

## THE STIRRINGS OF DISCONTENT

*Everybody seems to be asleep  
about what is going on right under our noses.<sup>5</sup>  
That is, everybody but those farmers  
who have wakened up on mornings recently  
to find every Negro over 21 on his place gone—  
to Cleveland, to Pittsburgh,  
to Chicago, to Indianapolis....  
And while our very solvency  
is being sucked out beneath us,  
we go about our affairs as usual.*

— EDITORIAL, *The Macon Telegraph*,  
SEPTEMBER 1916

### SELMA, ALABAMA, EARLY WINTER 1916

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NO ONE KNOWS WHO was the first to leave. It was sometime in the middle of World War I. The North faced a labor shortage and, after centuries of indifference, cast its gaze at last on the servant class of the South. The North needed workers, and the workers needed an escape. No one knows exactly when or how it commenced or who took the first actual step of what would become the Great Migration.

One of the earliest references came on February 5, 1916, and was seen as an isolated, random event.<sup>6</sup> It merited only a paragraph in the *Chicago Defender*, the agitator and unwitting chronicler of the movement, and was likely preceded by unremarked-upon departures months before. Railroads in Pennsylvania had begun undercover scouting of cheap black labor as early as 1915. But few people noticed when, in the deep of winter, with a war raging in Europe and talk of America joining in, several hundred black families began quietly departing Selma, Alabama, in February 1916, declaring, according to the *Chicago Defender's* brief citation, that the “treatment doesn’t warrant staying.”<sup>7</sup>

Ida Mae Brandon was not yet three years old. George Starling, Pershing Foster, and millions of others who would follow in the footsteps of those first wartime families from Selma had not yet been born. But those early departures would set the stage for their eventual migration.

The families from Selma left in the midst of one of the most divisive eras in American

history—the long and violent hangover after the Civil War, when the South, left to its own devices as the North looked away, dismantled the freedoms granted former slaves after the war.<sup>8</sup>

The plantation owners had trouble imagining the innate desires of the people they once had owned. “I find a worse state of things with the Negroes than I expected,” wrote General Howell Cobb, a Georgia planter, shortly after the slaves were freed.<sup>9</sup> “Let any man offer them some little thing of no real value, but which looks a little more like freedom, and they catch at it with avidity, and would sacrifice their best friends without hesitation and without regret.”

“They will almost starve and go naked,” wrote a planter in Warren County, Georgia, “before they will work for a white man, if they can get a patch of ground to live on and get from under his control.”<sup>10</sup>

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For all its upheaval, the Civil War had left most blacks in the South no better off economically than they had been before. Sharecropping, slavery’s replacement, kept them in debt and still bound to whatever plantation they worked. But one thing had changed. The federal government had taken over the affairs of the South, during a period known as Reconstruction, and the newly freed men were able to exercise rights previously denied them. They could vote, marry, or go to school if there were one nearby, and the more ambitious among them could enroll in black colleges set up by northern philanthropists, open businesses, and run for office under the protection of northern troops. In short order, some managed to become physicians, legislators, undertakers, insurance men. They assumed that the question of black citizens’ rights had been settled for good and that all that confronted them was merely building on these new opportunities.

But, by the mid-1870s, when the North withdrew its oversight in the face of southern hostility, whites in the South began to resurrect the caste system founded under slavery. Nursing the wounds of defeat and seeking a scapegoat, much like Germany in the years leading up to Nazism, they began to undo the opportunities accorded freed slaves during Reconstruction and to refine the language of white supremacy. They would create a caste system based not on pedigree and title, as in Europe, but solely on race, and which, by law, disallowed any movement of the lowest caste into the mainstream.

The fight over this new caste system made it to the U.<sup>11</sup>S. Supreme Court. Homer A. Plessy, a colored Louisianan, protested a new state law forbidding any railroad passenger from entering “a compartment to which by race he does not belong.” On June 7, 1894, Plessy bought a first-class ticket on the East Louisiana Railroad, took an empty seat in the white-only car, and was arrested when he refused to move. In 1896, in the seminal case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the Supreme Court sided with the South and ruled, in an eight-to-one vote, that “equal but separate” accommodations were constitutional. That ruling would stand for the next sixty years.

