

The Blank Canvas

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GRANDMA...

I remember all the excitement about finding something new for me to wear. I remember getting a gray coat with a matching hat and a muff from May's Department Store. I remember the steady stream of people in and out of the house. I remember the armloads of food they brought and how Grandma spread it out on the kitchen table. I remember them saying how sad "it" was. I remember them asking what was going to happen to "you know, the children." I remember Grandma waking me up, washing me, dressing me, putting me in a chair, and ordering me to sit still until it was time to go. I remember walking down the eight flights of stairs and getting into the big black car. I remember getting slapped on my hand for playing with the handle that opened the windows of the limousine. I know I was almost three years old, but I cannot for the life of me remember anything else about my mother's funeral.

I do not remember anyone ever explaining to me that my mother had died. I am not saying they did not explain, I just do not remember. I do not remember anyone rocking me, holding me, or telling me everything would be alright. Perhaps they did. Maybe they did not. I do not remember seeing my mother in the casket, although they tell me I did. I do not remember picking a flower from the wreath, even though I still have the flower. I do not remember crying or hurting or missing my mother. In fact, I do not remember her at all. The one thing I remember is all the food that people brought to the house. I also remember the only thing that stood between me and

the food was Grandma.

My paternal grandmother was a big woman, about five feet-ten inches tall. She was thick, not fat. She had a full head of salt-and-pepper hair, one of her most outstanding features. Her Cherokee heritage gave her broadly chiseled cheekbones and tiny, inset eyes. "Sister Harris," as she was called, was the backbone of any group because she worked harder and talked faster than anybody else. Everyone came to her for guidance and consolation because she knew what to do.

The main thing I remember about Grandma was her demeanor. She was always cool, until you crossed her. And when you did, she would bang one of her large hands on the table, squint her already tiny eyes at you, and begin a tirade that would last for hours, or days if it was a matter of her being corrected about anything. Nobody ever wanted to cross Grandma, and they did not.

Grandma was my primary caretaker after my mother's death. Unfortunately, no one ever told me that my mother had died. I have a vague recollection of a tall, thin, brown-skinned woman who spent a great deal of time in the bed. Once she was gone, I buried those memories because I had Grandma. Grandma swung between being incredibly loving and nurturing, although somewhat distant, and being incredibly cruel and abusive. She would lovingly prepare a wonderful meal and then slap me for eating too fast or slow. She would patiently and in great detail instruct me in how to perform a task, like cleaning the bathroom or ironing a shirt, then she would scream and curse at me if I made a mistake. I never told anyone I was afraid of Grandma. I did not have to. Everyone in the family, from the distant cousins to the cat, knew it. But they were afraid of her too.

Grandma had a sharp mind although she had never been formally educated. She was also highly spiritual. She saw spirits. She talked to them. She could hear spirits talk to her. Most of the spirits Grandma knew seemed to come from the darker side. I guess they were drawn to her for a reason. Today, Grandma would be considered a psychic, a clairvoyant.

When I was growing up I thought she was a witch. Grandma

could make people do what she wanted them to do merely by looking at them. I thought it was a special power she had. Eventually I realized that people were just plain-old afraid of her. I would not go so far as to say she was evil, but she certainly hung out with evil's first cousin.

Grandma was angry. She was angry at the world and everyone in it. She did not need a reason to be angry. She *was* the reason. And, for some reason, with all of the other people around, Grandma decided to take out most of her anger on me.

My grandmother's typical assessment of me was, "You ain't shit! You ain't never gonna be shit! You are just like your daddy!" Between the ages of two and twenty-one, I heard that negative affirmation at least once a day when I was in Grandma's company. She did not think too highly of my father—her son—whom I thought was a pretty decent guy. That is, until Grandma gave me the real scoop. She constantly complained about him to me and me to him. Compared to my brother, my father and I simply did not measure up, but, for the life of me, I could not figure out what I was doing so wrong to rate so low in Grandma's eyes. No matter what I did, it was not right or good enough.

