ONE
A Mississippi Childhood

AS JOEANN MARSHALL STOOD ON THE STEPS of the Nazarene Bible Institute, a warm breeze brushed her face. She trembled a little, despite the mild May weather. Three years of Bible college were ending, and she had nowhere to go. All the sacrifice she had made, right down to shredding her fingers picking the last gleanings of cotton in her uncle's field in the summers—what was it all for?

JoeAnn had given up secular education at Prentiss Institute for Bible college because she felt a calling. Sometimes the quest for God rose up in her like a tidal wave—but how to respond to it wasn't exactly clear. Often she thought of a teenaged Florence Nightingale, whose heart too had been pierced with a call to compassion. In thousands of pages of writings she left behind, Nightingale describes a painful awareness of the suffering of others, particularly European soldiers fighting in the Crimean War.

Thwarting her family's wishes, she traveled to the wounded soldiers, set up nursing stations, and trained other women to help. Kneeling in the dirt, Nightingale bound their wounds, assisted in amputations, and nursed them through cholera and typhus outbreaks. Against the medical conventions of the day, she stressed better diet as well as washing the soldiers and keeping their linens as clean as possible as a way of both decreasing the mortality rate and helping to heal their malnourished hearts.

Along with her medical ministrations, Nightingale wrote letters for soldiers unable to do so themselves and wrote to their families when they died. She set up reading rooms with books and coffee for soldiers at a time when only bars and lounges were

available to them. In personal essays, Nightingale dared to wonder if the world could imagine a woman who resembles Christ.

Nightingale's work to reduce the mortality rate of soldiers and veterans of the Crimean War was privately funded over the decades, allowing her to operate outside the constraints of the establishment. The idea of private funding to help the helpless made a permanent imprint on young JoeAnn's mind, nurtured by her foster father, who read the Nightingale biography to her at bedtime.

JoeAnn was clear about two things: she wanted to serve God, and she wanted to serve the poor and needy. But no churches in 1965 were clamoring for a young, inexperienced minister who happened to be female and black. Exasperated, she wondered what a farm girl from Lucedale, Mississippi, was doing in a West Virginia Bible college, anyway. And why, as some of her older relatives liked to inquire, didn't she have a husband yet? But amidst the uncertainty of what lay before her, the young woman had—she searched for the word to describe it—a *knowing*. While part of her was clamoring and complaining that things should be different, another part of her had the feeling that somehow it was all going to work out.

Young as she was, JoeAnn wanted to help others the way her foster parents had supported her and her brother and sister, lifting them like flowers toward the sun. JoeAnn's foster parents, who were distant blood relatives, had set the bar for selflessness, generosity, and thrift. Never had JoeAnn heard them offer the tiniest resentment toward her biological mother and father, who—truth be told—had abandoned their children.

As the family story goes, a few days before Christmas 1944, JoeAnn's father, Dyke Sylvester Marshall, packed the three kids in his Chevy sedan, drove them away from their home at 1750 Virginia Street in Mobile, and never brought them back.

Their mother, Lacy Lee Lawrence, was a girl of nineteen; Dyke was twenty-six. As Dyke drove away from the Gulf Coast into rural Mississippi, JoeAnn's birth certificate was in the glove box. It

listed Dyke's occupation as shipyard worker and was signed by a midwife rather than a licensed physician. Like most black babies at that time, JoeAnn had been delivered at home by a midwife. There weren't any black doctors, and white doctors rarely ventured into the black part of town.

Dyke drove into the basin lands, shadowing the Pascagoula River where pine trees were scarred from long cuts made to siphon off the turpentine. Where scuppernong and other wild grape vines stood bare, waited for spring's warmth to return. Where picked-over cotton fields stood with their bronze-colored stalks and the occasional white-puff face, watching the cars pass.

Dyke was headed with his babies to Lucedale, the county seat of George County, and Lacy Lee's grandfather's place. Down Rural Route 3 was a rectangle of rural forest and swampland anchoring southern Mississippi. Here, families stuck together in southern custom—but in reality it was the only way to survive, especially for black people. When the residents of Lucedale saw the big fancy car speeding through the town's one stoplight, they speculated about who it was because everybody knew everybody else—and most of them were related somewhere down the line. If a stranger showed up in town and got to talking with an old-timer from Lucedale, before long she'd have figured out how you were related.

At the end of a muddy, bumpy road, Dyke pulled up to the old farmhouse where DeLoach and Ora Mae Benjamin lived. He lifted three-month old JoeAnn from a blanket on the floor of the car, then looked at his other two children. The oldest, Lula, was three; the middle child, Dyke, Jr., could barely walk. "Come on now," he called, taking Dyke, Jr.'s arm and pulling him out of the car with his free hand.

