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A World Not of Their Own Making

Willie Darnell Harris came screaming into this world in a sharecropper's cabin on the eighth day of the eighth month in the year America entered World War II. The four-room shack where he was pulled from his mother's womb was the only home he would know for the first 19 years of his life. He was delivered by Laura Rimpson, a midwife who presided over the births of all the little black boys and girls in their part of rural Mississippi in the 1930s and 1940s, as the nearest hospital was 12 miles away. A year earlier, she delivered Willie's older brother Robert, and over time, she did the same for up to a dozen of his cousins who lived on a neighboring plantation.

The cabin was located on Clifton, a 1,000-acre plantation in the small community of Howard, which rests in Holmes County. It is due west of Lexington, the county seat, and the 10-mile trip to Lexington on Howard Road winds through thick forests and fields pregnant with cotton and corn in late summer. The county is lush, green, and sparsely populated, and an hour's drive west of Howard brings you to the east bank of the Mississippi. On your way to the big river, your ride can take you by the birthplaces of Delta Blues

pioneers B.B. King, John Lee Hooker, and Mississippi John Hurt, all of them born into sharecropping families.

The Harris cabin—as well as the other 15 on the plantation—had no electricity or indoor plumbing in 1941, and they were all set up pretty much the same way: two bedrooms, one for the parents and one for the kids; a kitchen with a wood-burning stove; a room with a table for eating, and maybe a couch and chairs, if you were lucky. Kerosene lamps provided light, and there was a well and outhouse in the yard.

Willie and Robert were raised by their parents Evie and Oscar Harris. Evie was born in 1900 in neighboring Carroll County, and her family moved to the Howard area when she was a young woman. By the time Willie was born she had spent most of her more than 40 years picking cotton, never having learned to read or write. Oscar was there, but he wasn't. He was known to take up with women in the area and he would disappear for days at a time, often taking some of the family's paltry wages or food with him to share with his girlfriends. When he was home, bad things often happened. He would hit Evie, and when Willie got to be 6 or 7 years old, Oscar would smack him around, too, when he got sassy. Oscar was 6 feet tall and 200 pounds, a strong dude, and when Willie talked back, Oscar would whack him upside the head with a left jab. Robert was calmer than Willie and could usually avoid Oscar's wrath by doing what he was told to do, but Willie was harder to handle. There was a fire burning inside him that was tough to contain, and it certainly could not be extinguished.

So Evie, Robert, and Willie clung together in their little shack and tried to survive each day as best they could. By the mid-1940s Evie was an illiterate, middle-aged black woman with no marketable skills—other than being an extremely hard worker in the fields—who was stuck in an unhappy marriage with an abusive husband,

eking out a hand-to-mouth existence on a plantation in the heart of the Jim Crow segregated South. Whatever dreams that made her heart leap as a young girl had long since floated away on a Mississippi breeze, but now she had a new mission to sustain her: do anything she could to help her boys get away from the dead-end existence of sharecropping and make something out of their lives.

Before the boys could make something out of their lives, they had to make it through childhood. Evie taught them everything, from working with the animals in the pen, to cultivating the peas, okra, sweet potatoes, collard greens, snap beans and more in their vegetable garden, to picking cotton. If the family was going to have chicken for dinner, she would send Willie out to the chicken coop to grab one of the birds and get it ready. He would hold the chicken under his arm and spin its head round and round with his other hand until he snapped its neck. Then he would yank the head off and drop the decapitated chicken in a pot of boiling water on the wood-burning stove to get the feathers off. Now they were ready to slice it open, pull out the intestines and other internal organs, and drain the blood before frying and eating it with biscuits and gravy. They kept the bones to make chicken soup the next day, but unlike some of their neighbors, they didn’t eat the chicken’s feet or head. They were happy with the rest of the bird.

