

Part One

≈Thinking Back≈

River leans in hard more to escape the hot pressing-comb her mother drags through her thick hair than to find comfort in her mother's soft breasts. Her eight-year-old legs struggle to reach the first rung of the kitchen chair in the hopes she will be able to push further away from the heat of the pressing-comb and the flame burning on the kitchen stove.

“Be still, River. Keep up all that fidgeting, and you'll get burned again!”

Just at that moment, sizzling pomade drops from the hot comb and burns her young scalp. River thinks she should be used to this by now. She's been getting her hair pressed for several months and this is just part of every Saturday's ritual of getting ready for Sunday church.

The stifling heat, expected in mid-summer in Hopewell, Texas, is made even worse by the heat from the burner and hot comb making it hard for little River to breathe. Finally, her toes reach the rung of the chair and she pushes hard into her mother. “Mama, that hurts!”

“I'm almost done, honey. Be still.”

Then, a quick breeze, loaded with the scent of gardenia from the bushes her mother planted by the kitchen window, wafts into the room. River breathes in the gardenias' sweetness, settles back into the chair, and tries hard to ignore the stench of Royal Crown Pomade and

scorched hair. Today, like many times before, the heat brings tears to River's eyes, but she forces them back, because she understands that her mother is only fixing what is wrong with her hair, making it nice and straight as hair should be. When she finishes, just like always, River will pluck a bloom from the bush outside the kitchen window and rub its sweetness into her hair. Sweet gardenia to make it all better, that, and her father's strong hand that almost covers her face when he gently brushes away any tear that lingers.

Come Sunday morning, the Thomas family makes its way across the stepping stones that her father dug deep into the thick carpet of Saint Augustine grass, the only grass that can endure the scorching summer sun. River climbs into her place between her older sister and brother in the back seat of the shiny 1953 Chevrolet, bought three years old, but kept looking like new by her father. River feels safe in her world, protected by the hills of her parents' shoulders before her and the nearness of her brother and sister beside her. The black asphalt road, made spongy by the Texas sun, tries to hold onto the tires which make a sucking sound as they make their way to church. Her father drives into the church parking lot and looks back at his children.

"Ya'll look so nice." The girls' hair, pressed straight, is pulled up and tied with large white bows into two pony tails. Just like many Sundays before, he tells them they should "keep their hair nice," reminding them the Bible says it is their "crowning glory." River smiles. Once inside, from her seat in the row just behind the Deacons' bench where her father sits, River gazes up at the larger than life-size picture of Jesus painted above the baptismal bay. Jesus with white skin, blue eyes, and long brown hair that is blown from his face by a gust of wind. She looks around the church and, just as before, notices that no one there looks anything like Jesus, except maybe in some ways, her father, due to skin that is just a little darker and eyes that, instead of blue, are gray. With a furrowed brow she tries to see what he'd look like if he would let his wavy hair grow long like Jesus' hair. Maybe it would blow in the wind, too. She studies the women in church and tells herself that even though their hair looks as straight, the wind would need to be a

lot stronger to move it, being as rigid with pomade as her own. By the time the choir, led by her mother's rich soprano voice, sings "At the cross, at the cross, where I first saw the light," River finally works it all out and decides that you are stuck with your skin and eyes. She can't see any way to fix those two problems, but smiles, satisfied there is something that can be done about your hair, even if it doesn't blow in the wind.

Suddenly, the woman in the pew across from River jumps up and starts twirling about. Eyes big, caught up in something she doesn't understand, River watches her jump around and cry out, "Thank you, Jesus!" Several other women join her and thrash about, violently tossing their heads around, shouting words River's never heard, while their hair remains firmly in place. River watches as the men in church catch and hold the women, some who have grown as stiff as their hair. She watches as the men pass something under their noses that brings them back, relaxed and calm, with every hair as it was before. No, she decides, there can be no wind strong enough. Then, she reaches up and smooths her hair and, with the wisdom of an eight-year-old, understands that straight hair is about as close as you can get if you want to be perfect, just like Jesus who her parents pray to each Sunday and every evening before dinner. For five years she endures the hot comb and pomade while she stares up at the white Jesus above the baptismal bay and watches the women praise his name, as they shout up and down the church aisles, until the day when everything changes.

