

VIOLA DAVIS

FINDING ME

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FINDING
ME

VIOLA
DAVIS

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my husband, Julius; daughter, Genesis; sisters, Dianne, Deloris, Anita, and Danielle; mom, Mae Alice; and dad, Dan.

Epigraph

“I think human beings must have faith or must look for faith, otherwise our life is empty, empty. To live and not to know why the cranes fly, why children are born, why there are stars in the sky. You must know why you are alive, or else everything is nonsense, just blowing in the wind.”

—ANTON CHEKHOV

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Chapter 1

Running

Cocksucker motherfucker” was my favorite expression and at eight years old, I used it defiantly. I was a spunky, sassy mess and when I spewed that expression, one hand would be on my hip, my middle finger in vast display, and maybe my tongue would be sticking out. If the situation was especially sticky, as backup I would call upon my big sister Anita. She instilled fear in every boy, girl, woman, man, and dog in Central Falls, Rhode Island. She grew her nails to be a better fighter. She was tough, stylish, talented, and well . . . angry. “I’ll get my sister Anita to beat yo’ ass,” I’d say with confidence. But her being three years older than me, she wasn’t readily available to protect me.

While Anita was the fashionista fighter who was as loved and adored as she was feared, I was none of those things. I was the ride-or-die friend, competitive but shy. When I won spelling contests, I would flaunt my gold star to everyone I saw. It was my way of reminding you of who the hell I was.

In the third grade, I challenged the fastest boy at Hunt Street School, in Central Falls, to a race at recess. It was the dead of winter and everyone showed up. I had my crew, which was mostly girls, and he had his, which was, well, everybody else. My shoes were two sizes too small and my socks were torn—the part that was supposed to cover my toes. So I took them off and gave them to my friend Rosie who said to me, “Beat his ass!”

I didn’t beat him. We tied, which was great for ole underdog me, but humiliating for him. It was bedlam after that. Every kid in the schoolyard started chanting, “Rematch! Rematch!” “C’mon, Chris; you can’t let that girl beat you!” I peeked at them in a huddle, laughing, staring at me, whispering, “You can’t let that nigga beat you!”

When the teachers heard the commotion and saw my bare feet, I had to stand in the corner. In shame. As if I had done something wrong. Why all the

vitriol? I was being bullied constantly. This was one more piece of trauma I was experiencing—my clothes, my hair, my hunger, too—and my home life being the big daddy of them all. The attitude, anger, and competitiveness were my only weapons. My arsenal. And when I tell you I needed every tool of that arsenal every day, I'm not exaggerating.

At the end of each school day, we had to get in line at the back door and wait until the final bell rang. The teacher would open the door, and everyone would dash out to go home. Everyone would get excited because it was the end of the day. Everyone, except me. As much as I could, I would push and shove my classmates, almost clawing my way to the front of the line, not caring in the least if they got pissed at me, because when that bell rang, I had to start running. I had to escape.

A boy in my class who was Cape Verdean, from the Cape Verde Isles off the coast of West Africa, was Black and Portuguese and as Black as I was. But he didn't want to be associated with African Americans, a mindset I later learned was very common among Cape Verdeans in Central Falls. More often than not, they self-identified as Portuguese. They would *kill* you if you called them Black.

So my "Portuguese" classmate and eight or nine white boys in my class made it their daily, end-of-school ritual to chase me like dogs hunting prey. When that end-of-school bell rang, it was off to the races, running literally to save my life. For the gang of boys, it was sadistic-fun time. Every day it was the same madness. The same trauma. Me, taking off like Wilma Rudolph or Flo-Jo, and them tight on my heels.

While chasing me down, they would pick up anything they could find on the side of the road to throw at me: rocks, bricks, tree branches, batteries, pine cones, and anything else their devious eyes spied. But running me down and throwing projectiles at me wasn't enough for them. Their vitriolic screams were aimed at the target of their hate. They threw, "You ugly, Black nigger. You're so fucking ugly. Fuck you!"