DeLoach, like most of the men in his family, had served in the U.S. military in a time when many African Americans were just one or two generations away from the gruesome days of slavery. DeLoach was the father of two children with his first wife, who

had died young, leaving him to raise their two teenagers on his own. But his single-parenting days had just begun.

When DeLoach's sister died, she left eighteen children behind, and he took in every single one of them. By the time he married Ora Mae Tanner, DeLoach was in his early fifties. He hadn't had much time to himself, but he didn't feel the need for it. He preferred to live surrounded by family, working with a bright heart and two strong hands to make a good life out of what little they had. As for Ora Mae, her parents were dead, and she was living alone on the Lawrence farm.

Originally the Lawrence family—JoeAnn's ancestors—owned as many as eight hundred acres distributed among twelve siblings. In the extended Lawrence family, one relative, Quitman Wells, owned fifteen hundred acres. According to JoeAnn's relative Charles L. Grant Sr. in his book *Heritages from Our Foundation Fathers,* in the early 1800s the requirements for acquiring a homestead of up to 160 acres were simple: File an application, spend every night on the property for two years, and get the neighbors to attest to this fact. The homesteader was then issued a patent deed stating that the parcel would belong to him and his heirs forever.

Ora Mae's father, Sardin Tanner, was mulatto, which almost always meant the offspring of a white slave owner and a black female slave. Her mother was Georgianna Lawrence, whose parents were Dan and Elizabeth Brown Lawrence. When Sardin married Georgianna, she was a teenager living with her parents and raising her little boy, Lacey Lawrence. Aside from being landowners, the Lawrences of Alabama were well-known as leaders in the community and included preachers, Sunday-school teachers, educators at historically black universities, and owners of such establishments as a café, a beauty shop, a barber shop, a funeral home, and washeterias.

DeLoach's marriage to Ora Mae Tanner was fruitful in love—but not in progeny. He was pondering that very thing when he

heard Dyke Marshall's shiny, late-model car pull into the yard, alarming the chickens. The old front door of the hand-hewn farmhouse creaked as DeLoach opened it. He was mildly surprised to see a little family heading for him, only slowly recognizing the man who had married Lacy Lee, his wife's niece, who was ten years younger than Dyke. *So, these are the little babies that have lived with all that trouble,* he thought to himself. The stories of Dyke and Lace Lee Lawrence's fighting had rippled through the family for years.

"Can you help us out?" Dyke asked, holding the baby outstretched from his new suit. The children's clothes were dingy and torn. "Just for a little while," he said, breaking into a grin when DeLoach reached out for baby JoeAnn. "Till we can get back on our feet."

Childless Ora Mae appeared at the door and in a single gesture drew that baby to her bosom. After all these years of wondering why God hadn't seen fit to give her a child, she knew exactly what this moment meant. She knew that taking these kids that day might mean keeping them forever. She knew she would be cutting cotton flour sacks to hand stitch into clothes, that in addition to farm chores, she would be making many trips to the yard and back, hauling well water inside for drinking, cooking, and cleaning. And she knew she would have taken these children in even if they hadn't shared the same blood. As the two older children looked up from the doorway, the chilly winter air suddenly seemed to warm, and DeLoach and Ora Mae embraced their first foster children, welcoming them into their hearts and hearth.

JoeAnn saw her mother only a few times after that day. The kids didn't know that Lacy Lee had called Ora Mae a few weeks after Dyke had dropped them off, explaining that they were getting divorced and asking Ora Mae if she would raise the kids for her. Dyke came around once or twice a year, always on a holiday when there was sure to be plenty of food. Each year at Mardi Gras time, Ora Mae took JoeAnn, Dyke Jr., and Lula back to Mobile

to see their father. But if he ever sent one dime of support for the children, JoeAnn never heard of it. It wasn't long before the older children stopped asking—or caring—if their parents were coming back to get them. It hardly mattered as God had blessed DeLoach and Ora Mae with enough love, thrift, and stubborn determination to parent many children who were not their own. Over time, they wound up taking in an additional twenty-five children from the Basin community, about twelve miles from Lucedale, Mississippi. They could not overlook the sight of a child whose parents hadn't the means, or perhaps the courage, to care for their babies. Over and over again, they allowed others' burdens to become their blessings. It was a way of life that imprinted permanently on JoeAnn's heart. With her "real" parents absent and distant relatives acting as her real parents, the question of who to love simply dissolved: she was to love everyone.