Now, with a new century approaching, blacks in the South, accustomed to the liberties

established after the war, were hurled back in time, as if the preceding three decades, limited though they may have been, had never happened. One by one, each license or freedom accorded them was stripped away. The world got smaller, narrower, more confined with each new court ruling and ordinance.

Not unlike European Jews who watched the world close in on them slowly, perhaps barely perceptibly, at the start of Nazism, colored people in the South would first react in denial and disbelief to the rising hysteria, then, helpless to stop it, attempt a belated resistance, not knowing and not able to imagine how far the supremacists would go. The outcomes for both groups were widely divergent, one suffering unspeakable loss and genocide, the other enduring nearly a century of apartheid, pogroms, and mob executions. But the hatreds and fears that fed both assaults were not dissimilar and relied on arousing the passions of the indifferent to mount so complete an attack.

The South began acting in outright defiance of the Fourteenth Amendment of 1868, which granted the right to due process and equal protection to anyone born in the United States, and it ignored the Fifteenth Amendment of 1880, which guaranteed all men the right to vote.<sup>12, 13</sup>

Politicians began riding these anti-black sentiments all the way to governors' mansions throughout the South and to seats in the U.S. Senate.

"If it is necessary, every Negro in the state will be lynched," James K.<sup>14</sup> Vardaman, the white supremacy candidate in the 1903 Mississippi governor's race, declared. He saw no reason for blacks to go to school. "The only effect of Negro education," he said, "is to spoil a good field hand and make an insolent cook."<sup>15</sup>

Mississippi voted Vardaman into the governor's office and later sent him to the U.S. Senate.

All the while, newspapers were giving black violence top billing, the most breathless outrage reserved for any rumor of black male indiscretion toward a white woman, all but guaranteeing a lynching. Sheriff's deputies mysteriously found themselves unable to prevent the abduction of a black suspect from a jailhouse cell. Newspapers alerted readers to the time and place of an upcoming lynching. In spectacles that often went on for hours, black men and women were routinely tortured and mutilated, then hanged or burned alive, all before festive crowds of as many as several thousand white citizens, children in tow, hoisted on their fathers' shoulders to get a better view.

Fifteen thousand men, women, and children gathered to watch eighteen-year-old Jesse Washington as he was burned alive in Waco, Texas, in May 1916.<sup>16</sup> The crowd chanted, "Burn, burn, burn!" as Washington was lowered into the flames. One father holding his son on his shoulders wanted to make sure his toddler saw it.

"My son can't learn too young," the father said.<sup>17</sup>

Across the South, someone was hanged or burned alive every four days from 1889 to 1929, according to the 1933 book *The Tragedy of Lynching*, for such alleged crimes as "stealing hogs, horse-stealing, poisoning mules, jumping labor contract, suspected of

killing cattle, boastful remarks” or “trying to act like a white person.”<sup>18</sup> Sixty-six were killed after being accused of “insult to a white person.”<sup>19</sup> One was killed for stealing seventy-five cents.<sup>20</sup>

Like the cotton growing in the field, violence had become so much a part of the landscape that “perhaps most of the southern black population had witnessed a lynching in their own communities or knew people who had,” wrote the historian Herbert Shapiro.<sup>21</sup> “All blacks lived with the reality that no black individual was completely safe from lynching.”

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In this atmosphere, *The Clansman*, a 1905 novel that was the basis of the 1915 film *Birth of a Nation*, became a national bestseller. It fed whites’ panic over freed blacks in their midst and inspired people in Georgia to revive the Ku Klux Klan the year the film was released. Soon Klansmen in full regalia were holding public parades before cheering white crowds across the South like celebrations of the Fourth of July, the Klan then seen not as a rogue outlier but as the protector of southern tradition.<sup>22</sup> Thus the fragile interdependence between the races turned to apprehension and suspicion, one race vowing to accept no less than the total subjugation of the other.