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River takes good care of her hair, washing it and having it pressed straight each Saturday, creating a few curls from rollers made from twisted pieces of brown paper grocery bags, and until a few days after her thirteenth birthday it serves her well. This is the day her sister destroys everything, including her first true love. Elvis is the first man River falls in love with and dreams about making love to. It is not a fantasy, of course, but the best love she can imagine. If ever they

meet, she knows Elvis will love her just as much. His pictures, torn from every teen idol magazine she can buy with her small allowance, hang from every available wall space in the bedroom she shares with her sister, Vallie Lynn. Then one day, when her sister needs more wall space for her current fantasy love, River's world shatters.

“River, you need to take down some of these pictures.” Quickly, her sister rips down two that are clearly on her side of the room.

“Don't touch them!” River screams. “You have enough room on your side.” She runs over to rescue Elvis.

Vallie Lynn, who has had enough of Elvis, runs to the far side of her bed and refuses to hand over the pictures. One, River's favorite, is of Elvis lying in a bed covered with teddy bears, and he is smiling that wonderful sideways smile that she loves, that makes her feel warm inside. Her sister hurriedly crumples the two pages in her hand and throws them to the floor.

“I hate you!” River screams, her eyes filling with tears.

“Really, River. Over a white guy! Why would any black girl want Elvis, or any white guy for that matter? You're black, River!”

River slumps across her bed, tears now falling. “I hate you, Vallie,” she whispers, “I really do hate you.”

Vallie Lynn holds her ground and hurls her rage at her sister. “Well that's just too bad. I'm sick of this white man's pictures all over this room anyway. He probably hates black people. Probably calls us niggers, and I bet he wouldn't even look at you, or speak to you, if he passed you on the street.”

Vallie Lynn's words cut River to the core, taking the wind right out of her. She slides from the bed onto the floor, smoothing the crumpled pages. River knows about racism and has

had that word hurled at her more than her fair share of times. Still, she wonders, can Elvis do such a thing? No, not her Elvis. How can he make her feel pretty when he asks her to “love me tender,” and warm inside with that smile if he can’t like her? She can hardly speak for the hard knot of pain welling up inside her chest, but she simply must fight for Elvis’ love.

“You don’t know, Vallie Lynn. Maybe all white people don’t hate us.” River, now huddled in a corner, caresses and smooths the crumpled pages, lovingly, until there is hardly a crease left, and Elvis’ sideways smile returns. “He could love me, if he knew me, maybe, you don’t know.” Her voice fades until it is barely a whisper while she pleads. “He could like me, Vallie. Couldn’t he?”

“What do you think, River? Use your head! How many black girls do you see in these jillion pictures you’ve got of him? Not a single one! And what makes you different, so special? Little Miss *River*!”

River knows, by the way she says “*River*,” that her sister is teasing her about her name. She had hated it when she was younger. Too often she’d been asked, “What river are you?” or “Where are you running to?” But over the years, River has grown to feel her name suits her. Deep inside River also knows her sister is right about Elvis, and the part that causes the most pain is that she is helpless to do anything more about it. She can’t change the color of her eyes or skin. She is already, while holding back tears, enduring that hot straightening comb, pressing her hair straight and burning her scalp, and sometimes the back of her neck, in the process. But she can’t escape her sister’s words and chokes down the hard truth that straight hair is simply not enough. Slowly, over a couple of weeks, the pictures come down while she gives up the fight against the painful truth she has always known, being black will matter for as long as she lives. And the worst part, she thinks, is that it can matter to the one person you want it not to at all. And how is she to know, she wonders? Something tells River, odious contempt, especially her

own, for her blackness will always stir something deep in her bones. She will always feel it. Please God, she prays, help me be strong enough to never feel this hurt again. Teenage love dies slowly, however, so for a little while longer she endures the hot pressing-comb, the scorched hair and burned scalp that have not been enough to win her Elvis' love, even with the sweet scent of gardenia from the blooms she rubs into her hair.

The hurt settles deep inside her, solid, like a rock, until the day she decides she's had enough and angrily takes back her love from Elvis. He doesn't deserve it. The anger feels good dulling that rock of pain inside her, smoothing its jagged edges. She feels a little braver with anger as her friend, more able to face a world that doesn't feel quite as safe as those Sunday morning rides to church. Then one evening, prodded by anger, she walks in the door from school and announces to her mother that she doesn't want to have her hair pressed with the hot pressing-comb anymore. She starts to wear her hair in a short afro, just like the one her sister has been wearing for years. Vallie Lynn is proud of her little sister and she tells her so.

