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Journey Down a Path Forgotten: The Stories My Foremothers Told

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Just over two years ago, I began to document what life was like for my foremothers. My plan was to speak with as many women as I could, and to tape record our conversations.

Before beginning my research, I read books about tape-recorded interviews, books about the history of Creoles in Louisiana, books about genealogy, and how to trace a family tree. I remember how organized I was; I read all the right books and knew all the right questions to ask. I bought just the right notepads and pens, and made sure I had extra batteries for my recorder, extra film for my camera. It was helpful to read books before beginning my research; but, when I look back on the past two years — on the long drives to Mississippi and Louisiana, the late-night, sometimes tearful interviews, the funny group interviews, the hotels, the uncomfortable questions I had to ask, and the candid answers I received — I realize that no book could ever have prepared me for this life-changing journey.

Journey of June

I interviewed my mother twice, in May and again in August 2000. June, the oldest of fourteen children, was born on July 19, 1931, in New Orleans' Charity Hospital. Her mother, Marguerite Edwards, was Creole, and her father, Elliot Spears, was a mixture of Choctaw Indian, Irish and Black. Although it was difficult interviewing my mother, I now have a much better understanding of her. In her lifetime, she survived poverty, racism, raising ten children and two of her sisters, the death of a son, the death of a husband, alcoholism and the overcoming of

alcoholism. I see her, now, not just as my mother but as one of the strongest people I've ever known.

Both times I interviewed my mother in the house where I grew up, in Ocean Springs, Mississippi. We talked about what it was like for her, growing up poor. She remembers the house she grew up in: "The house was what you would call a shotgun house. We had a long front porch with a banister around it. It wasn't screened in. We had a living room. The room after that, well, all fourteen of us slept in that same room. We had a bed for the girls and a bed for the boys. We just divided up. We had one bathroom. We had my parents' bedroom and that was right next to the kitchen, and the kitchen was the last room on the house; it went out to the backyard."

My mother also remembers what it was like growing up Creole, and she remembers how both Black and White people treated her: "It was nice to be Creole amongst the Blacks, but then when we were amongst the Whites, we were just another Black. In the Black community, we were treated special, you know; your skin was light, your hair was nicer. Back then Blacks were almost as prejudiced as the Whites are now against the Blacks. Because, back then you stayed with your own color. I can remember when I first started dating my husband, who was very dark, the people with light skin wanted to know what did I see in that Black boy.

"The White people, they treated us very bad. I mean they let you know you were Black. When I was growing up, the signs were still there. For Colored Only. For White Only. There were two ten-cent stores in town, Kress and Woolworth, and the water fountains were in the back of the store. One fountain was for Whites only and one was for Coloreds only. My brother and I, well, it made our day to go drink out of the White Only fountain when no one was looking, and if the clerk saw us, she would run us out of the store."

When I asked my mother to discuss things that had the biggest impact on her life, she talked about the death of her son,

my brother, Gene: "I had a son to get killed. And this is something I'll never forget. And I hope before I die, God will give me the wisdom to forgive, because I haven't yet. The way it happened, it was just . . . and then the way the person who did it is still walking around. And recently, last year, he was accused of molesting two members of his own family; two male members of his own family, and no more was written about this. This was publicly announced in the newspaper, but no more. And of course nothing was done about my son's death.

"My son, well, I thought he was in the house. And the place where it happened was one street over from the house. My husband had a charge account at this store and the boys always knew they could go over and put something on their daddy's charge account, as long as it didn't cost too much. Eugene, my son, he didn't like the shirt I had picked out for him to wear for Christmas, so he went over and he was going to get another shirt and put it on his daddy's charge account, one that *he* liked. And that's what he did. He got in the store. The White man was fooling around with the gun. I do believe that if Eugene and the man had been the only ones in the store, he would have accused Eugene of trying to rob the store. But it was fortunate that they weren't in the store alone. And the last words my son said were, 'Man, don't play around with that gun. It might be loaded.' And it *was* loaded. And he was shot. And he lived for two and a half days after that. With us in the halls of the hospital. The entire family. The entire time.