The planter class, which had entrusted its wives and daughters to male slaves when the masters went off to fight the Civil War, was now in near hysterics over the slightest interaction between white women and black men. It did not seem to matter that the danger to white women of rape by a black man, according to the white South Carolina–born author Wilbur Cash, “was much less, for instance, than the chance that she would be struck by lightning.”<sup>23</sup>

White citizens, caught up in the delirium in the decades following Reconstruction, rioted in Georgia, North and South Carolina, Tennessee, Florida, Texas, Arkansas, and central Illinois.<sup>24</sup> They killed colored residents and set fire to their homes on rumors of black impropriety, as authorities stood by or participated.

In the darkest hours of this era, the abolitionist Frederick Douglass saw his health fade just as everything he spent his life fighting for was falling apart. He said, in his last great public lecture, delivered in Baltimore in January 1894, a year before his death, “I hope and trust all will come out right in the end, but the immediate future looks dark and troubled.”<sup>25</sup> I cannot shut my eyes to the ugly facts before me.”

It was during that time, around the turn of the twentieth century, that southern state legislatures began devising with inventiveness and precision laws that would regulate every aspect of black people’s lives, solidify the southern caste system, and prohibit even the most casual and incidental contact between the races.<sup>26</sup>

They would come to be called Jim Crow laws. It is unknown precisely who Jim Crow was or if someone by that name actually existed. There are several stories as to the term’s origins. It came into public use in the 1830s after Thomas Dartmouth Rice, a New York–born itinerant white actor, popularized a song-and-dance routine called “the Jim

Crow” in minstrel shows across the country. He wore blackface and ragged clothes and performed a jouncy, palsied imitation of a handicapped black stable hand he had likely seen in his travels singing a song about “Jumping Jim Crow.” Jim Crow was said to be the name of either the stable hand or his owner living in Kentucky or Ohio. Rice became a national sensation impersonating a crippled black man, but died penniless in 1860 of a paralytic condition that limited his speech and movement by the end of his life.

The term caught the fancy of whites across the country and came to be used as a pejorative for colored people and things related to colored people, and, by 1841, was applied to the laws to segregate them. The first such laws were passed not in the South, but in Massachusetts, as a means of designating a railcar set apart for black passengers. Florida, Mississippi, and Texas enacted the first Jim Crow laws in the South right after the Confederates lost the Civil War—Florida and Mississippi in 1865 and Texas in 1866. The northerners who took over the South during Reconstruction repealed those hastily passed laws. The Federal Civil Rights Act of 1875 explicitly outlawed segregation. But the northerners who were there to enforce the law retreated by the late 1870s and left the South to its own devices. As the twentieth century approached, the South resurrected Jim Crow.

Streetcars, widely in use from the 1880s, had open seating in the South, until Georgia demanded separate seating by race in 1891.<sup>27</sup> By 1905, every southern state, from Florida to Texas, outlawed blacks from sitting next to whites on public conveyances. The following year, Montgomery, Alabama, went a step further and required streetcars for whites and streetcars for blacks. By 1909, a new curfew required blacks to be off the streets by 10 P.M. in Mobile, Alabama. By 1915, black and white textile workers in South Carolina could not use the same “water bucket, pails, cups, dippers or glasses,” work in the same room, or even go up or down a stairway at the same time.

This new reality forced colored parents to search for ways to explain the insanity of the caste system to their uncomprehending children. When two little girls in 1930s Florida wanted to know why they couldn’t play on a swing like the white children or had to sit in a dirty waiting room instead of the clean one, their father, the theologian Howard Thurman, had to think about how best to make them understand. “The measure of a man’s estimate of your strength,” he finally told them, “is the kind of weapons he feels that he must use in order to hold you fast in a prescribed place.”<sup>28</sup>

All told, these statutes only served to worsen race relations, alienating one group from the other and removing the few informal interactions that might have helped both sides see the potential good and humanity in the other.

Now the masses of black workers cast about on their own in a buyer’s labor market with little in the way of material assets or education or a personal connection to even the coldest slave master, who would have shown a basic watchfulness if only to protect his financial investment. Their lives were left to the devices of planters with no vested interest in them and, now, no intimate ties to ease the harshness of their circumstances or to protect them, if only out of paternalism, from the whims of night riders, a hell-bent



jury, or poor whites taking out their resentment at their unwitting competitors for work.