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Now, almost twenty years later, after listening to the message on her phone River smiles and wonders what it means and why, after so long, he has called. As she pours another glass of wine, she stands in almost total darkness and looks out the floor-to-ceiling windows in the living room of her sky-high Michigan Avenue apartment, unable now to read any more words from a worn and dog-eared copy of writings by Anna J. Cooper. The one in her hand is titled, "What Are We Worth?"

River studies the snow that gathers on the busy street below and looks out at the Sears Tower and wonders again if the building that stands in its shadow has a name other than the one that she gave it. When she first moved to Chicago, it became her favorite building in the nighttime skyline, with its lighted rooftop enclosure that looks like three huge crowns that made

her think of her father, so it became The Crowning Glory building. River trembles, takes another sip of the Pommard Burgundy, and pulls her warm, cashmere robe tighter. She glances up at the building and runs her fingers through the soft kinky thickness of her hair, no chemicals, no color, no curling iron, just her natural hair. She feels better. Through the glass walls of her apartment, she feels the city wrap itself around her, girding her safely. She relaxes, nestles down on the floor next to the gardenia-scented candle burning in a brass bowl on the floor. Its flame, barely there, flickers low in the puddled wax. The candle sputters, spewing some of the wax to land on Cooper's writings there on the floor. Then it sizzles out, the scent of gardenia begins to leave the room, and River smiles again when she thinks of how proudly she had worn that afro all through college. River pulls her robe tighter and, even though she knows Chicago is miles away from Houston and Adam, she thinks of him and the ugly and painful time that left her no choice but to escape him and leave Houston. Her smile fades.

≈The Early Years≈

Gregory Smith enters River's life at the beginning of her eighteenth summer, before she is to start college on a full scholarship. It was her second day waitressing at her sister's restaurant, Vallie Lynn's Café in the small Texas town of Alvin Heights. She thinks he has a wonderful smile. Sizing him up, she thinks he is probably the same height and weight as she is and not striking in any way, except for his quick, broad smile of gleaming white teeth. Teeth that look even whiter framed by his dark brown skin. It's that smile that puts her at ease and makes a quick "yes" fly from her mouth when he asks her to go out. She, nor anyone else, would believe he is thirty, a fact he keeps well-hidden, preferring to be "mid-twenties" when anyone asks.

"River, I don't think you need to be getting so serious with Greg. Remember, going to college is what you need to be thinking about." River looks at her sister with surprise.

"You don't like him?"

"He's fine enough, but you're spending way too much time with him. And just where are you two spending all that time anyway?"

River's face burns. Quickly she turns from her sister and begins folding napkins, wondering how much she knows, if she looks as different as she feels. "Mostly movies, no one place in particular."

"Well, just be careful. Understand? And why is his car parked out front?"

"He wants to take me shopping for clothes for college this evening. I'm picking him up from work." River, who has now regained her composure, turns from her busy work and looks directly at her sister, "He loves me, Vallie Lynn." Besides, she thinks, Greg always uses condoms. He'd promised. She had never been able to bring herself to look.

Everyone in Alvin Heights swears this is the hottest summer anyone can remember. The small air-conditioner in the restaurant is doing a poor job of keeping it cool, and the heat causes

River bouts of nausea. A few days after her talk with Vallie Lynn, River returns from the restroom and one of her nausea bouts when a tall, attractive black woman walks into the cafe.

“Are you River?” The woman asks through a smile that, to River’s thinking, doesn’t look real. Somehow it stays on her bright red lips never traveling up to her eyes, eyes that stare too long without blinking and scare her. Looking at the woman’s mixed-up face River wonders how she knows her name. She’s only been in Alvin Heights for three months and hasn’t gone any place to meet anyone other than Greg and Evaline, the other summer student who works for her sister.

“Yes? Can I help you?”

“Greg told me to come by and get the car.”

“What? Who’re you?” River feels her stomach tremble.

“Let’s just say I’m a friend of the family.”

“Well, why didn’t Greg tell me you were coming? He didn’t say anything about this. That I could give you the car. I don’t understand.” The tremble finds its way into River’s voice, “What did you say your name is?”

The woman repeats, without blinking, “Like I said, I’m a friend of the family.”

Surely, the woman knows Greg because she knows the black Cadillac parked out front belongs to him, River thinks, but Greg had told her that his family lives in Austin. They are planning a trip to meet them before she leaves for school in two weeks. River, unable to still the tremor in her voice, is angry with herself for being afraid and even more for showing it. “Are you from Austin? Do you know his family there?”