"I didn't want a funeral on the day after Christmas, so he was waked on his birthday, December 23, and buried the next morning, which was Christmas Eve. Since then, I have *hated* Christmas. I hate for that time of year to come. I hate the Christmas songs. Because most of them are too joyous. And I didn't want to be joyous. That's something I just can't let go of. I know I have too, but I haven't yet."

She also talked about the death of her

husband, my father, Turner Straight, Sr.; and she talked about her alcoholism: "Well, at the time my husband died, it was a time in our lives when we could do just about anything that we wanted to do, within reason. All of our children were grown and had gone their separate ways. We weren't rich, by any means, but we were financially secure. He worked for himself and if he felt like going to work he would, and if he didn't, he'd go fishing on his boat or go anywhere he wanted to go. We'd go on trips. We looked forward every year to going to the Knights of Peter Claver convention. It was always held in major cities at the finest hotels. We'd save so we could 'go in style,' like we phrased it. My husband was a very good dresser, and, of course, I tried to keep up with him.

"And then all of a sudden, that one night, my second son and the police came and told me that there had been an accident. My husband had been killed by a train. And this was at a time we had been married for forty years.

"After a while, after the crying had gone, and the children had gone back to their homes, I consoled myself by drinking wine. I figured if I drank wine, it wasn't as bad because I wouldn't get as drunk. It's not like drinking hard liquor, I thought, so this is what I did. I never did go out in clubs. I stayed in my bedroom and I would sit in my rocking chair, I'd take my wine, it would be sitting on the floor, off to the side. And I'd drink. I'd go to the casinos in the daytime because I could get free drinks there. I'd come home before dark every time. And I was cunning enough to go to different liquor stores because everybody in Ocean Springs knew me. So I would go to different stores, and I'd come back and walk around the corner and put the empty bottles in the dumpster, so when my son down the street came and looked through the garbage, he wouldn't find any empty bottles. And I'd leave a bottle on the countertop, about three quarters full, so my son would think, 'Hmm, she didn't have that much to drink today.' But I would be

loaded. I had three DUIs and with the third one, they gave me an ultimatum, 'You either go to a treatment center or you go to jail.' This is how I got into Alcoholics Anonymous. Just this week, I received my seven-year chip; these chips, they refer to the length of my sobriety."

I asked my mother what she remembers about her mother: "My mother was a saintly person to me. We went to Bingo together. We went to the movies together. And it was good, because in my earlier pregnancies, she was with me; and, naturally, with her having so many children of her own, I could ask her different things and we could talk about things like that. She was with me when I delivered my twin girls, and she thought it was neat that the same doctor who delivered her girls, delivered my girls. I had a good relationship with my mom."

Because her mother was very sickly, and sometimes couldn't get out of bed, my mother often had to cook for the entire family. She remembers standing at her mother's bedside, listening to instructions on what to cook and how to cook it: "Her bedroom was right next to the kitchen. So, I'd do whatever she told me to do, and then I'd bring it back to her bedside, and I'd ask her, 'Is this right?' And she'd tell me whether it was right or wrong. Then I'd go back to the kitchen, to the next step, until whatever I was cooking was finally the way it was supposed to be."

My mother was twenty-eight years old when her mother died. At the time, my mother was married with seven children of her own (I wasn't born yet). Her two youngest sisters, Bernadette and Grace, moved in with my family, and my parents raised them until they graduated high school.

Journey of Grace

Grace was nine years old when she moved in with my family. I interviewed her in July 2000, in Gulfport, Mississippi. I asked Grace where she was born; she doesn't know: "Some people say I was born

at home and some say I was born in a hospital. Somebody else said I was born at home, so I don't know. My uncle's wife said she came to see me in the hospital; but I think your mama said I was born at the house, and delivered by a midwife."