The farm where DeLoach and Ora Mae fed all those hungry mouths had been passed down to Ora Mae from her maternal grandfather, Dan Lawrence. It was rare for a black man to own land in the South, due to laws and general conditions before the Civil War. In the 1800s white landowners had grown rich off the worldwide cotton market, picked by Mississippi's slaves—as many as a half million. Some southern states (South Carolina, Georgia, and Mississippi) had made it a crime to teach a person of color how to read or write. But by the beginning of the Civil War in 1861, a few southern whites were not only educating their slaves but also freeing them.

As Ora Mae's family told the story, their ancestor Dan Lawrence had been a slave in East Tennessee, where farms were small and the mountainous land and colder climate created fewer opportunities for cotton plantations. Freed from bondage, he gathered his wife and children and left East Tennessee for Mississippi. It is unknown how they traveled that far; perhaps he loaded them into a horse- or mule-drawn farm wagon. They wouldn't have been welcome on a white passenger train, and most of the tracks

had been torn up in the war, anyway. The South was in shambles.

Arriving in Mississippi, Dan was prepared for the difficult task of building a new life. He was a fearless, big-boned man never known to shy away from physically brutal farm jobs. He could take down towering oaks with an ax, run a sawmill, and build wagons and houses. He could wrangle a cow and ride a horse and provide them with both blacksmith and veterinary services. He also became a preacher, carrying the message of the Gospel to local folks on Sundays and whenever he had a chance to spread the Good Word.

As Charles L. Grant wrote, "After these early settlers had become very well established in their homes, it was not uncommon for a man to drive to his neighbor's house some ten or more miles away and spend the day talking about the church and how God had blessed them by bringing them from under the bondage of slavery."

Dan Lawrence homesteaded on eighty acres near Lucedale, plowed with a mule and planted by hand. He understood how the phases of the moon affect the start of a crop. He found time to be a spiritual leader and cofounder of the United Methodist church in the Basin community and always had time to help one of his children and grandchildren.

It is no wonder that Dan's granddaughter Ora Mae married a man just like him. DeLoach was a big, hardworking, generous man from Little River, Alabama. He was something of an herbalist and a good cook. During World War I, he tirelessly made meals for thousands of National Guardsmen arriving at Camp McClellan, Alabama, for Army training. In the fall of 1917, there were 27,000 troops at Camp McClellan, including the First Separate Negro Company of Maryland. DeLoach was discharged in March 1919 from Company B 437, Army Reserve Labor Battalion. None of his living relatives are sure why, but one of his legs was virtually useless afterward. He was discharged with a full disability pension and used a wooden cane for the rest of his life. It

became his way of emphasizing a point, often punching it into the ground and cheering a struggling child, "Never give up!"

When the spirit moved him, DeLoach would steady himself, reach down, and swoop JoeAnn onto his shoulders, saying, "Come on, Fannie"—his special nickname for her—and carry her around the farm as he tended to his tasks. DeLoach considered himself a progressive man and subscribed to *Progressive Farmer* magazine. (The all-white staff were also *socially* progressive and went so far as to print an editorial in 1960 supporting voting rights for black people.)

You might think a man with a twelve-acre farm and a bad leg would be unable to care for over forty children, but DeLoach had more love in his little finger than most people had in their whole bodies. JoeAnn called him "Montee" or "Daddy" and Ora Mae "Mama," and a slew of other people were "aunt," "uncle" and "cousin." The South was that kind of place. Everybody knew everybody else's business, like it or not. So you might as well like it. Besides, it came in handy when trouble came to town. When there was illness, neighbors would come with a cure or bring the doctor. When a member of the Basin community died, if the family didn't have the money to bury the poor soul, neighbors pitched in to donate wood, build the coffin, dig the hole, cut flowers, pay the preacher—whatever it took to give their brethren a decent burial.

Little JoeAnn liked sitting on the front porch, taking in the sweet aroma of gardenias and magnolias planted near the house. In warm weather Ora Mae's flower garden was a living canvas of roses, Easter lilies, and medicinal herbs, and nearby peach and plum trees offered their succulent fruit. In late summer etched mahogany ovals began falling from the pecan trees, and pies were sure to follow.

JoeAnn also trained her ears to decipher the sound of different engines before a car or truck came past the big old oak tree that blocked part of the view. Before she could read, she memorized the colors of different license plates and could identify a car and

where it was from in a heartbeat. Often she knew whose it was. Her daddy's car never came again.

