

CHAPTER THREE

My father grew up in a small coal-mining town called Jenkinjones, West Virginia. It was one of several small towns called “hollows” surrounding the Pocahontas Coal Mines in McDowell County in the southeastern corner of the state. Jenkinjones was founded by a man named Jenkin Jones, born in Glynneath, Wales, who came to America in 1863. Jenkin Jones started out working in the coal mines of western Pennsylvania, and eventually travelled south to get into the business of coal mine development. He ended up settling in West Virginia. The town bearing Jenkin’s name possessed a large population of Black people, most who migrated there from states further south in the years after the Civil War. Work in the coal mines, though deadly and dangerous, did offer Black men an opportunity to achieve some financial stability, and even a bit of upward mobility. The work generally paid a living wage, and towns like Jenkinjones were born, with the coal mines as their economic centerpieces. My dad came to Jenkinjones from Galax, Virginia, as a young boy with his mother, his younger brother Curtis, and his younger sisters Ruth and Hazel. My dad’s mother was a light-skinned, red headed Black woman named Lucy Caesar, rumored to be partly white, though no one could say for sure. The census records for my Grandma Lucy list her as a “quadroon” and not as “colored,” as most Black people were categorized after the Civil War. Born in Red River County, Texas, how she ended up in Virginia remains a mystery. While living in Virginia, Grandma Lucy gave birth to my father, Walter Lee Caesar, on Friday, March 3, 1916. No one exactly knew who my dad’s father was, though it was believed my dad and his sister Hazel had the same father, because of their similar features, light skin and straight hair.

My grandmother Lucy worked as a domestic for a white family when she lived in Virginia, and the wife of this family cared for my dad and his siblings while my grandmother worked for them. This woman even changed my dad’s name. Though he was born Walter Lee Caesar, the white woman my grandmother worked for never called him Walter. She always called him John. My dad’s nickname remained John for the rest of his life, and everyone in our family called him John. Rumors always swirled that the husband of this woman might have been my dad’s father. True or not, Lucy went on to marry a man named Thomas Taylor, who was Curtis’ father. Ruth was Mr. Taylor’s daughter from a previous relationship. Mr. Taylor passed away, and in time, Lucy married another man named Mac Holbrook, who moved to Jenkinjones, some eighty miles away from Galax, to work in the coal mines. After settling there, he sent for Lucy and the children. In Jenkinjones, Lucy and Mac had five more children—Joe, Bell, Lily, Payton, and Wilbur. Mac eventually passed away too, and Lucy had nine children to support.

Another rumor about my dad was that the white men in Jenkinjones knew my father’s dad was white. I even heard that they knew exactly who his white father was. My dad’s possible, albeit unacknowledged, white lineage and his light skin allowed the white men in Jenkinjones to kind of pretend he really wasn’t Black. They could see him as the exception. This made it easier for my dad to be treated differently from the way other Black boys and men were treated. My dad got *almost* white privilege. The skin-color hierarchy established by white people wherever they colonized indigenous peoples has always worked very effectively to oppress people of color all over the world. In this hierarchy, light-skin is the best and most preferred (most like white people), and dark skin is the worst and least preferred (least like white people). Because of my dad’s skin color, he got to be atop this hierarchy.

Good jobs not involving the dangers of the coal mines were given to my dad. He worked in the local doctor’s office for a while. He ran the local post office and “company store,” that acted as a grocery store, clothing store, dry goods store, and much more all under one roof. My dad would read the books and periodicals he’d find in the doctor’s office, learning about all kinds of people and places and things he might not have ever known about otherwise. My dad would look through the slick, full-color pages of the Sears Roebuck and Company and the Montgomery Wards catalogs at the post office, admiring all the expensive things only white people could afford. My dad would also order tons of books while working at the post office, reading constantly, seeking to educate himself as best he could. He also ordered art supplies. My dad enjoyed art—drawing, painting and sketching. More than anything he wanted to be an artist, and he would order books with paintings by the Great Masters in them. He loved these classic works, and he would paint excellent reproductions of these works and would sell them to white people in town. My dad said it made them feel cultured, even though they were in the backwoods of West Virginia. And my dad needed whatever money he could make. After Mac, his mother’s last husband, passed away, my dad, as the oldest, became the man of the

house. He worked hard to take care of his mom and served as a father figure to his eight brothers and sisters. When his siblings moved away from home, and sometimes moved back home with their children in tow, my dad helped take care of them too. My dad worked so hard and so much he didn't finish high school himself, though he always valued education and made sure all his siblings finished.