"You don't have a copy of your birth certificate?" I asked. "Yes," Grace answered. "Well, on your birth certificate, where does it say you were born?" I asked. "I never looked," she replied.

Grace remembers very little about her mother, but she discussed the few vague memories she does have: "I remember her always dressing up in the morning. You never knew what she was going to do that day, whether she had an appointment or what. And she kept her hair neat. That's what daddy always said, whenever we'd walk around in rollers or in our robe all day. I remember one time me and him got in an argument when I was pregnant, and he said 'You walk around in that rag-looking something all day and your mama never would do that.' And I remember her with big pots, serving us. She never did let us serve our own plates. She smoked, and I remember her going to Back Bay for cigarettes and her sending us down there. And I remember her always listening to Perry Como, the singing show."

Grace also remembers the day her mother died: "You see, the night our mother died, we were all sitting around your mamma and daddy's house, I guess because my mother was very sick. The phone rang but nobody wanted to answer it. I could tell what had happened because your mama started screaming. I remember. We were eating fish. Your mama was screaming and I knew our mother was dead. I was about nine years old then. Bernadette was eight. I started to run and your daddy caught me and he called Bernadette and me into the room and he told us. He said, 'Your mother is dead. But I promised your mother that June and me would take care of you two until y'all got grown, because she wanted y'all to grow up together.' That was October 9, 1959. I remember.

“And when she was sick, I knew something was wrong because they came over and said the Rosary at the old house, before it got torn down, and I knew something was wrong because they would be praying a lot. And then my older sisters and everybody else got to go up to the hospital. My mother was in the county hospital in Laurel, but Bernadette and me didn’t get to go. Once my mother left that day in the ambulance, I never saw her again, except in her casket.”

Grace remembers what it was like to be Creole. She talked about moving from an all-Black Catholic school, after eighth grade, to an all-Black public high school: “Those girls in school would tell me I was ugly, and my friend would say, ‘They’re just jealous of you child because your skin is light and your hair is long.’ In high school they told me I was ugly for so long, until I believed it. I had a hard time getting over being self-conscious. I think it’s sick when you’re Black and you don’t like your own color. My daddy’s family taught him not to associate with dark people. When he married my mother, he went against his parents’ wishes and that’s why he couldn’t finish college. A lot of Black people are like that, when the only difference is the color of our skin.

People associate Black with evil, dark skin with evil. Some people are intimidated by skin color, and people don’t want to give Black *women* credit for anything.”

Grace remembers being pregnant at an early age with her first daughter, Stephanie: “With Stephanie, I told my sister Marguerite, ‘I can’t have no baby today! The doctor said the 26th and this is only the 21st. I got five more days!’ When my pains started getting numbered, Marguerite said, ‘Well, you know you can be early.’ ‘Early?’ I said, ‘But the doctor said the 26th.’ I had been cleaning up that night. Clean, clean, clean. Sometimes you can be so ignorant. There was blood when the doctor examined me, and I told my sister on the phone, ‘There’s something really wrong with me. I’m bleeding.’ The orderly explained to me

that it was supposed to happen that way. I could have had a heart attack when he explained to me, ‘Yeah, that’s where the baby is coming from.’ And I said, ‘*What?* The baby is coming from my stomach; the baby ain’t coming from down there!’ And the orderly said, ‘Yes it is, ma’am.’ That’s just how ignorant I was. They asked me if I wanted to see her being born; and, at first I said no, but then I thought, I ain’t having no more kids, put that mirror up here. And I watched Stephanie come out like a flower. You know how they say your body comes full bloom.”

I asked Grace who she was closest to growing up: “Bernadette. We used to get chips from the service station and eat them in bed.”