Thank God I was fast. I had to run my ass off down Eben Brown Lane, the route I would take because it was a shortcut to get home, an idyllic road that looked like a scene from *The Brady Bunch*. At times, the boys would hide behind houses on that street and I would have to duck and dodge and crisscross. I was being hunted. By the time I got home, I was a snot-dripping, crying mess . . . every day.

One day after a snowstorm the snow was piled so high in the streets anyone could hide behind the giant mounds that seemed to be everywhere. My shoes had huge holes on the bottoms, which meant I couldn't run fast in them because they would make my feet hurt worse than they did already. Because of this, during my daily runs for my life, I would usually take my shoes off, hold them in my hands, and run in bare feet. But with mountains of snow everywhere, I couldn't this time.

As a result, they caught me. And when they did, they held my arms back and took me to their leader, the Cape Verdean boy. I don't mention names because, well . . . their race is way more important in telling this story.

"She's ugly! Black fucking nigger," he said.

My heart was beating so fast. I kept silently praying for someone to come and save me.

And the other voices sounded around me, "What should we do with her?" "Yeah!" "You're, you're, you're fucking ugly!" "You're ugly!" "You're ugly!"

"I don't know why you're saying that to me," I pleaded to the ringleader, the Portuguese boy. "You're Black, too!"

And when I said that, everyone froze and fell deathly silent. For a split second, we were all in a movie, as all the now silent white boys looked at the Portuguese boy, eager to respond to anything he said.

"You're Black, too." I yelled it this time, calling him by name. The gang remained silent. So quiet.

He looked and looked and looked from one white boy to another, frightened and struggling to find a way to hide the truth of what I had just said. The kind of truth that's rooted in a self-hate that we would rather take to our graves. Finally, he screamed in intense anger, "Don't you ever call me fucking Black! I'm not Black! I'm Portuguese!!!" And he punched me in the arm, really hard. He looked down, ashamed at being called out. As if I exposed the ugliest, most painful truth.

"Get outta my face!" Then they threw me in the snow and kicked snow on me. My arm stiffened. It was in pain. I walked home, completely humiliated.

The next day I didn't want to go to school. My mom was doing the laundry in one of those old washing machines where you had to pull the clothes through the wringer.

“What’s wrong with you,” she asked.

“Mama, those boys want to kill me! They chase me every day after school.” After keeping it from her for months, I finally told her about my ongoing daily trauma.

“Vahla”—the southern pronunciation of my name—“don’ you run from those bastards anymore. You hear me? Soon as that bell rings you WALK home! They mess with you, you jug ’em.”

“Jug” is country for “stab.” But if you know what a crochet needle looks like, my mom was actually being ethical. They are not sharp at all! She gave me a crochet needle and told me to keep it in my pocket. It was her shiny blue one.

“Don’t come back here crying ’bout those boys or I’ll wop yo’ ass.” She meant it. This was a woman with six kids. She didn’t have time to go to school every day and fight our battles. She absolutely needed me to know how to defend myself. Even if she had to threaten me into doing it.

The next day, it took every bone, muscle, and cell in my body to walk after that bell rang. I could hear the voices of the boys behind me. I could feel their rage. The hate. But I walked extra slow. So slow I barely moved. My fingers were wrapped around that shiny blue crochet needle in my pocket. The voices got louder and closer. Finally, I felt one grab my arm violently, and an anger, a finality, an exhaustion came over me. I whispered, “If you don’t get your hands off me, I’ll jug you.” He looked at me terrified, searching my face to see if I meant it. I did. He let me go and the rest of them walked away laughing. The ritual of chasing the nappy-headed Black girl had suddenly lost its luster.

Years later, a conversation I had on the set of *Suicide Squad* with Will Smith was an “aha” moment. Will asked me, “Viola, who are you?”

