch straight through on ABC, but after that things got complicated. If I acted quickly during commercials and moved the dial at just the right moment, I could flip back and forth between stories and catch enough of each to keep up till the next week, when I would switch over, giving priority to the ones I had slighted the week before. I still remember the names of my favorites: *Days of Our Lives*, *The Guiding Light*, *As the World Turns*, *General Hospital*, and *Edge of Night*.

I want to put *The Secret Storm* on the list, too, even though I don’t remember its playing any vivid role in that summer’s ritual. Years earlier, though, *The Secret Storm* was the first soap opera I ever watched, and it continues to figure in memories that predate my logical mind. When I was four, five maybe, too young to get more than the barest gist of the plot, I would

curl up with my mother in the afternoons while she watched it. She would point at the screen when her friend Denny came on. Denny—Diana Muldaur, later of *Born Free* fame—had been my mother's classmate at Sweet Briar.

Those lazy afternoons spent lolling in my parents' room form scenes of half knowledge that float across my present mind like impressionistic daydreams. I recall the mohair blanket on the foot of the bed, its furry texture, the scratchy but not unwelcome sensation as it rubbed against my face. Mauvish-plum, it resembled the inside of the conch shell that served as a doorstep to my parents' room, which, in turn, bore some connection to the basket of shells in the arms of the watercolor woman framed on my parents' wall. All of this mingled with the whooshing sound of the wind and the sea crashing against the rocks in *The Secret Storm's* opening sequence.

These scenes also carry aural memory: a refrain that my young ears sifted for meaning. First there was that *storm*, which was perhaps a *secret* itself or contained secrets; either way, it signified the great whirl of things on and off television that I could not yet grasp about the grown-up world. And then the paradox of *Sweet Briar*: a place mentioned often in relation to girls and dates and dances, a place my mother and her mother had gone to and come from, a place I had never been, somewhere that sounded both nearby—just down the road in Amherst County—and far away. *Sweet Briar*, as conjured in my child mind, became the site of some ancient, botanical origin, suggesting as it did the extremes of female character: honeyed, docile, demur, and studded with thorns.

By eleven, marshaling all the powers of my young reason, I could absorb every cheap twist of plot. As my soap obsession grew, so did my lexicon. *Whore, abortion, hallucination, miscarriage, separation, blackmail, and adultery* were among the new words in my vocabulary, with definitions sometimes reluctantly provided by the women who minded me.

The characters' actions were often more mystifying than their words. How come? I was forever asking. How come that doctor won't show her the X-ray? *Hush, chile, and watch the story.* How come he's so mad at her? *Cause she did him wrong.* How come he dudden like that nice girl? *Some people just ain't got*

*no sense.* How come every time she leaves the room that lady comes in and moves the furniture around? *They trying to make her think she crazy.* How come—*Hush now.*

I turned my newly piqued curiosity about adulthood on those around me. I overheard my mother say that my father had finally gotten Vernell a divorce from that brute of a husband. Whatever a brute was, it didn't sound good, and I wondered if that meant Vernell had changed her name like the woman on the soap who refused to be called Mrs. Matthews anymore.

But when I asked Vernell, "What's your name?" She just smiled and said, "What's my name? Puddin' 'n' Tame. Ask me again, I'll tell you the same." I did find out that Vernell was thirty-eight, four years older than I knew my mother to be. When I asked Geraldean how old she was, she said, "I'm as old as my tongue and not quite as old as my teeth."

I went out one afternoon to run errands with my mother. At the drugstore, I was allowed to buy a fountain Coke and then sent to the back counter to fill my sister's ear-ache prescription while my mother shopped. I thought of Rachel from one of the soaps, who went to the pharmacy and demanded to know what drugs her daughter was taking. Walking down the aisle, I tried to swish my hips a little like Rachel. At the counter, the druggist leaned down. His nametag, reading "Howard Wren," flapped toward my face. He had little white bumps all over his cheeks. When he asked if he could help me, it came to me suddenly just how he could.

"Hey, Howard, do you sell barbiturates?"

He stood up immediately with the same expression Dr. Bradley had worn the previous Friday when he found Rachel's letter. His mouth was open, but he didn't get a word out before my mother came rushing up.

"Elizabeth Logan! *Where* do you get such ideas?"

"I just wanted to see what they look like. The other day, Rachel—"

"Rachel? Rachel *who*?"

"She's on TV."

"Lord, these kids. I am sorry, Howard." My mother handed the prescription to the druggist, who was rubbing his forehead. I wondered if his little bumps would pop like the ones that had lately appeared on my chin.

Marching me back down the aisle, my mother said: “*Hey, Howard?* You know better than that. You say *Mr. Wren*. Grown-ups, adults *older* than you are, you call them *Mr.* and *Mrs.* It’s a form of respect. You *know* that.”