Grandma taught me how to pray, and she prayed for me. When she was not praying, Grandma was pinching me, poking me, or backhanding me upside my face for one thing or another I had or had not done. She would often preface these assaults with, "God knows you deserve it," and I believed her. In my prayers I asked Grandma's God to help me do right. As I grew older, I came to believe that God had given Grandma a certain deep, spiritual understanding about me. I also learned that she had developed even deeper character flaws.

Grandma insisted that I bathe with homemade soap and oil my body with olive oil. Grandma's soap was brown, odorless, and contained lots of little sticks and leaves that pricked my skin. I hated it. It made me smell so "clean." I wanted to use Camay soap and Pond's cold cream like all my friends. You could smell the sweetly perfumed scent of these products on their bodies if the wind was blowing or if they were sweating. Grandma would not hear of it. Olive oil, she claimed, was holy oil. Moreover, she said, "There's a lot

of things you can't see that you've got to be protected against." I never understood the significance of what she was saying until much later in life.

Grandma always got up before dawn. Some days, if I got up to make a potty run, I would see her sitting by the kitchen window with her Bible in her lap and a small candle burning. She would sit there, staring at the sky without blinking. I could walk right up to her and she would not move.

I remember days when it was barely light out and Grandma would come into my room and rub my body down with a thick yellow substance. She called it "waterproofing." It was actually lamb's mutton. She would tell me, "It's going to rain today and we don't want a cold," and without fail, before the day was over, the rain would come. I thought my grandmother knew everything. She was weird, but she knew everything.

Grandma had a small mahogany night table where she kept jars of colorful little pebbles. She burned those pebbles in a small black frying pan. I could tell by the scent what the day would bring. If the smell was sweet and lingering, we were having company. If it was a mixture of sweet and pungent, we were going out. If the smell was heavy, almost overpowering, Grandma didn't feel well. Grandma never spoke about the purpose or meaning of those scents, and I never questioned her. As an adult, I spent a great deal of money buying incense before I understood the true meaning of the different aromas.

One morning when I woke up, Grandma was in her usual place at the window, but something was different. Grandma was rocking and moaning. I walked up to her and saw tears rolling down her face. I panicked. I began crying and screaming at her, "Grandma, wake up! Please don't cry!" She cried, rocking and moaning, for what seemed like hours. Suddenly, she stopped, opened her eyes, and said to me, "What are you doing walking on the floor without your slippers?" I couldn't believe it. She never wiped her face. Her tears dried instantly. My eyes and nose were running profusely. Grandma wiped my face with her apron and said, "Hurry, now. Run to the potty and then get dressed. We've got to go to Virginia."

Uncle Jimmy, my grandmother's older brother, lived in Smithfield, Virginia, with his wife, Aunt Mattie. Uncle Jimmy was a bootlegger, and Aunt Mattie was, in my opinion, the best cook ever to walk the face of the earth. I could hardly wait to wrap my lips around one of her hot, honey-dipped biscuits. Grandma didn't say a word during the entire eight-hour bus ride. I chatted on and on endlessly about the trees, the birds, and the blue water in the toilet on the bus. I could hardly wait to see Uncle Jimmy and the chickens. I wondered if the swing he had made for me was still in the tree. I ate the cold chicken sandwiches Grandma had prepared for our trip and wondered what Aunt Mattie was cooking for dinner. When we arrived in Smithfield, Grandma hailed a taxi. It was then I realized that something was terribly wrong. When Uncle Jimmy opened the door, he wasn't surprised to see us. He said, "She's not going to make it. She's in a coma." Grandma responded brusquely, "Hush your mouth and take my bag." They both went into the house and left me standing on the porch. Over the course of the next hour I learned that Aunt Mattie had suffered a stroke. She was a diabetic and refused to stay on her diet. Uncle Jimmy showed us a little blue box containing a hypodermic needle. He told Grandma that he had paid twenty dollars for it, yet Aunt Mattie refused to use it. He also told her, in vivid detail, about Aunt Mattie's convulsions, her refusal to go to the hospital, and her ultimate collapse while feeding the chickens. She was in the "white folks's" hospital, he claimed, because the doctor insisted that she be taken there. Uncle Jimmy could visit her on Saturday the doctor said. It was Tuesday.