“What does that mean? I know who I am,” I replied with indignant confidence.

He asked again, “No, but who *are* you?”

“What does that mean?” I asked again.

“Look, I’m always going to be that fifteen-year-old boy whose girlfriend broke up with him. That’s always going to be me. So, who are you?”

Who am I? I was quiet, and once again that indestructible memory hit me. Then I just blurted it out. “I’m the little girl who would run after school

every day in third grade because these boys hated me because I was . . . not pretty. Because I was . . . Black.”

Will stared at me as if seeing me for the first time and just nodded. My throat got tight and I could feel the tears welling up. Memories are immortal. They're deathless and precise. They have the power of giving you joy and perspective in hard times. Or, they can strangle you. Define you in a way that's based more in other people's tucked-up perceptions than truth.

There I was, a working actress with steady gigs, Broadway credits, multiple industry awards, and a reputation of bringing professionalism and excellence to any project. Hell, Oprah knew who I was. Yet, sitting there conversing with Will Smith, I was still that little, terrified, third-grade Black girl. And though I was many years and many miles away from Central Falls, Rhode Island, I had never stopped running. My feet just stopped moving.

I had all the brawn in the world but hadn't mastered the courage part. *This* is the memory that defined me. More than the bed-wetting, poverty, hunger, sexual abuse, and domestic violence. It is a powerful memory because it was the first time my spirit and heart were broken. I defined myself by the fear and rage of those boys. I felt ugly. I felt unwanted, even by God. I wanted so badly to fit into this world, but instead I was being spit out like vomit. Who I was offended them. The memory burrowed itself inside me and metastasized. It didn't help that I was running back to a home where there was no protection. A home that seemed to cement all the horrific things those boys said about me.

At the age of twenty-eight, I woke up to the burning fact that my journey and everything I was doing with my life was about healing that eight-year-old girl. That little third grader Viola who I always felt was left defeated, lying prostrate on the ground. I wanted to go back and scream to the eight-year-old me, “Stop running!”

I wanted to heal her damage, her isolation. That is, until a therapist a few years ago asked me, “Why are you trying to heal her? I think she was pretty tough. She survived.”

It hit me like a ton of bricks. I was speechless. What? No poor “little chocolate” girl from Central Falls? She's a survivor?

He leaned forward as if to tell me the biggest secret, or to solve the biggest obstacle of my existence.

“Can you hug her? Can you let her hug YOU?” he asked. “Can you let her be excited about the fifty-three-year-old she is going to become? Can

you allow her to squeal with delight at that?”

I sat there with my arms crossed. No way! *I'm* the one who made it out. *I* have the authority. I looked over at the empty space next to me on the couch and saw my younger self so clearly. She sat there waiting . . . to be embraced? To be acknowledged? To be let in.

He leaned toward me, staring at me, tough, stout, insistent, and said, “It’s the fifty-three-year-old that needs some help.”

Silence is all I could muster by way of response.

“That little girl SURVIVED!!!!!!” he stated emphatically.

I kept my arms crossed. Steely.

He leaned back and waited for those arms to uncross. They never did.

The final stretch to finding me would be allowing that eight-year-old girl in, actively inviting her into every moment of my current existence to experience the joy she so longed for, letting her taste what it means to feel truly alive. The destination is finding a home for her. A place of peace where the past does not envelop the Viola of NOW, where I have ownership of my story.

For my speaking gigs, the title of my presentations is always the same: “The Journey of a Hero.” I learned from writer Joseph Campbell that a hero is someone born into a world where they don’t fit in. They are then summoned on a call to an adventure that they are reluctant to take. What is the adventure? A revolutionary transformation of self. The final goal is to find the elixir. The magic potion that is the answer to unlocking HER. Then she comes “home” to this ordinary life transformed and shares her story of survival with others.