Hogs provided much more bounty than chickens, and they also required much more work. It started in the spring when Willie and Robert would go out to the forest that surrounded the plantation fields and cut down a hickory tree, saw it into smaller pieces, pile it on the back of a mule they had borrowed from the plantation owner, and haul it back to the cabin where they would cut it, split it, and stack it, so it could become seasoned throughout the summer and fall. The family usually had a half dozen hogs, and they would slaughter them in November or December so they would have

enough food to get them through the cold winter months. When they killed a hog, they would cut up and eventually eat all the meat: the ham, ribs, bacon, hock, neck, and butt, as well as the feet, ears, snout, cheek, and tongue. Almost no part of the hog went to waste, and about the only parts they wouldn't eat were the teeth and eyeballs. Many families would eat the hog's small intestines, known as chitlins—boil them up and season them with greens. Willie didn't like that; the ham was his favorite. After cutting up the hog they would use the chopped hickory sticks to start a slow-burning, smoldering fire in the smokehouse, which was a small wooden structure in the backyard near the outhouse. They would hang the meat in the smokehouse for a few days to preserve it and then would take a little here and there to make meals over the next several months. The hog fat was very important because Evie would render it in boiling water in a pot on the stove to create lard, which was used to fry chicken. Buying soap from the store would have been a luxury, so Evie made their soap for body washing and doing laundry from a mixture of lard and lye.

In addition to smoking meat from the hogs to get through the winter, the family would preserve potatoes by digging a hole in the ground, dropping them in, and covering them with straw. Evie was also a master at canning peaches, pears, and apples in mason jars. With lessons handed down over many generations, she knew exactly how long to cook the fruit, how much sugar to put in, and how to can them so they didn't spoil. Willie made himself many a meal from canned peaches and biscuits.

It was a subsistence living, to be sure. The vast majority of what they ate they had raised or grew. On most days, everything they consumed was a product of their labor, except the sugar and salt they would buy at the Howard Store at the bottom of the hill. Sharecropping was designed so the sharecroppers would always

have just enough money or food to get through the day or week, and they needed to keep working incessantly to sustain their meager way of life. It is a system in which landowners provide housing and a plot of farmable land to families in exchange for their work raising and harvesting the crops. Sharecropping became widespread in the South during and after Reconstruction (1865-1877) following the Civil War. Plantation owners had plenty of land to raise crops, but no longer owned slaves who worked the land. Most free blacks had no land and very little or no money, but they could work to earn their keep. In most cases, the landowner provided each family with a ramshackle cabin, tools for farming, and a small plot of land behind their cabin for raising a few animals and growing their own vegetables, known as the truck patch. At the end of the year, about a week before Thanksgiving, each family would settle up with the owner and receive their share—or more accurately, the amount the plantation owner said was their share—of what the crop, usually cotton, brought at market, hence the term “sharecropping.” The sharecroppers were supposed to be paid one-third to one-half the value of the crops they brought in during the harvest, the idea being that the landowner would keep one-half to two-thirds, since he provided the land and housing. However, like just about every economic, political, legal, educational, or social system devised by whites who held power in the South in the century following the Civil War, its ultimate goal was to maintain the power and economic security of whites and to keep blacks mired in hopeless poverty, undereducated—or utterly uneducated—and under the thumb of the ruling class.

The amount each family received from the owner depended in large part on how much or how little the owner chose to give them. Many sharecroppers were illiterate, and even those who could read and were skilled in arithmetic had no recourse if they knew they

were getting cheated. The owner controlled everything: he owned the land and the tools needed for farming; he provided housing, such as it was; he created, maintained, and interpreted the plantation’s financial records; and he ran the plantation store where the sharecroppers would buy the sundry items needed to supplement what they were able to grow and raise on their own. On top of all of that, he was white, and if a black man questioned the actions of a white man in the South in the mid-twentieth century, he was likely to get a gun pointed at his head, or much worse.

The system was designed to keep sharecroppers perpetually dependent on, and often indebted to, the plantation owner. The year started in late winter with the owner providing each sharecropping family with a monthly loan to help them survive until the crop came in.