Within a matter of hours and over the course of the next few days, the house was filled with the smell of Grandma's little pebbles. It was a new scent I was not familiar with. I didn't like it. I remember vividly that it made me anxious and nervous. I could not keep still, so, to stay out of trouble, I spent a great deal of time in the yard with Fred and Rosie, the pigs. Uncle Jimmy spent the four days until Saturday in the rocking chair on the porch, holding the little blue box. Grandma spent the days washing, starching, and ironing Aunt Mattie's clothes.

In the evenings, we ate dinner in total silence. After dinner,

Grandma and I went into the woods to pick herbs. I was terrified of being in the dark, woody hills. Grandma talking to the bushes did not help matters any. I clung tightly to her skirt because she acted as if I wasn't there. Grandma collected bundles of herbs, which we took back to the porch. There, she picked the leaves off the branches and pounded them in a large washtub. She then took Aunt Mattie's clothes and swished them around in the slimy green herbal concoction. The next morning, she washed these clothes in the wringer washer and hung them on the line to dry. By noon, she was sprinkling and ironing the very same clothes she had washed and ironed the day before.

Between the silence, the smell of the pebbles, the washing and rewashing, and the amount of time I was spending with Fred and Rosie, I was convinced that Grandma had "lost it." However, I knew better than to ask or say anything.

Saturday finally came. We all awoke very early to a bright Virginia sun. To my surprise and delight, Grandma let me wash up with Aunt Mattie's Camay soap and lotion myself with Jergen's. I was literally smelling myself as we drove to town in Uncle Jimmy's big blue Cadillac. When we arrived at the hospital, Uncle Jimmy went upstairs to visit his wife. Grandma and I went to the ice cream parlor. I was totally ecstatic at the sight of the checkered tablecloths and soda fountains. Grandma gave me a dollar. She told me to get myself some ice cream and get her a Coke. The man behind the counter gave me a tray and a big pile of napkins. I think he gave me a little extra ice cream because I told him I was from New York.

I was about to enjoy myself for the first time in four days, but before I could get my lips around the first spoonful of coffee ice cream, Uncle Jimmy came back—with Aunt Mattie.

This could not have been the same woman who had almost fallen dead amidst the chickens, I thought. She strutted ahead of Uncle Jimmy, walked right up to Grandma, and greeted her as if she was the next-door neighbor. We sat around in the ice cream parlor for at least an hour. For the first time, Uncle Jimmy acknowledged my presence. He kept shoving dollar bills into my patent-leather purse, telling me, "A girl always needs to have her own to walk straight in

life." Grandma kept giving me the "don't-mess-up-your-clothes" look. Aunt Mattie told us about sleeping in the hospital hallway without a blanket, about not being allowed to brush her teeth, and about how the nurses kept telling her she was as good as dead. I ignored everything except my ice cream and my bulging pocketbook.

Grandma and I left Smithfield on the six o'clock bus Sunday morning. Aunt Mattie gave me a small jar of Lady Esther cold cream. Uncle Jimmy gave me two rolls of quarters, one for myself, one for my brother. Aunt Mattie died, twenty-three years later at the age of seventy-four. She never had another stroke, and, according to Grandma, she never used that needle.

I did not talk much on the trip home. Grandma thought it was because she had let Uncle Jimmy fill me up with junk. That had nothing to do with it. I was simply disappointed that I had spent four days in Virginia and never had a single biscuit.



My grandmother, like many Black women her age, led a very simple life. Simplicity in approaching life and understanding nature are key elements of spirituality. Grandma never went to school, yet she could read the Bible and the newspaper, and she could count money. She believed that wasting time was wasting life, so she never did it. Her days were tightly scheduled as she put her considerable energies toward several useful endeavors.