Sometimes JoeAnn looked at the Sears catalog, turning page after page of slim white women dressed in all the newest fashions. There wasn't a single black face in any of those pages or any of the other clothes catalogs. Then she realized that her baby doll and all of her friends' baby dolls were white. Black dolls were extremely rare in the United States because there was no market for them. A psychologist's study at the time showed that given the choice between a black doll and a white doll, both white and black children would choose a white one. But one year JoeAnn asked Santa for a doll with the same color skin as hers. Santa must have had to go all the way to New York City, but he found her a black baby, and it sat waiting for her on Christmas morning.

The spirit of the Christmas season penetrated the house like the fragrance from the fresh evergreen tree, chopped down from the woods by DeLoach. It was loaded with ornaments that Ora Mae embroidered and sewed by hand, and folks came from miles around each December to admire. The biggest draw, however, was Ora Mae's seasonal baking: Christmas pies of apple and pumpkin, pound cakes and chocolate cakes, and cookies made with local honey and molasses.

To everything there is a season and a purpose unto heaven. This JoeAnn understood in the marrow of her bones. Spring was for planting, summer for hoeing, fall for harvesting. Anything they didn't grow in the fields DeLoach simply hunted or harvested from the forests and fields. He knew which plants were medicinal and which were deadly and that a spider web made a fine bandage for a deep cut. Like the four seasons, the events of JoeAnn's childhood wove together in a four-part helix, forming a worldview of love, generosity, hard work, and faith.

New Year's Day was hog-killing time. A three- or four-hundred pound hog could easily feed a small family all year long, so it took two of them to see the Lawrence family through till the next

winter. Butchering an animal that size required cold weather to discourage contamination. A handful of male relatives and neighbors came to help for however many days it took, and they were properly thanked with plenty of fatback and chitlins to take home for their own families. The pig parts that plantation owners historically left for slaves had quickly become a well-loved traditional meal for African Americans in the South, where story-telling was as much a part of mealtime as the food.

The meat was salt cured for a month, then sugar cured and smoked in hickory for half the spring. The resulting meat was fit for a king, and Ora Mae pressure canned it in Mason jars for safekeeping and eating the rest of the year. All the fresh fruit and garden vegetables too were peeled and cooked and canned in glass Mason jars: purple-hulled peas, Great Northern beans, turnips and collard greens, peaches, and every kind of fruit jam and jelly.

Montee and Ora Mae shouldered the exhausting chores necessary to run the farm. He fed the cows and hogs at the crack of dawn while Ora Mae milked the cows every day or sometimes twice a day. They refused to make farmhands out of their children and instead assigned them smaller but important tasks. They picked cucumbers, peas, and butter beans out of the garden for dinner. They happily ventured into the nearby woods to pick blackberries, dewberries, and huckleberries, eating their fill and sucking on the ambrosia of honeysuckle vines. The kids kept their rooms neat and took turns washing dishes and sweeping chicken litter from the dirt yard. They pumped water for the cows and carried it to their trough twice a day. JoeAnn didn't mind hauling water from the pump to the house. As she watched the cool water pour into the wooden bucket, she often thought of the man she called Daddy and how he always made things better—including the well he had dug so they wouldn't have to walk all the way to the stream to bring water to the house.

In the spacious kitchen, Ora Mae always had a fire crackling in the wood cook stove, and she'd be cooking up something good.

The cook stove was also a main source of heat for the house, besides the two fireplaces. The children slept in warmth in full-length handmade nightgowns underneath piles of cotton quilts that Ora Mae had pieced together from scraps. When they were small, Ora Mae heated large towels by the stove at bedtime, rolled them up, and pressed them under the covers of each child's bed. When they were older, the kids would come and get their own warmed towel.

In the mornings the kitchen was warm and fragrant with the smell of Louisiana coffee with chicory, biscuits, and salt-cured ham. JoeAnn would slip from under the covers, dash to the outhouse, then fly to the kitchen for a warm breakfast. She had become as strong as any boy her age and liked to run and jump and climb trees—which may have been why a neighbor boy sometimes teased her for being a tomboy. Sitting at the pine-plank table, she watched Ora Mae hover over two cast-iron frying pans, one sizzling with bacon and the other full of pancakes. "We'll have company for dinner tonight, baby," Ora Mae called over her shoulder to JoeAnn. "You can help me pluck the chickens after your brother kills them."

JoeAnn liked it when folks came into the warmth and safety of their home. It was the kind of home that people knew would provide them with help. A place where a lost soul could eat, sit on the porch, get their questions answered, stay a few nights, borrow money. A safe house. Like the early church in the book of Acts, JoeAnn learned from an early age how to share all things in common with whomever God would bring her way.