The woman leans over the counter and brings her face within inches of River’s who, frozen in fear, is unable to step away. She can feel the woman’s hot, wet breath when she speaks.

It smells like cinnamon and cigarettes when she sneers, “I’m talking about his family right here in Alvin Heights.”

River feels her stomach churn when she whispers, “I don’t know what you mean.” The woman, pleased to see River shrink from her, doesn’t pretend to smile anymore and her red lips spread into a wide, scary sneer while she rushes on.

“Well, you need to know. I’m talking about his wife and two children who live right here, less than a mile from where we’re standing. Over on Anderson Street.”

The floor rises quickly to meet River, but she wills herself to hang on. She will not faint, but she loses the battle with nausea that sends her fleeing to the restroom. When she returns, the woman is gone. The car is still there.

Young, and, in what for her, is true love, River doesn’t know what to believe. She refuses to see Greg, but over the phone he pleads he is sorry he didn’t tell her he is married, but he and his wife are separated. And that woman who came to the cafe is someone he’d been seeing, and only came by because she is angry he ended the relationship now that he is in love with her. She wants to believe it, but she has her pride, and even better, her anger. Soon River understands it is more than the Texas heat causing her nausea. Scholarship surely gone, the bus ride back to her small Texas town is as endless as River’s self-recrimination. The bus turns off IH-290 on one of its scheduled stops in another small Texas town, kicking up dust and loose gravel as it comes to a stop on the unpaved parking area. River leaves the bus last with the other black riders who are seated in the rear, and once inside the terminal her steps slow when her eyes fasten onto the “Whites Only” sign, painted neatly in big, block letters above the first ladies’ restroom she sees. Anger urges her to simply walk into that one, and she wonders what anyone will do if she does. She checks her reflection in the window of that door, picks at her afro with her fingers, lifting it higher, and then walks on past to the smaller, dirtier, ladies room in the back, the one with the

“colored” sign scribbled above it. She pushes the unpainted door open, holds her breath, and walks inside.

In Hopewell, the bus comes to a rough stop, and with her head pressed against the window, River dries her eyes and looks harder to be sure it is Greg’s Cadillac she sees parked in the bus station lot. She waits until the last person leaves the bus before she slowly walks down to where Greg is waiting. She walks past him.

“How could you leave like that? Without saying a thing to me! Your sister told me about the baby. How could you not tell me?”

River keeps walking, picking up the pace.

“River, talk to me. I love you, I want to marry you!”

“It looks to me like you already have a wife. How many do you need?”

Greg takes her hand and forces her to stop walking. “I told you. We were already separated. I know you love me. I want to talk to your folks, to tell ‘em I want to marry you.”

“Believe me Greg, you don’t want to talk to my parents, especially my father, not now. And I don’t know what I feel. How can I be pregnant? This is all your fault; you promised this couldn’t happen, and I believed you!”

“Come on, it’s nobody’s fault, accidents happen, let’s get in the car and talk, then I’ll take you home.”

“No, my parents told me to call when my bus got in; they’re coming to get me. And I’m serious Greg, I don’t know what my father would do if he saw you now. He’s a kind man, he’s never fussed at us or spanked us, even when we probably needed it. My mother has, but not Daddy. Once I saw him slap a man so hard, because of something he did to my sister, the man fell on the ground.

“What?”

“Yes. The only thing that stopped it from being worse was my mother calling Daddy back to the house. So, I don’t think you want to talk to my parents. Not right now.” She didn’t tell him that her father had looked back at the man, trying desperately to get into his car and said, “Believe me, there’s not a poison in the drug store that’ll kill you any quicker than I will about my daughters.”

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When Greg meets River’s parents one month later, her father fixes his gray eyes on him, “Me and my wife been married for twenty-five years. I never raised my voice or hand to her once. I don’t expect no less from you with my daughter. Understand?”

Greg’s face hints at the pain he feels from Mr. Thomas’ crushing handshake when he answers, “Yes sir.”

Three months later River feels her prayers are answered when she marries the newly divorced Greg. Their baby boy comes two months early and dies three days later. It takes River almost a year to want to live again, to find the strength to return to school and rescue her sanity, and in that year her short afro grows taller. She doesn’t question why she feels anchored by the large afro, or how it seems to be the one thing that keeps her from simply floating away.

≈School Days≈

River sits at her desk at Alvin Heights Elementary where, with thirty credits from the local community college, she works as a teaching assistant when the pain seizes her, spreading from the pit of her stomach to her back. She hopes it's not what she thinks it is. Just six months ago, seven weeks into her pregnancy, a pain just like this gripped her when she miscarried, but she is

almost nine weeks now; she reasons this must be better. She holds her stomach tenderly, and gingerly walks to the Teachers' Lounge to call Greg.