Journey of Bernadette

Like Grace, Bernadette remembers very little about her mother. Born April 28, 1951, in Biloxi, Mississippi, Bernadette was the youngest of the fourteen. She was eight years old when her mother died. I interviewed Bernadette in July 2000 in Biloxi. She remembers what her mother looked like: “She looked like an Indian. Tall. Real pretty, wavy black hair. And I remember, one night we were all sitting around Mother’s chair in the living room and she asked us, ‘If I die, would y’all want me to come back and visit you?’ Grace and me both yelled ‘No!’ at the same time. And right after that, I remember, everybody else thought it was real funny when one of my brothers knocked on the window and tried to scare us.”

Bernadette remembers when her mother died, “I remember her casket being in the house. It was open. You see, in those days, people were waked in the house. And, you know, people would stay at the house all night at the wake. It was like a big party. And I remember we all had to kiss her goodbye.”

She also remembers the pressures of going from an all-Black Catholic school to an all-Black public high school, and she remembers desegregation: “I went to Our

Mother of Sorrows Catholic School until the eighth grade. After eighth grade, I went to Keys High School. This was a big adjustment for me. I got called names. They called me yellow bitch. People didn't like me. Because we were Catholic, we still had to go to religion class, and they talked about us because we had to leave school early one day a week to go to religion class. It was a whole different environment, because we lived a very sheltered, secluded life.

"Keys High School. It was a Black school. There were no White teachers in our school. Everybody was Black. In my senior year, I was going to be valedictorian, but then integration came. And I had to go to the White school, Ocean Springs High School. And I hated it. But they closed Keys High down, so we didn't have a choice. I didn't participate in anything my entire senior year. No prom. No nothing."

Journey of Betty

Betty Lee Spears is the 8th of the fourteen children. She was born in Biloxi, in the house where they grew up, at 911 Reynoir Street. I interviewed Betty on July 7, 2000, in Biloxi. In addition to discussing what she remembers about her mother, Betty remembers a lot about growing up. She remembers, in great detail, the games they played as children: "We played. Like sometimes we made dolls out of Coca-Cola bottles and we put grass in the bottle for the hair. We had a little house under the fig tree and we'd sweep it with the limbs from the tree, sweep up the sand and have a cardboard box turned over. That would be our table, and we'd go out there and eat figs. We had more fun than it is now."

She remembers elementary school, and each job she had as a teenager: "I went to Catholic school all my life; never spent a day in public school. I was always an angel in school. Every time they had angels in school, I was an angel. You know that statue of the Blessed Mother in front of Our Mother of Sorrows Church? I was the first one to crown her. I graduated from eighth

grade, and I crowned her. I sold candy for the nuns. There were two grades to each classroom and it was like learning twice. I graduated with eleven in my class; nine girls and two boys and one of the boys is dead.

"After high school, I washed dishes in a restaurant, waited tables, and cooked the hamburgers, all for nine dollars a week. Nine dollars a week. And half the time I'd have to go in the register to get that because my boss, he'd say, 'We didn't make any money this week.'"

I asked Betty what she remembers about her mother: "We used to go to the movies together. And I never remember being really hungry or nothing. I don't know how Mother did it with all of us, making meals out of nothing. She made all of our clothes and most of the time, when all of the kids were there, all of us had something to do. And all I had to do was clean the bathroom, and if I went outside to play, and it wasn't clean, then I'd have to duck to come back in the house.

"I also kept Grace and Bernadette all the time, and when Mother had heart trouble, I'd have to stay out of school one day, and my brother Ralph would stay out the next day, like that, because Mother was so sickly all the time. She had an asthma attack when she was pregnant with Bernadette, and they had to take her to the hospital. The doctor told her no more children after Bernadette and she didn't have anymore. Now, I remember that, just like it was yesterday."