Grandma was extremely self-reliant. Her experience of being raised on a farm where she picked cotton and peas taught her the value and meaning of work. At age ten, she went to work as a wash girl and cook. At thirteen, she married my grandfather, Lester Harris, a mulatto five years older than she. Grandma told me her mother-in-law hated her because she was a "squaw," but my grandfather did not seem to mind. When she was fourteen, she gave birth to my father, Horace Lester Harris, who was an only child. She was widowed at age sixteen, when my grandfather drowned while fishing. At twenty, she came to New York City with my father and went to work as a domestic and cook.

Grandma lived in the same place for thirty-two years: a

fourth-floor walk-up, seven-room apartment in Brooklyn. She was grounded and familiar with her environment, and knew everyone within a ten-mile radius of the place.

Grandma never called herself a spiritualist. She simply claimed she was blessed. She had a little black book—she called her prayer book—that seemed to contain the answers to all of life's problems. When someone was deeply troubled, they came to see my grandmother. The two of them would sit by the kitchen window and discuss the problem. Grandma never allowed me in the kitchen during these private talks; I had to peek around the door to see what was going on. After the talk, Grandma would open the black book, mumble a few words, and then scribble something on a piece of paper. I had no idea what she told the people who came to see her, but they were always thanking her and bringing her gifts afterwards.

Grandma introduced me to spiritual rituals at the age of four. Every Sunday morning, she would scrub me down with her homemade soap, grease my body with olive oil, dress me in my Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes, and pin a small white hankie to the top of my head. We never missed the 8:02 "A" train out of Brooklyn because we had to be at 135th Street by 8:40. Sunday school at the holiness church we attended began promptly at nine o'clock. I would go to class while Grandma and the other "saints" prepared the after-service dinner. At eleven o'clock, the fireworks began.

For many years, I thought church was a woman's club. The handful of men who were around performed menial duties like opening the door and collecting the money. The women, including my grandmother, did the big jobs: the cooking, the caring for the minister, the singing, and the shouting. The shouting was really important because it made the minister smile, and one thing I learned real early about church was that it was important to keep the minister smiling. Like Grandma said, "When the Reverend smiles on you, God smiles on you."

I had no idea what shouting meant, but I knew it changed your status in the church when you did it. Once the spirit "touched" you and made you shout, it became mandatory that you wore white every Sunday. There were at least fifty women in our church who

wore white. I thought they were nurses. Once you shouted, it also meant you had to sit in the front row, right near the pulpit.

When I was about five, I got to sit up in the front with Grandma because the spirit touched her. It was a normal Sunday service. As usual, the Reverend began his sermon in a very soft voice. It was hard to hear him, but I remember that he began by telling the congregation what the Lord had said to him. It seemed that the Reverend heard the Lord all the time. I remember wondering how the Lord could speak to so many people without ever coming to church.

The church began to get very noisy. Moment by moment, the Reverend's voice was rising, and people began rocking and humming. The fat ladies began waving their hankies in the air. The skinny ones were crying and moaning "Amen." As the Reverend's voice got louder, the momentum in the room changed. People began shaking their legs, clapping their hands, and jumping up and down. The Reverend started to sweat, which also seemed strange because it felt to me as if the room was getting cooler. The hairs on my arms were standing straight up, and I was getting goose bumps all over. Sooner or later, I knew somebody would let loose the loud wail that would cause a domino effect throughout the congregation.

In every corner of the chapel, people were screaming and crying. The Reverend was sweating profusely and had to open up his jacket. The people in their seats were swaying in rhythm. Someone in the back screamed, "Thank you, Lord" and everybody started clapping simultaneously. The organist began accenting every ten words the Reverend would say with powerful bass chords. The Reverend got down on his knees, moaning and crying. Hankies began flying everywhere. Feet were stamping, hands were clapping, and people were popping up out of their seats in every row of the sanctuary. The ladies in white were running around frantically, trying to catch the fainters and the shouters. As always, I was amazed by these activities, trying to take everything in. This time, however, as my head was turned to watch a man who was shouting over on one side of the room, the spirit touched my grandmother, who, just seconds before, had been sitting next to me in her usual, cool way.