“Starting in about March of every year if you had four in the family, he would give you about $30 for March, April, May, June, July, and August; you start picking cotton in August. So those months, he would give you something to start, about $30 a month, but at the end of the year he would take that back,” Willie said.

Robert recalls how hard his family worked and worked, only to end each year with nothing to show for it, and the system continued to work as it was designed, keeping families like the Harrises dependent upon their plantation owner.

“They would work all year long and come to the end of the year, they didn't get anything. The man told him that they owed money instead of getting money. The way it supposed to be, once he sold his crop off, we were supposed to get some money back, but we never did. And we just kept workin' and workin'. You'd scrape every little bit you could. There was nothing you could do about it. It was what it were. Like I say, we raised our own gardens, we raised our own

hogs, and we had our own cattle, one or two cows, and that kept us goin'.”

There were peach and pecan trees on Clifton Plantation, as well as peanut and alfalfa fields. But like most plantations in Mississippi, the dominant crop was cotton. The calendar and daily life of everyone on the plantation revolved around the cultivation and harvesting of cotton. It started in March or April when the seeds were planted on the owner’s fields, as well as all the plots assigned to each sharecropping family. These were anywhere from 3 to 10 acres, depending on the size of the family. The bigger the family, the more cotton they could pick, the larger the plot. A few weeks after the planting, the choppin’ would start. Choppin’ cotton was the most physically demanding and exhausting part of the process. Once the cotton plant has grown to be about 6 inches tall, the grass that grows around it needs to be cleared away, so it doesn’t smother the burgeoning stalk. Clearing the grass away with a hoe is called choppin’ cotton. It might take two weeks for a family to chop cotton in their field, and then they would have to go back and do it all over again until the plant was strong enough to survive on its own. The workday was from “can to can’t,” which means you start working at sunrise, when you can see, and you stop at sunset, when you can’t see.

Willie and all the other little boys and girls would start working the fields when they were old enough to handle a hoe, about seven or eight years old. Before that, some would be given the job of bringing water to those toiling in the cotton rows. Choppin’ and picking cotton was brutal work, and Willie hated it. “You get up in the mornin' and go out in the cotton field and it's wet from the night's dew and all of that stuff, and that cotton is over your head, and it would be cold, too, but you had to do it.” He would end the day wiped out, often hungry, with his sweaty clothes stuck to him.

Washing clothes was a laborious process, and with so many other things to do, it only happened once every couple of weeks. Willie would have to wear the same clothes for a few days in a row, and the cabin would smell pretty rank at times.

The cotton plants would grow to maturity during June and July, and during that time the sharecroppers would work on the crops in their truck patches, bale hay, and do other work for the plantation owner. On a hot summer day Willie would be standing in the field, sweating while he walked behind the hay baler, and watch the white boys playing Cowboys and Indians, and ask his mom why.

“Mom, why do we have to work so much? I want to play like the white kids.”

“Well, son. That’s just the way it is. There ain’t nuthin’ we can do about it, so you just have to deal with it,” Evie would say.

It was the late 1940s, almost a decade before the civil rights movement gained any momentum. Life was just as hard for blacks in Mississippi in 1948 as it was when Evie was a girl in 1908, so she had no reason to believe it would ever change. The Southern Way of Life, with its well-known written and unwritten rules, had been ensconced since the late nineteenth century, when it had been altered slightly to accommodate for the abolition of slavery. The social and economic caste system was clearly defined: white plantation owners and professionals at the top, and blacks, sharecroppers in particular, at the bottom. Evie taught Willie and Robert everything they needed to know to survive: “Whenever you speak to a white man you address him as sir, or mister. Whenever you are in town, if you see white people walking toward you on the sidewalk, you step off to let them pass. Whenever you are standing in line in a store and a white person gets in line, you step off to the side to let them go ahead of you. When a white person tells you to do something, you do it, and you don’t sass them. And perhaps most important of all, whenever

you see a white woman or girl, do not look her in the eye and do not speak to her."