Like all the other women I interviewed, Betty has faced seemingly insurmountable odds in her lifetime. And, like all the other women, she has relied on her faith in God to help her through some difficult times, including the death of her daughter, Lisa, who was killed in a car accident at age sixteen: "You just can't describe it. But I would talk about it. I talked about it. I went to therapy. I questioned God about it. I did everything. "When Lisa died, the doctor gave me pills. And the pills made you not think; the pills really helped me. Because I knew what I

was doing. I went to her funeral. I watched them put her in the ground. I got back in the car. I came home. I sat out in the yard and I talked to people. And the next morning, I got up and it was that empty thing all over again. It was mostly when I was by myself. That's why my oldest daughter Reety came to live with me. Reety has never left me since Lisa died. I can't imagine if I had been in my house by myself like June when Gene died.

"I talk to Lisa if times get real bad. Or if I get really aggravated, I'll say, Lisa, you're up there with them. You got to help me, you know. And that makes me feel better. And now, I believe I have accepted it. It's something that will never go away, and sometimes it will be right there and I say, God, take this feeling away from me. I don't want it. Just take it away.

"One day, a lady came up to me and she said, 'You know what? I'm going to tell you a story. All the angels were up in heaven and they were running around and singing and playing. But there was one angel sitting in the corner and another angel asked, 'Why aren't you playing?' And the little angel said, 'I can't have fun, because my mamma's tears are in the way.'

"The story that lady told me was telling me to give Lisa up. The little angel said, 'I can't play because my mamma's tears are in the way.' And then I got to thinking, whenever I feel happy, I feel guilty. The psychiatrist told me this was going to happen, but not to let it bother me, because it's natural. Just like when they say God's not going to put nothing on you no more than you can handle, it's true. And I often wonder about people who don't have faith. What happens to them? Who do they ask? What do they do?"

Journey of Carol

Carol is first cousin to my mother; her mother and my mother's mother were sisters. She was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, on December 6, 1945. I met Carol for the first time in July 2000, and interviewed her in August 2000, in New

Orleans in her house on Jonquil Street. She remembers her mother: "She was on the heavy side. She had black curly hair and she was just very fun. She was a fun type person, very bubbly. She was a good cook, she never did work, and it seemed, as time passed on, like I was the mother and she was my baby. She always needed me to do things for her, you know, things like clean up, wash clothes, go to the grocery store. I guess because she had a heart condition, and she wasn't very well."

Carol remembers when she moved in with her mother's sister, Edith, at an early age: "Well, Aunt Edith didn't have any daughters, and she just wanted me to stay with her. In a sense, I liked staying with her, but there was never anyone there. I was there most of the time by myself. Aunt Edith was a workaholic. She had a short order restaurant, a franchise. Alexis Chicken. She worked fifteen hours a day, seven days a week. And no holidays meant anything to Aunt Edith, because nobody was ever there. We never put up a Christmas tree at Aunt Edith's. At Christmastime, everybody would be running around doing different things around the holidays, and there were so many things I wanted to do, things that Aunt Edith took me by my mother's house to do."

Carol also remembers going to work when she twelve:

"Since I was twelve years old, I was always working. I worked in Aunt Edith's restaurant, frying chicken. Cooking you know, just working. You just got used to it. That was just a way of life. I had to work to help my mother and that was just the way it went. When I went to school, I would be tired and I'd fall asleep in class; and, I couldn't tell anyone I was working, because of my age. But if I had to do it all over again, I'd do the same thing. Because I look at the work experience like it helped me out as an adult. I always had a lot of responsibility. It comes natural. If I didn't have any of those responsibilities I had growing up, I'd be lost right now."

Carol walks with a cane, but not until I asked her, did she tell me why she walks with a cane: "That was twenty-three years ago. This antique son of a bitch that I was married to, he was twelve years older than me. He never did work too much or whatever. And I even did the restaurants for three years so I could accomplish something in life. Well, I did buy the house so that was something. And that money from the restaurant, it sure did go to that trick dog's head. After he blew all the money, I used to work as a dining room cashier, and then I used to work in one of the restaurants from seven in the morning to one or two in the morning. After I did that for three months I said this is just too much here.