Dad's intelligence was recognized early on by everyone in Jenkinjones. Even the white men in the town admitted my dad was a "smart nigger," as they were quick to call him. They appeared to be fond of him, and my dad learned how to be charmingly deferential to the white people in town. They not only liked him, they never were particularly threatened by him either. Striking this balance was extremely important, because my dad's favor with the whites in town didn't only benefit him. It allowed him to support his family. Additionally, in many places, light skinned Black men were killed because they might successfully "mix" with white women who might not know these men were Black until their children's skin color revealed the secret. My dad's survival depended on carefully maintaining his image. He was so successful at being charming, docile, and harmless, some of the white folks kept in touch with him even after he left Jenkinjones, moved to New Jersey, and married my mom. One of the families he worked for in West Virginia sent me money in a Christmas card from the time I was born for almost a decade.

My dad often told me a story of how he once heard two of the most influential white men in the town talking about him. These two men encountered my dad making his way to work at the post office, and as he approached the two white men, he greeted them with his usual respect and deference, then moved along. He overheard the white men comment on how smart, respectful, hardworking, and humble "that boy John" was. They liked that he wasn't "uppity" or a troublemaker. One white man said to the other, "You know that nigger missed out on a whole lot when he wasn't born white. Damn shame, too, because he really is a smart nigger!" When my dad would recount this story to me, he was clearly proud such fine white men thought so highly of him. It always made me sad, even when I had little context for the story. But this assessment of his character by those white men was a pivotal moment affecting the rest of his life. It ensured my dad would value whiteness the rest of his days, and he would teach his offspring the same. My mom, on the other hand, didn't object much to his ideas or how he conveyed them to me. She went along with however my dad wanted to raise me, because she didn't feel she had anything to offer me. Her perspective on the world, and her role in it, differed from his.

Christine Marie Street ("Chris"), was fifteen years younger than my dad, born on Tuesday, June 23, 1931. She and her younger brother, Elwood Junior Street ("Dittywit", born three years later), were the children of Lena Street and Ernest Spruiel. Both Chris and Dittywit were born in Jenkinjones. (Growing up my dad used to mention remembering the day my mom was born, which always seemed weird to me.) Lena and Ernest never married, and Ernest went off to work on the railroads, another lucrative profession for Black men in those days. He eventually settled in Baltimore, Maryland. After a few other unsuccessful relationships, including a failed marriage, and some transiency, Lena brought Chris and Dittywit to live with her sister Ina, who was married to Ernest's brother, Lester. Lena, by this time, was considered what people called "a little touched in the head." Lena's past was full of stories no one could quite confirm, including tales about time spent at Tougaloo College in Mississippi, and time spent in a mental institution. Because Lena was "touched," Ina and Lester ended up raising my mom and her brother. Lena and Ina were both shapely, dark-skinned women, and my mom and her brother were both deep brown in skin complexion. Lester was a midnight-colored, grizzled, hardworking man who dipped snuff, owned many shotguns, made the best moonshine in the hollow, and who listened to blues and jazz records after long days working in the coal mines of the Pocahontas Coal Company.

By the time Chris and Dittywit were teenagers in Jenkinjones, they knew my dad as the nice, older, light-skinned Black man in town who worked at the post office and the company store. He could always loan them a few dollars to go to the movies, and he owned more books than anyone. My mom and her brother hung out with my dad's younger brothers and sisters, and they went to school dances and parties together. They were all quite close. My dad's mom Lucy didn't like my mother, because to her my mother was a bad influence on her son and her daughter Bell, my dad's younger sister, one of my mom's closest girlfriends. My mother was short, which she was self-conscious about, short-haired, nappy-headed, and loud. She was known for a sharp tongue, a quick temper, and a willingness to fight anyone who made her angry, and everyone and everything made her angry. She punched my dad a few times in her youth, and even got kicked out of her senior prom for fighting.

My mom didn't feel especially attractive or smart. She wasn't given any preferential treatment at all, as none of the whites in town interacted with her or her family much. She didn't go away to any of the colored colleges or training schools to become a nurse or a teacher or to learn some other kind of vocation after graduating from the local high school. No one ever called my mom a "smart nigger," or encouraged her to continue her education. As was the tradition for most Black women then, my mom went to the nearest big town to work as a domestic after finishing high school, which for Jenkinjones folks was Welch, West Virginia, about twenty miles away. While there, she briefly became involved with a married man, got pregnant, returned to Jenkinjones to her Aunt Ina and Uncle Lester's house to give birth to my sister, Marvalene ("Marva") Marie Street, named after the boxer Joe Louis' wife. When my mom returned to Jenkinjones, she stood before the entire church congregation to apologize for her transgression to ensure her re-entry into the community. To totally seal the deal, my mom's Aunt Ina and Uncle Lester legally adopted my sister, which allowed them to get the supplemental financial support the state of West Virginia paid people who adopted children. Aunt Ina and Uncle Lester gave Marva their last name of Spruiel, raising her alongside their son's three children who they were also raising.