David L. Cohn, in the 1935 book *God Shakes Creation*, wrote that, for a colored man without a white sponsor, “his fate is in the lap of the gods.”<sup>29</sup>

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Each year, people who had been able to vote or ride the train where they chose found that something they could do freely yesterday, they were prohibited from doing today. They were losing ground and sinking lower in status with each passing day, and, well into the new century, the color codes would only grow to encompass more activities of daily life as quickly as legislators could devise them.

Thus, those silent parties leaving Selma in the winter of 1916 saw no option but to go. Theirs would become the first volley of a leaderless revolution. There was no Moses or Joshua or Harriet Tubman, or, for that matter, Malcolm X or Martin Luther King, Jr., to organize the Migration. The best-known leader at the start of it, Booker T. Washington, was vehemently against abandonment of the South and strongly discouraged it. Frederick Douglass, who saw it coming but died before it began, was against the very thought of it and considered an exodus from the South “a premature, disheartening surrender.”<sup>30</sup>

Those entreaties had little effect.

“The Negroes just quietly move away without taking their recognized leaders into their confidence any more than they do the white people about them,” a Labor Department study reported.<sup>31</sup> A colored minister might meet with his deacons on a Wednesday, thinking all was well, and by Sunday find all the church elders gone north. “They write the minister that they forgot to tell him they were going away.”

Ordinary people listened to their hearts instead of their leaders. At a clandestine meeting after a near lynching in Mississippi, a colored leader stood before the people and urged them to stay where they were.

A man in the audience rose up to speak.

“You tell us that the South is the best place for us,” the man said.<sup>32</sup> “*What guaranties can you give us that our life and liberty will be safe if we stay?*”

The leader was speechless.

“When he asked me that, there was nothing I could answer,” the leader said afterward. “So I have not again urged my race to remain.”

Any leader who dared argue against leaving might arouse suspicion that he was a tool of the white people running things. Any such leader was, therefore, likely to be ignored, or worse. One Sunday, a colored minister in Tampa, Florida, advised from the pulpit that his flock stay in the South. He was “stabbed the next day for doing so.”<sup>33</sup>

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In the years leading up to and immediately following the turn of the twentieth century, a generation came into the world unlike any other in the South. It was made up of

young people with no personal recollection of slavery—they were two generations removed from it. The colored members of this generation were free but not free, chafing under Jim Crow and resisting the studied subservience of their slave parents and grandparents. They had grown up without the contrived intimacy that once bound the two races. And it appeared that young whites, weaned on a formal kind of supremacy, had grown more hostile to blacks than even their slaveholding ancestors had been.

“The sentiment is altogether different now,” William C. Oates, the old-guard former governor of Alabama, said in 1901 of the newer generation of white southerners.<sup>34</sup> “When the Negro is doing no harm, why, the people want to kill him and wipe him from the face of the earth.”

The colored people of this generation began looking for a way out. “It is too much to expect that Negroes will indefinitely endure their severe limitations in the South when they can escape most of them in a ride of 36 hours,” the Labor Department warned.<sup>35</sup> “Fifty years after the Civil War, they should not be expected to be content with the same conditions which existed at the close of the war.”

Younger blacks could see the contradictions in their world—that, sixty, seventy, eighty years after Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, they still had to step off the sidewalk when a white person approached, were banished to jobs nobody else wanted no matter their skill or ambition, couldn’t vote, but could be hanged on suspicion of the pettiest infraction.

*These were the facts of their lives:*<sup>36</sup>

There were days when whites could go to the amusement park and a day when blacks could go, if they were permitted at all. There were white elevators and colored elevators (meaning the freight elevators in back); white train platforms and colored train platforms. There were white ambulances and colored ambulances to ferry the sick, and white hearses and colored hearses for those who didn’t survive whatever was wrong with them.

There were white waiting rooms and colored waiting rooms in any conceivable place where a person might have to wait for something, from the bus depot to the doctor’s office. A total of four restrooms had to be constructed and maintained at significant expense in any public establishment that bothered to provide any for colored people: one for white men, one for white women, one for colored men, and one for colored women. In 1958, a new bus station went up in Jacksonville, Florida, with two of everything, including two segregated cocktail lounges, “lest the races brush elbows over a martini,” *The Wall Street Journal* reported.<sup>37</sup> The president of Southeastern Greyhound told the *Journal*, “It frequently costs fifty percent more to build a terminal with segregated facilities.” But most southern businessmen didn’t dare complain about the extra cost. “That question is dynamite,” the president of a southern theater chain told the *Journal*. “Don’t even say what state I’m in.”