"He just was a...he just was a pig from hell. He hadn't worked for four years. And sometimes at work, I used to drive the mail truck. You know, delivering company mail. I never was one to wear makeup too much, but sometimes I used to wear makeup. And then a couple of times I went and played Bingo with other girls I knew, and we went to supper one time and I came home around midnight. And oh, how he carried on. He pulled out a gun and started shooting at things in the house.

"The next morning, I packed up my things and I went to go tell my Aunt Edith what happened. I said, 'Auntee, I told that scum bag that I'm gonna give him the house and I'm gonna try to save some money and I'll buy me another house. And see, if I give him the house, I figure that would be a good way to get rid of him.' Aunt Edith said, 'No! You shouldn't have packed up your clothes! You shouldn't have did it like this; you know how that animal is!' She said, 'You should have put him under a peace bond.' 'Well, that's what I'm gonna do now,' I said. 'I'm goin over by this friend of mine house, and get her to come with me to put him under peace bond.'"

I asked Carol what was a peace bond: "You know, like today they would call it a restraining order. So, anyway, the night before I went in the hospital, my husband

said, 'You want to be smart? You got all your damn friends putting all kinds of shit in your head. And if you think you gonna leave away from here, you ain't leaving away from here in one piece. And don't forget, a man don't serve no jail time for killing a nigger. You red motherfuckers always think that you better than other people, spendin all the fuckin money on the fuckin children. But, I'm gonna show you. You just go ahead and do whatever you want to do.' So I said to him, 'I'm just tired of being around you.' And he said, 'You want to be smart? I'm gonna show you how to be smart.'

"So the next day I took off from him, and I went by my Aunt Edith's house. I stopped by Aunt Edith's house and I called Public Service and told them that I wasn't able to come in to work because I wasn't feeling good. So then I left her house and I went by this friend of mine's house and we were gonna put my husband under peace bond. I was knocking on her door when I saw his car pull up. He had a rifle. And he started shootin. He shot me in my knee, in my ankle, and in my hip.

"I remember very well. I remember knocking on my friend's door. And I remember goin to the hospital. I remember going into surgery. And I can remember waking up, and I had tubes all up in my damn mouth. And I felt like I couldn't breathe. And I had some stuff hooked up to me. My spleen was removed. My ankle, my hip and my knee were shattered. And once a week I would go to surgery and they would remove bullet fragments or bone fragments or something like that. I was in the hospital for a year."

* * *

There are still three women I would like to interview for my project: my mother's sister Marguerite, in New Jersey; my mother's sister Marietta, in Texas; and my mother's first cousin Aline, in California.

I'm also writing a novel based on these tape-recorded interviews. It tells the story

of Marguerite, a fifteen-year old Black girl who has just discovered she's pregnant. While standing in front of a mirror, trying to decide what to do about her pregnancy, she sees an image in the mirror of a woman, who introduces herself as Faith. Faith is Marguerite's mother's sister, and she explains to Marguerite that there is a place called the Living Room where all of the women in the family gather to talk. Some of the women are dead; some are alive. Throughout the story, Marguerite receives advice from all of these women in the Living Room, and the advice that they give her is taken from the actual tape-recorded interviews.

In the section of the novel that follows, the women of the Living Room are sitting in their kitchen. It is morning, and the women are discussing a mass and reception they attended the night before. Their conversation is interrupted when one of the women realizes that Marguerite is on her way to the hospital to have her baby.

* * *

It was a little after six in the morning when Bernadette came downstairs in her teal terrycloth bathrobe and opened the kitchen window blinds. She had already started the coffee and walked over to the cupboard to grab the ingredients for her dinner before she noticed Faith and Grace asleep at the head of the kitchen table. Bernadette preferred to cook her dinners early, before the midday sun arrived. The house had no air conditioning, just ceiling fans, and by midday, the kitchen was hot. Bernadette struck a wooden match, lit the front burner on the black gas stove, and put on a small pot of grits. When the grits came to a boil, she lowered the flame to simmer.