Willie, Robert, Evie, and millions of other sharecroppers were living in a world not of their own making. They did not choose any of this. They were born into it and boxed in. The concept of the American Dream holds that if you work hard and play by the rules you can build a better life for yourself than your parents had. For these people, in their situation, that notion was a pathetic farce.

Willie felt the shackles of segregation from a young age. He hated the fact that he had to work so hard and couldn't have any of the things the white kids had. While others put their head down and plowed ahead because that is just the way it was, Willie asked himself, Why? Why do I have to deal with this crap? Why do I have to be careful about everything I say, work almost all the time, and never have anything? And nothing crystallized this growing anger more than cotton picking season. When August rolled around and the white kids were getting ready for the start of school, the black kids from the sharecropping families were getting ready for two to three months of hard labor.

A cotton field in full bloom is a beautiful sight: a sea of brilliant white speckled with green stretching to the horizon, shimmering in the September sun against the backdrop of a gorgeous blue sky. It is a beautiful sight, that is, unless you are one of the people who has to pick all that cotton. In that case, it can practically be hell on earth. Mechanical cotton harvesting machines were not widespread in Willie's area of Mississippi until about 1960, so throughout his entire childhood all the cotton on Clifton Plantation was picked by hand by the 15 sharecropping families. He and Robert would get up in the morning in late summer and early fall and head out to the fields.

When they were eight or nine years old, they were given a small sack that Evie had stitched together, and it would hold about 10 pounds of cotton. As they got bigger, they got bigger sacks, until eventually they were lugging sacks that held 100 pounds of cotton on their backs. They would quickly, yet carefully, pluck the fluffy cotton fiber from the boll with two fingers and a thumb, then stuff it in the sack. Again, and again, and again. It made your fingers ache, and your hunched back sore, and it was so monotonous and mind-numbingly boring.

After many a long day of working in the cotton rows, Willie would finally be free to rest. When the lamp was extinguished, there was nothing left to do but lie there in bed—often damp, and cold, and hungry—and count the stars through the holes in the roof. In the still of the Mississippi night he would listen to the crickets and cicadas sing, hoping that someday, some way, he might hear a rare and different tune.

There were bright spots in Willie's childhood; they didn't have to work all the time, and they did have some fun with the other kids on the plantation, as kids will do. The family had two pet dogs, including Ted, a mutt who survived on Harris table scraps. Willie and Robert and the other kids would bring him along to help hunt rabbits and squirrels. Back in the day, they shared many a tasty meal with squirrel as the main course. Lope was a registered collie, but he was no Lassie. Robert named him Lope because he meandered along at a casual pace and liked to lay around in the shade, just chillin'. Like any kid, Willie was happy when he was with his friends. His infectious smile, outgoing personality, and impressive height made him a natural leader among his peers. Many of his friends didn't know he was angry inside; they just knew him as Willie D. When they didn't have to work, the boys often played baseball and the

game that would become Willie's lifelong obsession, a blessing, and in some ways, a curse: basketball.

When Willie was growing up, there were four or five other working cotton plantations adjoining Clifton or within walking distance—Brock, Beall and Ellison, and Powell among them. This area, known as Howard Bottom, is very flat and consists mainly of acre upon acre of cotton fields bounded by forest. Every now and then you would see a dwelling, a red wooden barn, or a silver grain silo. The nearest town is Tchula, four miles away, and it had only 900 residents back then. This was true country living. Dirt roads, lots of dust, and people who were self-sufficient, because they didn't have any other choice. The nexus for the community was Howard Store, where household necessities were sold, and right next to that was the cotton gin, where everyone would bring their cotton to have it weighed and processed. To get to Clifton, you went up a steep gravel road that began next to the gin.

Once you ascended the hill, the land flattened out again and the plantation spread out before you. Jones Road ran straight down the middle of the plantation, with cotton fields stretching symmetrically for an eighth of a mile on each side, and behind them, the sharecropping cabins, about one every 100 yards. Willie's next-door neighbors were the Johnsons on one side and his friends Curtiss and Winford Ross on the other. Pinky Patterson, whose little sister would become Willie's high school sweetheart, lived next to the Rosses, and the other families included the Hendersons, Nelsons, Simmons, Fords, and Jergens. A half mile down at the end of the road, past all the cabins, was the focal point of Clifton Plantation, The Big House.