Worry clouds Greg's face when he holds the car door open for River. "We better head on to the emergency room. Don't you think?"

"No, Greg. I already called Dr. Simms. He said for me to stay off my feet for today and come in tomorrow."

"Oh, okay then. I'll stay home with you the rest of the day."

"That's all right Greg. Your shop is just minutes from here. I'll call if I need you."

Greg, who knows his way around any car, is the assistant manager at one of the larger auto-mechanic shops in Alvin Heights. He's taken on extra hours so that his child support payments don't make too much of a dent in his take home pay. When he walks in the door from work that evening, River doesn't have to tell him there is no more baby. From the bed, where she softly cries, she watches him turn and walk into the bathroom. Through the closed door, River hears him plead to God for forgiveness for his sins -- she wonders if she is one of his sins -- and ask him to please let his babies live.

River is waiting for Greg to pick her up after work the next Monday when she is surprised to see her brother pull up in a rental car. He is living in New York where he is an investment banker with Paine Weber.

"Ernest! What are you doing here? I didn't know you were coming."

"Just checking up on my little sister. I'm leaving for Europe tomorrow and wanted to see you and Vallie before I left. I saw mom and dad earlier today. How are you?"

"Fine. I'm doing fine."

“Listen River, I’ve been thinking, and if you and Greg can swing things, without you working, I’d like to pay your tuition at Texas Southern. So, you know, you can go full time and get this behind you. What do you think?”

River leans in to kiss her brother who smiles and pulls away saying, “I don’t do that mushy stuff. You know that.”

That night at dinner Greg, doesn’t seem quite as happy about River going to school full-time as she, Ernest, and Vallie.

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River comes alive at school, making friends who are her age. She is still working part-time at the elementary school, and for extra income, has started tutoring Jason Long, the university’s star quarterback. And as good as he is at handling a football, he seems just as committed to “handling” as many of his adoring female fans as he can.

“Gotta run, River. Got a date.” Jason is ending another tutoring session early.

“With Vera?”

River has met his girlfriend, Vera, and she likes her a lot. She chides River often about paying so much attention to her hair and seems to never pay any attention to her own, which she wears in a very short afro.

“Not this time, somebody else.” His smile is telling.

“Jason, I don’t understand why you have to run around on Vera? Don’t you love her?”

“For Sure! She’s my main squeeze, without a doubt! And when I settle down, it’s gonna be with Vera. Just not ready to settle yet.”

“Oh,” is all River says. Then she thinks of Greg and is glad he, at least, is settled. While Greg is praying for River to become pregnant, River is planning what she will do when she

finishes school. With Greg's overtime and River's work as teaching assistant, they've moved into a nice house on Bay Area Boulevard in Clear Lake. Greg seems happier since River has been attending the church he's joined and attends a lot more frequently than she does. It's a lot like the church of her youth, she thinks, where women shouted up and down the aisles, with one big difference for the better; they have a black Jesus painted over the baptismal bay. She is fastening her necklace when Greg calls out again, "Are you ready?"

"What's the problem, Greg? We have plenty of time, it's only 10:30. Church doesn't start for thirty minutes."

"No problem. Just don't want to be late."

Just before the preacher adjourns church, River looks around, surprised, when he calls her and Greg to the alter. Greg takes her hand and almost drags her to the front of the church where he kneels and pulls at her, encouraging her to kneel before the alter with him. She tries to, but her knees won't bend. The pastor begins to pray loudly, while church members gather around them with their arms raised in the air, asking God to bless them with a baby.

There is dead silence in the car as they drive home, and Greg eases the car into the driveway. River reaches to open the car door when he stops her.

"Do you think God is punishing me? Do you think that's why you can't have a baby, River?"

"Greg, I don't believe there's someone somewhere, deciding if I can or can't get pregnant. And punishing you for what? I can tell you one thing I know for sure, though. That's the last time I set foot in that church."

"Can I ask you something, River?"

"What is it?"

“You wouldn’t be taking those new kinda pills that stop women from having babies, would you? I think if we have a baby, things’ll get better for us.”

“No, Greg, I’m not.”

River walks slowly into the house, finally answering something she’s asked herself for the six years she’s been married. Would she have married Greg if she had not been pregnant? The answer is no.