Bernadette. She loved to cook; she loved to dance; she loved to sing. And she was delighted when she could do all three, simultaneously. She was an exceptional cook; her specialty was shrimp Creole, but this morning she would cook gumbo, from her grandmother's recipe. Bernadette had

rhythm. And while she prepared the roux for her gumbo, she swayed her hips in a sultry way. She melted a half stick of butter in a large, heavy saucepan over medium heat, then, sprinkled a quarter cup of all-purpose flour over the butter. As she stirred the mixture of butter and flour, Bernadette wondered why Faith and Grace were asleep at the kitchen table. But she didn't wake them. She knew better.

The grits were done. So Bernadette turned off the pot, and stirred her roux constantly, for about ten minutes, until it turned a medium-dark reddish brown. She was careful not to burn it. When the roux was ready, she sat the pan to the side. In the deep, stainless steel sink, she rinsed her vegetables with warm water, and pulled out her cutting board from behind the refrigerator. Humming softly, she chopped one bell pepper, one onion, two stalks of celery, and she shimmied to the left. In another heavy pan, she fried two slices of bacon, added okra, and threw in the rest of her chopped vegetables. When the okra was done, she added one can of chopped tomatoes, one can of tomato paste, and she shimmied to the right.

Faith and Grace still slept, oblivious to all that went on in the kitchen. But, the aroma of the bacon and the onions, along with the noise of the can opener, awakened the other women who were asleep upstairs: Carol, Lenora, Edith, Rosie, Marietta, June, and Lois dragged their stubborn feet downstairs in single file toward the aroma. Bernadette tossed two bay leaves into the frying pan and added a dash of Kitchen Bouquet, Lea & Perrins, and salt and pepper. She dipped her finger in the pan and tasted the vegetables and sauce. "Perfect," she said. And then Bernadette started to sing:

*"I was born way down in Luzianna
I love the way it sound
'Cause thassa my home
Way down in Luzianna
I'm goin' back
And try to settle down*

*Gonna settle down
Gonna settle down
Gonna settle down
In my old hometown.*

“Who sings that song, Bernadette?” Carol was the first to enter the kitchen.

“Percy Mayfield.”

“Then you need to let him sing it, cause you sho messin it up, yeah.”

Bernadette laughed, “Good morning to you too, chère. You tryin to tell me I can’t sing?”

“I’m not tryin to tell you anything, Ms. Bernadette. I’m tellin you, boo. You can’t sing.”

Carol, Lenora and Edith laughed and sat down at the kitchen table, while Rosie, Marietta and June stood in line to pour hot coffee. Sunlight, sprinkled with tiny particles of dust, seeped through the kitchen window blinds. The light darted quickly from one countertop to the next, resting occasionally on the spice rack with its cayenne pepper, and on the little crystal dish filled with garlic butter. Bernadette added cayenne pepper to almost everything she cooked. And the garlic butter was never refrigerated; it spread easier on French bread that way. Bernadette was still singing when she took the French bread out of the oven. She placed the bread on the table with the bowl of garlic butter, along with a stack of saucers and a butter knife. “So, how was the mass for Sister Francine last night, June?”

“Well, the mass was nice, but the food at the reception, now that was a different story!” June added a heaping spoon of sugar to her coffee and tore off a chunk of French bread from the loaf. “They had this stuffin. Now, when have you ever heard of stuffin with no seasonin in it? No celery, no onions, just bread with little chunks of somethin, I don’t know what it was...”

“Lawd, that woulda made me sick; hell, they coulda at least picked up some Stovetop stuffin from the grocery store, yeah?” Carol stared at Grace and Faith. “What we gone do with them two and they strange ways? Jesus, Mary and Joseph! Pass me a spoon and the peanut butter please, Marietta. The mass was nice, but I’m glad I didn’t stay for the reception, cause I woulda been mad, yeah. You sure it was supposed to be stuffin?”