That’s exactly how I describe my story. As a child, I felt my call was to become an actress. It wasn’t. It was bigger than that. It was bigger than my successes. Bigger than expectations from the world. It was way bigger than myself, way bigger than anything I could have ever imagined. It was a full embracing of what God made me to be. Even the parts that had cracks and where the molding wasn’t quite right. It was radical acceptance of my existence without apology and with ownership. I saw that young girl so clearly that day in my therapist’s office. I could hear her saying, *You are my home. Let me in.*

When she still didn’t receive a hug, she got more passionate.

That younger self was sitting there saying, *So, what? You’re not going to let me in? I ran my fucking leg of the race! I passed the baton to yo’ ass!*

All those cocksucker motherfuckas! Shit! I know I was inappropriate, but shit, it got you HERE! Telling those boys to “kiss my Black ass”?! The crying! The pissin’ the bed!! I still see her sitting, staring, arms to her side with her little ’fro and hand-me-down jeans. Waiting. . . .

My journey was like a war movie, where at the end, the hero has been bruised and bloodied, traumatized from witnessing untold amounts of death and destruction, and so damaged that she cannot go back to being the same woman who went to war.

She may have even seen her death but was somehow resurrected. But to go on THAT journey, I had to be armed with the courage of a lioness.

Man, I’d rather go ten rounds with Mike Tyson than face some inner truths that have lain dormant. Hell, at least with Mike, I can throw the fight. But this inner battle, this inner fight I couldn’t throw.

That day in my therapist’s office, the goal was clear and repetitive. Individuals on the journey eventually find themselves experiencing a baptism by fire. It’s that moment when they are just about to lose their lives, and they miraculously, courageously find the answer that gives their life meaning. And that meaning, that answer, saves them.

In the words of Joseph Campbell, in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, “The call to adventure signifies that destiny has summoned the hero. The hero, whether god or goddess, man or woman, the figure in a myth, or the dreamer of a dream, discovers and assimilates his opposites, his own unsuccessful self, either by swallowing it or by being swallowed.”

I still see my younger self so clearly from that fateful day in my therapist’s office. She stands up, in tears, on a mound of snow. Pissed off, she shouts, “Bitch!!! I’m not going to be swallowed!”

Chapter 2
My World

*“Vahla . . . all ya uncles and aunties was in the house eating, dancing,
waiting for you to be born.”*

—MAE ALICE DAVIS

When my mom told me my birth story several years ago, I was quite surprised. It was a healthy, happy memory. “MaMama” (as I call her) has a tendency to spontaneously tell shocking stories: relatives messing around with each other; how she started taking care of her siblings when she was four years old; my father’s cheating. Well, buried in the midst of all these fabulously horrid stories, there was a sweet tale—my birth story.

MaMama has two very southern phrases that are a cause of heavy laughter and a source of great comfort for my siblings and me. One is “Ma” which she calls *us*—her children—as a form of affection. The other is “And stuff like that in tha.” She sprinkles this phrase into sentences liberally.

In her South Carolina accent, she said, “Vahla, when you were born and stuff like that in tha, all ya uncles and aunties and stuff like that in tha, everybody was there. They was drinkin’ and dancin’ and stuff like that in tha, waitin’ for you to come. Miss Clara Johnson and stuff like that in tha was late, so ya gran’ mama delivered you. Everybody was happy!”

When she first told me, I allowed a long gulf of silence after she finished. I was waiting for the shoe to drop. I was waiting for some unbelievable, traumatic interjection; *something* that interfered with the beauty of it. But the horrible never came. It was a normal, beautiful story of family centered around my arrival in the land of the living. To my shock, my birth story didn’t confuse me or induce pain or numbness in the core of my being. It was simply a tale of love and life.

I love that story so much and ask my mom to repeat it often. I mean, a lot. And, every time she retells it, she tops the story off with this wonderful addition: that she ate a sardine, onion, tomato, and mustard sandwich right after she gave birth to me. A disgusting concoction, I know, but she explained, "It was the best sandwich I ever ate." She named me Viola after my great-aunt on my father's side.