Former Ross family cabin, Clifton Plantation, 2017

The Big House, Clifton Plantation, 2017

Constructed in the late 1840s by slaves, its formal name is Clifton Plantation House, but all the sharecroppers who ever worked there

knew it simply as The Big House. Built in the Greek Revival architectural style, it is roughly a 50- by 50-foot square, with tall sash windows, white clapboard siding, and topped by a pyramidal, grey shingled roof, with dormers on all four sides. Supporting the roof across the front of the house are eight elegant white pillars that sit on a generous U-shaped covered porch which wraps around the left and right sides. Inside, the impressive main entry hall is flanked by a parlor and library, and behind them are an expansive dining room, the kitchen, and two bedrooms. The truncated second floor also houses several more bedrooms. The front porch is a comfortable place where the owner and his family could sit and sip on a glass of lemonade, watch the swaying boughs of the majestic magnolia trees in the front yard, thumb through a book, and watch the slaves and their descendants, the sharecroppers, hard at work in the sweltering tropical heat. It is a great source of pride to the family who owned The Big House from the 1870s to the 1980s that it is widely considered to be the architectural model for Beauvoir, the post-Civil War home of Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederate States of America. Beauvoir was constructed in Biloxi down on the Gulf Coast just a few years after The Big House, and the homes are so similar that without looking closely it is difficult to tell them apart.

The Big House was entered into the National Register of Historic Places in 1985 and its application stated that its significance includes its representation of “an agriculturally-oriented lifestyle that is a rare survivor of the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the modern age.”

The contrast between The Big House and the sharecroppers’ cabins was as dramatic as that between a sunlit mountaintop and a murky ditch. The Big House exuded elegance, refinement, and attention to detail, while the cabins provided the bare minimum of a roof, four walls, and a floor. In the 1940s all of Clifton Plantation was commanded by Mr. Peyton Abbott Jones. In rural Mississippi,

the plantation owner's decrees were akin to the law. Peyton Abbott Jones ruled Clifton like a king, and The Big House was his Buckingham Palace. Born in 1894, the plantation had been in Peyton's family since shortly after the Civil War. His grandfather, who had the improbable name of Major Liberty Constantine Abbott, and his grandmother Maria were the first in his family to run the plantation and reside in The Big House. Major Abbott was from a small town south of Buffalo near Lake Erie. He had volunteered to fight for the Union in New York's Fifth Cavalry and had come to Mississippi as a carpetbagger in the late 1860s to work on behalf of the federal government. He never left.

Peyton Abbott Jones started running the plantation in 1930, and he was feared and loathed by the sharecropping families who lived on Clifton. Willie tried to stay as far away from him as he could, since he was, in Willie's words, a complete jackass. When Willie or anyone had to talk to him, they needed to remove their hat, bow their head, and meekly ask "'Scuze me, Mr. Jones, may I please ask you something?" If you didn't treat him with the proper deference, you were likely to get slapped in the head or kicked in the ass. It didn't matter that he wasn't a big man, you had damn well better not hit him back if he struck you. He controlled everything and everyone on the plantation. If you did something he didn't like, he just had to say the word and your family was gone, with no place to go.

He often told the sharecroppers that "Niggers don't need no damn education." When he saw 8-, 10-, or 12-year-old kids going to school when there was work to be done in the fields, he would tell them and their families: "We need this boy working in the fields, not goin' to school."

