

Little Trespasses

By Wilmot B. Irvin

CHAPTER ONE

THE COMMUNITY THAT MOURNED my daddy's passing is sequestered north and east by fields of cotton and corn and hemmed in along the southwest by a broad green sea of loblolly pines dotting a tract abandoned long ago to the benignity of nature. Peapatch, the name attributed to this old township by our agrarian forebears, is no bird sanctuary but it boasts a freestanding post office, a grocery and dry goods store, a Presbyterian church, and a taxidermist. Seven miles up the county road a self-service gasoline station – our gateway to modernity – stands athwart the T-junction with Highway 9.

My daddy was Jake Plantain, senior. He never used the suffix, though. His Social Security card reads “Jake Plantain” period – not Jacob, and no middle name or title is ascribed. I, on the other hand, am – and always will be – Jake junior. The appendage is a part of my name. It appears on my birth certificate, dangling like a spare toe right after Plantain. Daddy did not possess a birth certificate. That is because his mother birthed him at home, and she and Grandpa were too poor or busy or both to drive into the county seat to register the boy. Nobody much cared back then. First, he was a legitimate child – everyone knew that. Second, he was white and had a Christian name. And third, his nativity was enrolled in the Plantain family Bible, tracing a line of descent all the way back to Adam – Plantain, that is – my great-great-great-grandfather. Those credentials sufficed for Rabun County, Georgia during its recovery from the Great Depression of a decade earlier.

Momma's people came from Tuscaloosa, which is a long way from Peapatch. Around about the time other boys his age were going off to college, Daddy got his start with the International Harvester Company, whose regional headquarters were located in Tuscaloosa. At that time Tuscaloosa wasn't what you would call a city, really. It was just a sleepy southern town, except on autumn weekends when the Crimson Tide played football at home, with a railroad depot sufficient for Harvester to deliver its tractors and cultivators along a spur dedicated to

the company's exclusive use. Daddy supervised a crew of very black men who offloaded the equipment and transported it to nearby warehouses.

One sweltering summer evening Daddy met Momma at a church social, courtesy of the Jacksonboro Methodist Church, just up the road from Tuscaloosa. Her father was the minister there. After a respectable period for courtship elapsed, enabling Daddy to save enough money to buy a tiny diamond ring, the Times-Democrat announced the imminent nuptials of Mr. Jake Plantain, formerly of Peapatch, Georgia, and Miss Estelle Lawrimore Buist, of Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Reverend Buist conducted the ceremony on Christmas Eve. An entourage consisting of Grandma and Grandpa Plantain, Daddy's younger brother Hutch, who served as Best Man, and a gaggle of relatives caravanned over from north

Georgia for the wedding. On the Buist side of the aisle, a few dozen friends and family gathered for the occasion. Conspicuous by his absence to those who knew him was Momma's uncle Gerald, Reverend Buist's brother and the designated black sheep of the Tuscaloosa fold. I heard it whispered as a teen that my great uncle Gerald, the phantom of the family whom I never laid eyes upon, had a little problem with something we now call sexual orientation.

A dry reception followed in the same social hall where the lovebirds first met. For their part the Plantains milled nervously about, sipping punch and suffering the indignity, until Momma tossed her little bouquet of sweetheart roses, cut fresh that afternoon from Reverend Buist's garden, to her maid of honor, whereupon Momma and Daddy made a dash for the getaway car – a 1950's-vintage Ford loaned to Daddy by his supervisor at Harvester. They lit out down the road, sparks flying from tin cans Hutch had tied to the rear bumper of the coupe, to spend their honeymoon night and one more, too, at the No-Nok Motel nestled on the west bank of the Black Warrior River, just thirteen miles east of Jacksonboro.

While the incipient stage of their matrimony progressed nicely, the same could not be said for Daddy's career with the International Harvester Company. He got sick and tired of offloading tractors in the hot sun, but his dearth of formal education limited opportunities for corporate advancement. One day he came home at lunchtime, unannounced. Momma was out back doing the wash.

“Stella!” he called to her from the kitchen door.

Startled, she turned and looked up toward the house. The noonday sun was blinding. She put her hand to her forehead in a faux salute, squinting.

“Jake?” she hollered back. “Is that you?”

He sauntered across the backyard to where she was standing next to the washtub. Her calico dress was wet down the front from being on her knees and leaning against the washboard. Grinning like a schoolboy, he took her in his arms and kissed her.

“Stella, we’re leaving here,” he declared after a moment. “Go pack your things.” He was resolute.

She took a step back, feeling dizzy from the combined effects of the kiss and the sun and the announcement.

“What do you mean, Jake? We can’t just pack up and leave.”

She stared at him, trying to make sense of what was happening, but he made no reply.

“What about your job, Jake?” And then, almost as an afterthought, she added, “And what about the baby?”

That latter question was a reference to me, of course: Jake junior. By some accounts it was Momma’s last gasp at familial responsibility.

She was four months pregnant when they moved to Peapatch. Reverend and Mrs. Buist didn’t like it one bit, but what could they do? Momma and Daddy were grown-ups just like them. Well, almost grown-ups, anyway: Daddy was old enough to vote. At least my maternal grandparents had the comfort of knowing their little girl would be surrounded by loving in-laws while she was great with child. But Peapatch, as I said, is a long way from Tuscaloosa.