On August 11, 1965, in St. Matthews, South Carolina, I was born, the fifth of six children, in my maternal grandmother and grandfather's house on the Singleton Plantation. And yes, it was and still is a plantation. Not a farm. Drive down the long, dusty road leading into the 160 or so acres and you'll come to the big, white, beautiful plantation home. Drive a little farther and there's the tiny, one-room church. An even farther venture will deliver you to the doorsteps of the sharecroppers' houses, outhouses, outdoor showers, and a well.

My maternal grandparents, Mozell and Henry Logan, like the other sharecroppers, had a one-room house with a big fireplace.

Their daughter, MaMama, the oldest of eighteen children, left school after the eighth grade because she got pregnant, but also because she was beaten a lot in school. I mean beaten to where it broke skin and she bled.

My grandmother and my aunt had to go to the school and confront the teacher, who was Black but lighter skinned, and suffering from the all-too-common, intraracial disease of colorism. She was punishing my mom because she was dark-skinned, came from the country, the backwoods, and had nappy hair.

MaMama's family didn't have indoor toilets, showers, or bathrooms. That, mixed with the sheer number of kids, and the desperate poverty, meant she often smelled like piss. Another shame that justified the teacher's fear and anger toward darker-skinned MaMama. Once again, an association of everything that is wrong and negative with skin shade. All I know is, I felt a different level of being heartbroken for my mom when I learned the real driving force behind her decision not to return to school.

My mother pushed on with her life, nonetheless. She was married and had her first child, my brother, John Henry, at age fifteen. She had my sister Dianne when she was eighteen, Anita at nineteen, Deloris at twenty, and me at twenty-two. Years later, at age thirty-four, she had my sister Danielle.

Only eleven of Mozell and Henry Logan's eighteen children survived, MaMama, obviously, being one of them. Several were stillborn, and one my

mother constantly talks about died in a fire as a newborn. That baby was named Deloris.

MaMama tells me that she was about four or five years old and had the mammoth responsibility of taking care of her younger siblings. As she tells it, she would take the Binky from her own mouth to put in her brother's mouth. That was how young she was. Like most children at that time, while the adults worked in the fields, the children were left home alone, unattended. Often, they cooked, cleaned, and changed diapers.

She was playing with matches one day in the open fireplace of their wooden shack, and the rug caught fire. It scared MaMama tremendously. She had the presence of mind to grab her younger brother Jimmy and run out of the house. As the house went up in flames, she couldn't reach her younger sister, who was in the back room. When Deloris was found, she was perfectly, beautifully intact, but she had died of smoke inhalation.

"She was a beautiful baby, like a doll," moaned MaMama. Unfortunately, MaMama was blamed for Deloris's death and subsequently beaten by both her father and mother. She says she still has problems to this day with the arm that was beaten.

MaMama tells this story on a loop. Finally, after so many years, I told her, "You know that was not your fault. It was *not* your fault. I'm giving you permission to forgive yourself. Your parents were *wrong* for beating you. It was an accident. You should not have even been in that position."

Painful silence. Then she simply changed the subject. I know MaMama will never forgive herself, even though years later we saw the death certificate that shows MaMama couldn't have been more than three years old, not four or five, when her baby sister died.

I love staring at my mom. I take in every detail of her face, hands, skin. I see all the scars. Some I remember from abuse she endured, and some I don't. The sore left arm. The scar on her right forearm made by my dad ripping her arm open. Scars on her face, legs . . . Scars. I think about the complexity of her childlike heart compared to the ferocious, maternal warrior who would angrily snatch her wig off to kick anybody's ass who even thought about harming her babies.