The next thing I knew, Grandma was racing down the aisle, hopping on one foot, waving her hands in the air, and screaming at the top of her lungs, "Save me, Lord, save me!" The white hankie she had pinned to her head flew off. Three nurses were hovering around her. The organ, guitar, and drums were playing loudly, and the Reverend was swinging his tie over his head, smiling benevolently up at the ceiling. I buried my face in my hands and cried. I thought Grandma was going to die.

Church was never the same for me after that day. Each Sunday, I would sit stiffly next to Grandma, fearful that the spirit would try to get me next, and vowing that if it did, I would fight it off. I also vowed to stop coming to church as soon as I was old enough, probably once I got married. I had no use for spirits or for being attacked by them. I had no intentions of embarrassing myself by jumping around to the rhythm of an unheard beat. And there was no way I was going to surrender myself to one of those nurses, who would sometimes get the spirit themselves and drop their "patients" to the floor.

I figured out much later that the problem with me and church was that no one ever explained the purpose. I went because I was told to go. I read the Bible because I learned that the more you read and memorized, the more stars you got on the Sunday School board—and that made Grandma happy. Because of Grandma, I believed that God was a cruel God who meted out punishment according to one's deeds—especially mine, it seemed. Grandma's God watched and recorded every move I made and used that information against me. According to Grandma, God never gave a person more burdens than he or she could bear, and I was her burden. Thus, she vowed to God and the community to use every breath in her body to break me down, and she prefaced her efforts to do so with, "I know what she needs because God told me."

I was 25 years old when I realized I had no idea what religion or church meant or how it fit into my life. Grandma's holiness church scared me to death. The Methodist church I sometimes attended with my cousin was so boring, I usually slept through the service. I went to a Baptist church on my own until a young minister bought me an

ice cream cone and put his hand down my blouse. Grandma said I had to go to church because I was a sinner. We are all sinners, she claimed, wretched and born in sin. But no one bothered to explain to me what sin was. They only said church was the way to clean it from your soul. Still, I couldn't figure out how somebody could go to church like Grandma did, talk to the Lord and hang with the spirits, and still be so mean to me. None of it made sense.



Experiences like these made me wonder why the adults in my life believed they were not required to explain things to children. They seem to think children would pick up the understanding as they went along. That's why no one ever told me how or why my mother died. Nor did anyone ever explain to me that my brother had asthma and that was why he was treated more delicately and humanely than me. No one ever explained to me the things a little girl needs to know about life, about men, or herself. Nobody told me that there was a spiritual aspect to life or that the spirit of goodness resided in everyone. It would have been nice to have known as a child what I know now: that how people act and their spiritual worth are two completely different issues.

With this understanding, I have come to the realization that although my grandmother never told me she loved me, she tried to show me some love in the only way she knew how: by feeding me, by keeping me clean, by disciplining me. She did all that, but she never nurtured me. She believed in ruling with an iron fist, a switch, an ironing cord, a belt, and a razor-sharp tongue. Her theory was that if a child was frightened enough, he or she would not do the wrong thing. She never explained to me what exactly the wrong things were, she just forbade me to do them.

On the darker side, everyone in the family knew Grandma was mean to me and a little "off." They also knew that she, in her own words, "couldn't stand the sight of me," and that she favored my brother. That she was cruel and abusive to me did not seem to matter. They would simply pat me on the head or give me a reassuring hug when she wasn't looking, but they left me with her because they did

not want to accept the responsibility of raising me. I was too "bad." I was a "burden."

Thus, very early in my life, the colors of my life canvas were muddied, the unformed stone of my budding consciousness disfigured and marred. I learned young that it does not matter if people who say they love you treat you bad. What happened to me was unimportant because "I" did not matter. "I" was broken and needed to be fixed. "I" was bad. Even God knew it.

However, God must have changed His mind because one day, many years and tears later, He showed me and everyone else a totally different picture.