How did this happen? How is that 80 years after the end of the Civil War Willie found himself growing up in a system that felt like a watered-down version of slavery, minus the whips and iron

shackles? To understand interactions between whites and blacks in Mississippi in the 1940s, we must consider what came before. What historical events, economic and social systems, and traditions and beliefs helped shape the environment Willie was born into in 1941? It all began with the settling of the South by whites in the 18th and early 19th centuries, and the growth of its agricultural economy. In W. J. Cash's classic 1941 delineation of the history, temperament, and social order of the American South, aptly titled *The Mind of the South*, he explains that the white southern resistance to external authority has its roots in the pioneer spirit of the men who settled the deep Southern states. They had access to generous tracts of inexpensive, fertile farmland, and in order to succeed, they had to rely primarily on themselves to make the most of it. While most Americans grow up and make their way in a community, relying on others, and usually being bound by the rules of their community, this was foreign to the men who settled the South as farmers, many of whom eventually became plantation owners when the cotton boom occurred at the turn of the 19th century. Cash explains that the dominant trait of the white Southerner was individualism. This mindset was fostered by the conditions present throughout cotton country: the need to work the land effectively to survive, and the isolation inherent in living up to a mile or more from your nearest neighbor. This individualism in turn bred a chip-on-shoulder swagger in all classes of white Southerners—be they wealthy plantation owner, common farmer, or the poor white who drank his moonshine and played his fiddle—and the swagger was usually accompanied by an ever-present threat to “knock hell out of whoever dared to cross him.”

The demand for cotton—and the ability to produce it more rapidly —exploded in the first few decades of the 19th century. King Cotton was a juggernaut, with the Southern states producing the majority of

the world's supply, and no state producing more than Mississippi. During the decade prior to the Civil War, there were actually more slaves than white people in Mississippi. Economically, slave labor became a necessity to ensure the profitable production of cotton—or so it was thought—and consequently, the concept of slavery as an acceptable, normal, and just practice became a foundational component of the worldview of most white Southerners. People have the ability to justify almost anything, especially when money is at stake. Slavery as an institution needed to be protected from any external interference, especially from any do-gooder Northerners—the infamous outside agitators—trying to meddle in the South's business.

Of course, it would be unfair and wholly inaccurate to suggest that an entire population of millions of people spread out over thousands of square miles—the white South—thought and acted in lockstep by supporting slavery, with every man and woman also fueled by the same fierce resistance to authority and an ironclad determination to choose their own path. Perhaps surprisingly, the vast majority of abolition societies formed in the first half of the 19th century were founded in the South. But the pro-slavery forces, led by plantation owners, many of whom became state legislators and U.S. congressmen and senators, dominated Southern society and politics in the mid-19th century, and it was their determination to maintain the status quo that sent them flying headlong and with fury into the disaster that was the Civil War.

Following the war and collapse of Reconstruction around 1890, Southern state legislators and governors enacted discriminatory laws that prohibited almost any public or private mingling of blacks and whites, and the legal segregation of public and private spaces became the norm. That strict separation between the races was just as clearly defined and impermeable in 1940 as it had been in 1890.

In one respect, Peyton Abbott Jones wasn't too far removed from the Civil War and slavery—really just one generation. While his grandfather on his mother's side was a Yankee carpetbagger, his father, Peyton Tabb Jones, was born in Virginia in 1854 and lived in Mississippi most of his life. He would have been very familiar with slavery, the Civil War, and their aftermath, having lived through all of them. Beliefs and values are handed down from generation to generation—however misguided or malignant they may be.

In 1908 the United Daughters of the Confederacy erected a 25-foot-tall granite monument in honor of the Holmes County soldiers who fought in the Civil War to recognize their "patriotism and their heroism, and to commend their example to future generations." This same organization erected a monument to the Ku Klux Klan in North Carolina in 1926. The Holmes County monument stands today in Lexington on the courthouse grounds at the epicenter of the county's political, social, and commercial life. It is topped with the likeness of a noble-looking Confederate soldier who calmly holds the barrel of his rifle. For more than a century he has stood next to the American flag—though the rebel soldier is conspicuously higher than the stars and stripes—and he gazes out on the bustling town square at a hardware store and insurance agency. The following is carved into the base:

> *The men were right who wore the gray, and right can never die.*

The fields of Holmes are filled with memories. Ancient footprints are everywhere.