In the parking lot, we said hello to Mrs. Yancey, who said that if we needed the name of a painter, she knew a good one.

“Thank you, Nancy. I’m sure we’ll get somebody. It’s just—”

While my mother was talking, Mrs. Yancey’s face stretched open; her big eyes grew bigger. “But you know, the good ones *stay* busy,” Mrs. Yancey said. “You have to call soon, or it could be next spring before—and it has, well, I mean, it certainly *looks* like it might need taking care of *this* year.”

“Right, Nancy,” my mother said. “I’m sure Billy’s taking care of it. Hop in, Elizabeth.”

“Nancy Yancey,” I said in the car, sucking on the crushed ice from my soda as I enjoyed the rhyme. “I mean *Mrs.* Nancy Yancey.”

“That’s right, Mrs. Yancey. Mrs. Nancy Yancey who is a bug-eyed busybody.”

“What’s a busybody?”

“Nosy,” my mother said, gunning the car across the lot. “Nosy and bossy at the same time.”

“Oh.” I understood. “You mean she doesn’t mind her own beeswax.”

When we got home, Vernell met us at the door and helped us carry in the groceries. We were all in the kitchen putting things away, when I began to sort it out a little further. “So,” I asked, “if we’re supposed to say *Mrs.* and *Mr.* to people older than us—and Vernell is older than you—how come you call Vernell *Vernell* and she calls you *Mrs. Harris?*”

Vernell and my mother stopped what they were doing in mid-stream. There was not even the slightest crinkle of a paper bag.

“*How come?*” I pressed.

“Run on now,” my mother said, reaching back into the bags. Vernell never looked up.

Neither one of them saw my left eyebrow separating from its mate, lifting of its own accord.

One Friday in late summer, Vernell and I were absorbed in the suspense of Erica’s end-of-week adventures, when we heard a

clattering behind the house. Vernell went to the back window and, seeing my father's car, said, "It's your daddy. He's up to something."

My father soon came up the back steps and Vernell made him a sandwich for lunch. He said he was home early to cut the grass. Later, we heard more clattering. I went outside to find a long ladder leaning against the front of the house beside the biggest bare spot. "That oughta shut people up till Linwood can get here," my father said.

It shut my mother up at any rate. She stopped bugging my father about a painter and once school started, the carpool mothers, pulling in our driveway, remarked on our progress: "Having some painting done, I see. How nice."

"Oh, yes," I replied with confidence. My father's ruse gave me renewed faith in his unorthodox ways. Looking up at the ladder, I was proud of our ability to fool people. And I knew that sooner or later, Linwood, newly released, would appear on that ladder and paint over all the cracks. Then everybody's version would be right. Meanwhile, I liked being in on both sides of the story.

The start of fifth grade meant I had to quit my soap habit cold turkey. For the first week, I was distracted, wondering about all the cliffhangers I'd left unresolved. Gradually, though, my attention shifted away from the soaps to the intrigues of my new school. That year, I was among the first white children to attend a formerly all-black middle school. The principal, Mr. Martin, was an affable black man who greeted students warmly in the hallways. By the second week, he was calling all us fifth-graders by name. As far as I know, there was no trouble among the students along racial lines. We got along fine. With my ears newly tuned to the adult channel, I could tell that such was not the case among the teachers, however. Mine was Miss Traylor, a sour old white woman who had been teaching grade school since my parents were kids. Whenever Mr. Martin came to the door of our classroom, she crossed her arms with a huff and turned her back to him.

The color line, as far as my eleven-year-old eyes could see, ran very close to class. The black adults I encountered in Lynchburg, Virginia, in the early 1970s were most often poor and poorly educated. Besides Mr. Martin, I knew of few other exceptions: a couple of lawyers and doctors, a minister, a funeral

home director, an urbane bartender at the country club. I knew them as members of our integrated Episcopal church or as the parents of the few black children in my advanced math and reading classes.

As I would come to learn, however, there had been a small but well-established African-American middle class in Lynchburg since before the turn of the century. This included the Harlem Renaissance poet Anne Spencer, who was, in fact, still alive at ninety-one during my summer of soaps. The Spencer family hosted Langston Hughes, W. E. B. Dubois, and other black artists and intellectuals traveling through the Jim Crow South. James Weldon Johnson first brought Spencer's poetic gifts to the public's attention. With Johnson, the Spencers formed the local chapter of the NAACP in the 1920s, at about the same time my grandmother's family was leaving downtown for their new homes on Rivermont Avenue.