I think about her bravery in fighting for welfare reform in the 1970s. Getting arrested. Holding us with one arm and waving her fist with the other as we were herded into wagons. Her speaking at Brown University: "I may have had an eighth-grade education and I was nervous, but I spoke." I think

of the woman who survived horrific sexual abuse only to marry my dad who was an abuser, yet after many years became a true partner.

All that comes to mind when I look at one of the great loves of my life, my mother, and listen to her retell the same stories.

“That doctor said you were gonna have a water bucket head, a big stomach, and bowlegs,” my mom said in between eating bites of rice and drinking her mimosa. She was telling a story of when I was about two years old.

“You was at Memorial Hospital. You was just a baby. They had you all hooked up to machines and all that crust and matter like that in tha around ya eyes and nose. Ya daddy went there to see you and it was the first time I seen him cry like a baby. I knew I had bad milk. The doctor said you weren’t going to develop like, you know, normal.”

MaMama was visiting my house in Los Angeles telling this story. It was on a day off from shooting *How to Get Away with Murder*. We were in the backyard. I knew the story by heart, but listened anyway.

“He wanted to experiment on you. He said he was gonna break ya legs to see if they grew straight. But I saw how he was looking at me. I ain’t dumb. He saw that I was poor and Black. I took you from that hospital. That doctor kept sayin, ‘Mrs. Davis, you’re making a big mistake!’ But I told him he wasn’t gonna experiment on my baby. I took you to Miss Cora’s house and she made you some lima bean soup, and you ate the whole bowl and drank a big glass of cold water and that was it.”

Miss Cora was our distant relative who lived in Prospect Heights, a low-income housing project in Pawtucket, Rhode Island.

“Miss Cora said, ‘Ain’t nothing wrong with this baby!’ And after you ate that soup you hugged Miss Cora’s leg and wouldn’t let go.”

I just listen, always silent. I have a vague memory of this moment hugging Miss Cora’s leg, feeling gratefulness, but just that moment.

“I know that doctor’s not alive now cuz this was when you were a baby. But I wish he could see you now,” she says, as always, with a great burst of joy, smiling, laughing. “You ain’t got no bowlegs or big stomach. Ya head is big, but that’s what make you a good actor!

“Vahla, make ya mama another one of these memeesas or . . . you know what I mean.” No matter what, I cannot get her to remember “mimosa” so I stopped trying because I sort of enjoy it.

I run to make her another mimosa—more juice than champagne— anxiously getting up the courage to ask a very risqué question. Anything to ply secrets from her. The “water bucket head hospital story” is one of her favorites. I grew up hating it. I let her get it out of the way before I ask her something more challenging. One of the beauties of getting older is really getting to know a parent.

“Uhh . . . Mom . . . did you ever have an affair? Fall in love with someone else? Did you have an affair with Howie?”

Howie was a really nice white guy who lived on the second floor of 128 Washington Street, an apartment building we lived in. Every time my father would beat my mom, she would run to Howie’s apartment. He would wash her wounds and let my mom hide out in his apartment until my dad calmed down. Picture the stereotypical ’70s hippie. That was Howie. He would play the guitar for us and give us candy. Just regular candy; no hippie “additives.”

“No, Vahla. I nevah did nothin’ with Howie. He was just a nice guy. Ya daddy always accused me of messin’ with him.”

I have to say, I was disappointed with that one. I was waiting for not only something salacious but sort of wanted my mom to have some story where she harnessed her joy, desires, or a tiny bit of happiness, even if it was from an affair.

She took another sip. “But I did fall in love with my gynecologist.”

I perked up. “OHHH! Really!”

“Vahla, I was pregnant with Danielle and, ya know, he was taking care of me, listening to me. I was so sensitive at that time, and he was so nice.”

I waited for more but that was it. She had feelings for a man who cared for her. As stubborn as a bull, as innocent as a child, and loyal even when she has been abandoned. Thank God for mimosas, or as MaMama calls them, “memeesas.”