“It was squares of dough. Actually, I think it was sliced bread and I think they took the ends off of it and...”

“That’s what it was, sliced bread with the ends off. That’s exactly what it was.” Edith spread garlic butter on her French bread.

“And that peach cobbler!” Marietta sat down next to Faith and handed Carol a spoon and the peanut butter from across the table.

“They shoulda had you cook, Bernadette. Right, Lois? Lois?”

“Yeah, boo?”

“Don’t you think they shoulda had Bernadette cook?”

Bernadette broke the rhythm of the conversation that was bouncing back and forth throughout the kitchen, “Y’all come get some of these grits. Edith, you want me to fix you a bowl a grits?”

Edith pulled herself up from her chair with the help of her cane. She couldn’t walk without it. “No, no, boo. I can get it. I can get it.”

“Good. Cause I sho didn’t feel like gettin it for you!”

Even their laughter had a rhythm to it, like a Sunday morning choir. Rosie was still laughing when she glanced over at Faith and Grace. She dipped her French bread in her coffee. “Wonder why they ain’t sleeping in their beds? Think we should wake em up?”

“No, no, chère! Member what happened last time we woke em up? Let em sleep. Jesus, Mary and Joseph! Let em sleep!” Carol licked the last bit of peanut butter from her spoon.

Lenora got up to get some grits. “Hey,

Carol? Guess who we saw at the reception? She wasn't at the mass, now. Just the reception."

"Who, chère?"

"Suzie. But she was just at the reception, not the mass."

"I know I don't remember seeing her at the mass, no. She probably just showed up at the reception to get something to eat. Y'all know she spent all her money gambling, yeah. She lost her house and . . ."

"Who lost their house?" Edith carried her bowl of grits in one hand and held on to her cherrywood cane with the other.

"Suzie. She lost her house gambling. Lost everything."

Bernadette poured the roux, the vegetables and sauce, and eight cups of water into a big metal pot and took another sip of her coffee. She stirred her gumbo, adjusted the flame to medium heat, and finally sat down at the table. "But she lost her house years ago, right? Before the casinos even came?"

"Yeah, boo. She lost it playing bingo."

"Bingo?"

"Yeah, chère. You know she always used to put those little glass statues of the Blessed Mother on each of her bingo cards, well, she dropped one and broke it, and ever since then . . ."

"Y'all want me to turn this ceiling fan on?"

Bernadette added salt and butter to her grits.

"No, no, chère. I'm fine."

"I'm fine, too."

"I'm just hungry!"

"She wouldn't eat at the reception last night, that's why she so hungry now, yeah."

"Why you didn't eat, Lenora?" Bernadette got up and stirred her gumbo. She added three pounds of shrimp, about a pound of crabmeat, and turned the flame down to simmer.

"Cause I woulda had to take my teeth out."

"You take out your teeth to eat?"

Edith stirred butter and salt into her grits and took a big bite of bread, "See, if I did that, ate without my teeth in, I'd be choking right now, yeah."

"Lenora, I told you, all you got to do is chew some of that Freedent gum to get used to chewing with your teeth in, boo."

"I tried that Freedent, and it felt like I had a damn horse in my mouth! I hate wearing those teeth! I'd rather for somebody to grab me and beat my behind. It feels like I got a pile of shit in my mouth!"

Grace slowly lifted her head from the table. She looked at Lenora and asked, "And how you know what it feels like to have a big pile of shit in yo mouth?"

Before Lenora could answer, Carol stuck her spoon back into the peanut butter jar and asked Grace, "Have you been awake this whole time?"

"No." replied Grace. "The pain in my belly woke me up."

Grace gently shook Faith by her shoulders. Faith lifted her head and rubbed her sleepy eyes.

"Faith, go into the Living Room and get the little hand mirror. You know where I keep it. Hurry up, chère! Marguerite's in labor. She's bout to have that baby, yeah!"