A friend of Spencer's, poet and scholar Sterling Brown (1901–1989), taught in Lynchburg from 1923–26 at the former Virginia Theological Seminary (now Virginia University of Lynchburg). In his poem about Spencer, "To a Certain Lady, In Her Garden," Brown writes of the town "a step beyond" her house, where "the dingy streets begin / With all their farce, and silly tragedy—"

Anne Spencer lived on Pierce Street, one of the most desirable addresses on the "Negro side" of Lynchburg. Vernell recently told me that Spencer's niece was her grade-school teacher in Amherst County. Vernell recalls hearing from a young age about her teacher's aunt, the famous poetess on Pierce Street. The Spencer house and garden were eventually restored by a group of white and black citizens, but I would have to go north to college before I would ever hear of Anne Spencer or Sterling Brown. I well remember my surprise when my "Afro-American" literature professor played a recording of Sterling Brown. Fluidly, Brown moved in and out of dialect, reading poems and telling anecdotes. In one, he recalled going down in the country to Coveseville, Virginia, a little hamlet where my father's grandfather was said to come from.

In the mid-70s, my mother formed a dance company with Karen Hubbard, a black dancer who had recently moved to town. She regularly came to our house, and I noticed how Vernell called her "KarenHubbard," running the two names to-

gether quickly, as if they were a single word. I later realized just how savvy that was: using both names in rapid succession did not allow any room for “Mrs.” or “Miss,” nor did it give anyone listening time enough to form the impression that Vernell would be so bold as to address my mother’s peer by her first name.

As my mother’s career grew, both as a dancer and the director of the dance division at the local arts center, she worked to bring a number of well-known troupes, including the Dance Theater of Harlem, to Lynchburg for performances and master classes. My parents’ close friends were (and are) all white, but by the time I left for college in 1980, they often hosted mixed-race gatherings, meetings, dinner parties, and post-show suppers. I remember most vividly the great long limbs of modern dancer Clay Taliaferro—star of the José Limón Dance Company and long-gone native of Lynchburg—stretched beneath our coffee table as he lay on the living room floor with a tiny glass of crème de menthe in his enormous brown hands.

But in the kitchen to this day, Vernell is still Vernell and my mother is still Mrs. Harris. If the tables were turned, or at least equally weighted, my mother might have called Vernell, “Miss Rose,” using her maiden name. Recently, while reading the early annals of Lynchburg, I raised my left eyebrow—effortlessly after years of practice—when I came across the Rose family, white landholders during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. When I ask Vernell about this, she confirms that her father’s people were enslaved in Amherst County. Her cousins have done the research. When they were emancipated, she says, they took the last name Rose. Vernell, with her light skin, is likely descended from slaves once owned by the Rose family, if not also the white Roses themselves.

Over Christmas vacation of 1973, I made a half-hearted attempt to resume my daily diet of soaps. I picked up on a few scandals at the holiday parties in soap land. I caught Erica lifting an eyebrow under the mistletoe, but my interest never approached the level of my summertime obsession.

We had special plans for Christmas that year. My grandmother Harris was coming in from the Country to spend Christmas Eve with us. After we opened our presents, we would go back

out to the Country and have our Christmas dinner there. Geraldean would get the meal ready beforehand and have everything waiting for us to heat up when we got there.

As soon as we entered the house, we knew it had been burglarized. There were no signs of forced entry, but somebody had gotten in and turned the place topsy-turvy. Dishes and platters were missing from the dining room table. They had rifled through the silver drawer, taking the biggest pieces. They broke into the liquor cabinet. They carted off a television.

My father immediately channeled his anger into action—his favorite sort of action, the kind that involved criminals and the police. He told my mother that she would have to take us home soon. There would have to be an investigation; detectives would come to dust for prints.

We thought we might at least take the Christmas dinner with us. But we found that the food also bore an imprint of the crime. As my mother took the containers out of the fridge, we saw that the thieves had sampled them all. Every dish had been abused. The distinct impression of the culprits' fingers marred the surface of the cranberry sauce. In the ready-to-heat pan of dressing, a hunk the size of a fist was missing.

“Now, why on earth would somebody do that?” my grandmother wanted to know.

Looking over the defiled dinner, I had a curious sensation. I felt an intimate, physical repulsion as strong as my attraction might have been toward the unspoiled food. It was disgusting to think of strangers pawing at our Christmas dinner, but the scene also had the flavor of twisted innocence about it, reminiscent of a fairytale, of Goldilocks poking around the bears' house.

But the thieves did not have golden locks. They turned out to be Ronny and Johnny, Geraldean's twin sons, who had stolen the key from their mother's handbag and let themselves into the house. The police were quick to nab them. Being minors, they got off lightly, as I recall, though this would not be their only run-in with the law. The twins would go to jail eventually for other crimes.

They got away with a few valuables, but most things were found and returned. I don't think we suffered the loss of anything too important for very long. What did have a lasting

sting—what has stayed with me all these years—is the willful violation of our meal: the handprints of the young men who tore at the food their mother spent her Christmas Eve preparing for somebody else. And the picture of my young self, trying to change channels fast enough to keep up with everybody’s story. I’ve been working the dials ever since.