There was a colored window at the post office in Pensacola, Florida, and there were white and colored telephone booths in Oklahoma. White and colored went to separate

windows to get their license plates in Indianola, Mississippi, and to separate tellers to make their deposits at the First National Bank of Atlanta.<sup>38</sup> There were taxicabs for colored people and taxicabs for white people in Jacksonville, Birmingham, Atlanta, and the entire state of Mississippi. Colored people had to be off the streets and out of the city limits by 8 P.<sup>39</sup>M. in Palm Beach and Miami Beach.

Throughout the South, the conventional rules of the road did not apply when a colored motorist was behind the wheel.<sup>40</sup> If he reached an intersection first, he had to let the white motorist go ahead of him.<sup>41</sup> He could not pass a white motorist on the road no matter how slowly the white motorist was going and had to take extreme caution to avoid an accident because he would likely be blamed no matter who was at fault. In everyday interactions, a black person could not contradict a white person or speak unless spoken to first.<sup>42</sup> A black person could not be the first to offer to shake a white person's hand. A handshake could occur only if a white person so gestured, leaving many people having never shaken hands with a person of the other race. The consequences for the slightest misstep were swift and brutal.<sup>43</sup> Two whites beat a black tenant farmer in Louise, Mississippi, in 1948, wrote the historian James C. Cobb, because the man "asked for a receipt after paying his water bill."

It was against the law for a colored person and a white person to play checkers together in Birmingham.<sup>44</sup> White and colored gamblers had to place their bets at separate windows and sit in separate aisles at racetracks in Arkansas. At saloons in Atlanta, the bars were segregated: Whites drank on stools at one end of the bar and blacks on stools at the other end, until the city outlawed even that, resulting in white-only and colored-only saloons.<sup>45</sup> There were white parking spaces and colored parking spaces in the town square in Calhoun City, Mississippi.<sup>46</sup> In one North Carolina courthouse, there was a white Bible and a black Bible to swear to tell the truth on.

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These were the facts of their lives—of Ida Mae's, George's, and Pershing's existence before they left—carried out with soul-killing efficiency until Jim Crow expired under the weight of the South's own sectarian violence: bombings, hosing of children, and the killing of dissidents seeking basic human rights. Jim Crow would not get a proper burial until the enactment of federal legislation, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which was nonetheless resisted years after its passage as vigorously as Reconstruction had been and would not fully take hold in many parts of the South until well into the 1970s.

And so what started as a little-noticed march of the impatient would become a flood of the discontented during World War II, and by the tail end of the Migration, a virtual rite of passage for young southerners—brothers joining brothers, nieces joining aunts, as soon as they got big enough to go.

Many of the people who left the South never exactly sat their children down to tell them these things, tell them what happened and why they left and how they and all this blood kin came to be in this northern city or western suburb or why they speak like melted butter and their children speak like footsteps on pavement, prim and proper or



clipped and fast, like the New World itself. Some spoke of specific and certain evils. Some lived in tight-lipped and cheerful denial. Others simply had no desire to relive what they had already left.

The facts of their lives unfurled over the generations like an over-wrapped present, a secret told in syllables. Sometimes the migrants dropped puzzle pieces from the past while folding the laundry or stirring the corn bread, and the children would listen between cereal commercials and not truly understand until they grew up and had children and troubles of their own. And the ones who had half-listened would scold and kick themselves that they had not paid better attention when they had the chance.

And in this way, the ways of the South passed from one generation to the next in faraway cities by the Pacific Ocean and on the shores of the Great Lakes and along the Hudson and Potomac and Allegheny rivers. These are the stories of the forgotten, aggrieved, wishful generations between the Harlem Renaissance and the civil rights movement, whose private ambition for something better made a way for those who followed. Of the three whose lives unfold in these pages, Ida Mae Brandon Gladney left first, in the 1930s, George Swanson Starling in the 1940s, and Robert Joseph Pershing Foster in the 1950s, in a current that swept up millions of others like them.