When Marva was a young girl, my mom moved away from Jenkinjones to take a job as a domestic a family friend arranged for her in Long Island, New York. My father had already moved north to Paterson, New Jersey, as did most of his brothers and sisters. Once he moved there, he found a job and got his high school diploma and additional college course work through correspondence courses. With this additional training, my dad eventually managed to get a job as a commercial artist—what you would call a graphic designer today—with Continental Can Company, and he made a pretty good living. My mom reunited with and eventually married my dad in Paterson. Aunt Ina and Uncle Lester kept my sister in West Virginia and continued to raise her while my parents settled down in Paterson, and eventually gave birth to me, Petula Lynnette-Marie Caesar, on Wednesday, August 24, 1966, at Paterson General Hospital.

My parents' union consisted of two people from totally opposite sides of the Black class spectrum coming together. My dad was the town catch. He was handsome, well built, smart, gainfully employed, with a reputation for being a hard worker, and he had no children. Most importantly, he was light skinned with straight hair. He was a man destined to be an excellent husband and provider, with the added benefit of being very acceptable to whites, both in appearance and demeanor. He was functionally Caucasian in many of his day-to-day interactions in Jenkinjones, but he still behaved as if he was completely unaware of it. Although my dad could have had pretty much any Black woman in the town, and did have many of them, he ended up choosing my mom, who was considered not only average in looks and smarts, but was also dark-skinned, short, kinky-haired, a bit promiscuous, and had a child by a married man. Judgement about his choice abounded.

For my mom, landing my dad as a husband was like hitting the matrimonial jackpot. She was always, and at times, painfully aware of this. My dad had no qualms about allowing her to sit in those feelings. His awareness of her intense gratitude to him for choosing her allowed him to influence her. There was no way my mother could directly benefit from my father's functional whiteness because of her skin complexion, but my dad knew she might be able to indirectly benefit under his tutelage. So, he began giving her books and magazines to read, instructing her on appropriate ways to behave, and so on. Under his influence, my mom became outwardly sweet, docile, and demure, a chocolatey Stepford wife who was all about home and hearth.

My dad often would talk about how he tamed my mom, bringing up her wild early days and explaining how he transformed her into a much better person. He spoke proudly about it, almost like a teacher would speak of a student that exceeded their expectations. In return for marriage and the security he offered her, my mom conceded everything he required to be his bride, which included her quick temper, her sharp tongue, and her loud, uncouth (to him) ways. She followed his lead. He would be the head of the household. My mom even stopped working completely once she got pregnant with me and never returned to the workforce. By the time I was born, my mother felt fortunate to have my dad around to raise me properly. She allowed him total dominion over me when it came to my upbringing, which made it easy for him to indoctrinate me in just the ways he wanted me to be. She put up absolutely no fight. No matter how unreasonable she found him to be, my mom supported him.

Even now, I know dad did it all for me. It was done to make me the best version of me possible. Achieving this meant having Norman Rockwell prints in our house. It required surrounding me with white dolls and classical music, extensive exposure to "classic American literature" and not much else, a subscription to

Reader's Digest and not letting me learn how to braid my hair. I needed to know about “all-American” and “traditional” things. It meant keeping me away from dark-skinned boys once I became a teenager. It meant controlling what college I attended. It was done to ensure my survival, and to ensure I thrived. My dad often told me all he wanted was for me to have a better, easier, and less harsh life than his own. As I got older I came to understand he wanted me to have a life free of the traumas he believed inherent to being Black. He wanted the weight of oppression to weigh as lightly on me as possible, or, perhaps if I was careful and lucky, I could avoid it completely.

I had a “get out of oppression free” card with my skin color, and my dad was going to teach me to use that card. With it, I could travel far away from the Black world I was born into without ever looking back. As a Black person, the world would treat me as a second-class citizen. But if he schooled me in the ways of whiteness, I would rise to first-class status, and my skin color would secure my status. Sure, the process might confuse me, damage me, hurt me. But it would preserve my life, secure my safety, and save me from the trauma awaiting me if I didn't sever my ties to Blackness.