

DOROTHY JEAN the BEGINNING

“Do you really think I can go through this another year? Huh?” My uncles’ bottom lip was quivering. He eyed each and every person sitting at the oversize table in the kitchen. Searching their faces for confirmation. It was January 1948 and winter was in full roar. Snow was on the ground and ample wood had been chopped to get through the next week. It was chopped and stored in an outside pile also in a bin next to the fireplace. The town was Weston, southeast Georgia, Randolph County in my Grandma Julie’s kitchen. It was the central gathering area for family and friends. It was huge with a wood stove that provided warmth and an exit to the backyard to the outhouse. She lived in the big house which was previously occupied by the landowner. It had a wraparound porch. The smokehouse set in the corner of the yard and there had been a garden. A bountiful crop of corn, collards, okra and beans had been harvested, canned and stored. Three months prior a hog had been slaughtered

and hung to smoke and cure. Afterwards the hog was taken to the public meat locker for better preservation.

The Morrison's were well known for their honesty, diligent work and dedication. The women were plump and big boned. The men were muscular and tall. They all had strong African genes. None were afraid of a day of hard work. Picking cotton, plowing fields and general labor. It was Grandma's responsibility to stay home and prepare meals for the family. She would cook seemingly all day long, and everyone was good and hungry after a long day's work. They were sharecroppers ,partnering with the owner of the land on which they lived. Sharing the responsibility to bring in the crops and supposedly the financial gains from selling of the goods. However, when payday arrived it was explained that the crops didn't do as well as expected and therefore the wages were not as expected. Being paid pennies compared to what they thought they would get. "This is not the first time this has happen and it will continue as long as we allow it." My Uncle

Bubba chimed in. “ Ole man so and so looked me right in my face and told me the same thing.” The others echoed in unison that they were victims too. Although slavery had been abolished many years ago, the oppression of black people was quite prevalent. Times were hard back then! My people were still second-class citizens, disrespected and easily conned as there was fear of repercussion and reprisal from the landowner. Times were changing. Blacks were getting wiser and antsy. Some even had a little education and wanted more. They attended the New Mount Lebanon Church school. Fifth grade was the highest grade of completion. If you wanted to go further you had to go to boarding school in Albany. There was no school during harvest time. Every available able-bodied person was needed in the field.

Now they had had enough! My people dared to dream. They all decided at that time, that exact moment it was time to leave Georgia. As talk of relocating was whispered, some concluded to go up north as opposed to down south. They heard racism

wasn't as bad in New York and Philadelphia. Friends who had moved there were writing letters of good paying jobs and a lively jumping town. Great entertainment and excitement. A place where you could be somebody. A couple of Dads cousins had accompanied their white employers to the Big Apple and were doing quite well living on premises. One was the housekeeper and the other was the cook.

As the evening came to a close, my relatives left Grandmas house with a new sense of gratitude and satisfaction. Knowing they were taking control of their lives and the family's future. It had to be a better place somewhere. A house with electricity, running water and a bathroom inside. No more sleeping on corn shuck mattresses, hauling wood for cooking because the new places had stoves. No more grinding corn for meal and grits because it could be bought at the grocery store. An immeasurable sense of pride overwhelmed them..... Although the northern states appealed to a few, my Dad Horace and his brother Oscar had set their sights on sunny south Florida. It

was rumored that the weather was so nice you didn't even need a blanket in the winter. Miami was the destination. It was relatively a new and thriving city. The possibilities were unlimited.

Following the season, picking fruits was one way some people got of the state of Georgia. They simply left and never returned. Settling in Palmetto, Coconut Grove, Gainesville and other parts of the state of Florida. The decision to leave Georgia was a timely one. Young fathers wanted better for their family. New marriages had resulted in new babies on the way. Looks like everybody was pregnant. The women were all of childbearing age and were breeding like rabbits. My Mom, Her Mom Daisy, two of my Dads sisters Lula and Dinah and his favorite cousin Leila Mae. Their babies were all born in 1949 and one of them was ME. Dorothy Jean, born on a Saturday evening on May 7th, 1949. I arrived as a screaming pink bundle of joy. The midwife had to scrape "chalk" from my back as my Mom craved it during her pregnancy. This was the white clay found all over Georgia. All the women ate it!

My name was finally agreed upon, after Arthur Ola had been tossed back and forth in honor of my Uncle Bubba whose real name was Arthur. I thank Cousin Flossie for convincing Mom that Dorothy Jean was a prettier name. I am still called that today, but why they call me both names I have no idea. Either Dorothy or Jean would have sufficed. However, at times it comes out “Dotha Jean” the way only people from Georgia would pronounce it with a thick southern accent. Making my entrance into the world, I was famished! My Moms milk “not come down” (lactating) so I was breast fed by Grandma Daisy.

The family all knew they had to help one another. Uncle Oscar being the oldest was the first to leave. He made a way for the others. Cousins Marvin and Julius Stevens had already settled in Coconut Grove, so he stayed with them until getting on his feet. My Dad came a year later and then sent for Mom, who now had a six-week-old baby named Betty Ann. She was a cute little girl with a head full of jet-black hair.

We took a Greyhound bus along with Aunt Effie, Grandma Daisy's sister who assisted with the babies. She also yearned for more opportunities and a better life for herself. Look out Miami here we come!