When I was young, I thought, perhaps arrogantly, that I could do better than my mom. I was going to slay dragons. Be stronger and more confident. I wasn’t going to run from bad memories. I would be a “hero,” an overcomer.

But you know the saying, “Show me a hero and I’ll show you a tragedy.” As a theater geek, I learned that tragedies always end with the downfall of the hero. Everyone who was influenced by them, who benefits from them, who relies on them is crushed in their downfall. Heroes always cause their own downfall, like Oedipus. I didn’t want to cause my own

downfall. I didn't want to move through my life and not be accountable for recklessness. I wanted to be aware of my Achilles heel. I believed *awareness* was what would release my blessings. I had no idea the mammoth task I was asking the universe.

In one of my mother's episodes of dropping spontaneous and extremely important facts, without warning or context, she told me that although she has gone by Mary Alice Davis for most of her life, her real name is actually Mae. "M-A-E," she always says, "not M-A-Y." She renamed herself Mary early in life because all the girls in the country were named Mae, and she didn't want to be like everyone else. How badass is that!

The woman I tried so hard not to be was the muse sitting on my shoulder in *How to Get Away with Murder*. She didn't tell me or my sisters about her name change until much later in life. I was thirty-five when I found out. It wasn't a legal change, just a personal one. When she told me, it was absolutely not a confession, but a correction. It was almost as if she was insulted that I said her name wrong. I was sending her money via Western Union, like I always did. "Vahla! Stop writing Mary!! My name ain't Mary! It's Mae. M-A-E! You keep writing my name wrong!"

Silence. "MaMama, what're you talking about? You've always been Mary: Mary Alice Davis."

"Vahla! I've always been Mae. I just never liked that name. Everyone in the country was named Mae."

"I . . . I . . . I'm confused."

"But my ID says 'Mae,' so send it to 'Mae Alice Davis.'"

Silence.

"Vahla?! You heard what ya mama said, didn't you?"

"Uhh. Yeah. Sure, Ma." I just went with it. As confused as I was, I didn't want to ask questions because she didn't seem to be open to it. Plus, she would whoop my ass when I saw her next. I'm not kidding. Two generations removed from slavery, as docile as she appeared at times, she had a brutal right hook. So I didn't bring up that her sister's name was Mary, an interesting sidebar to her name change from "Mae" to "Mary."

As much as I try to chisel into MaMama to get at the core of who she is, I never can. There are decades of suppressed secrets, trauma, lost dreams and hopes. It was easier to live under that veil and put on a mask than to slay them.

Unlike my mother, my father was a simpler man. Dan Davis was born in 1936 in St. Matthews, South Carolina. As far as I know, he had two sisters. For the life of me I can't remember, but he had, I believe, a poor relationship with his stepfather, whose last name was Duckson.

Daddy says his education went as far as fifth grade, but evaluating his penmanship over the years, I would say my father's formal education ended closer to second grade. He may not have been educated, but he was not a dumb man. Illiterate at fifteen, he learned to read because his friend taught him by looking at billboards on the side of the road.

At fifteen, after years of abuse, he ran away from home to work as a horse groomer at racetracks around the country. He groomed some of the greatest racehorses in history, and yet he hated the work. MaMama woefully says that my father never groomed Secretariat. We still have photos of him in the winner's circle because the groom was nearly always in the picture when a horse won.

I loved going to work with my father when I was younger. I loved being around the horses. Even the smell of the manure, hay, and horse food excited me. Looking at the horses in their stables, and feeding them with my father is a happy memory.

When the owners came and directed my father about how to brush the horses and how to feed them, the atmosphere transformed into something very different. When my father was around those men, it was almost as though he was a slave and they were masters. He would be juggling five tasks at once. The huge syringe with vitamin shots for the horse, the different mixtures of feed, the grooming brushes and hay. They had no understanding of how much they were asking him to do at any given moment. I could feel his frustration, his anger. But what choice did he have?

To make matters worse, grooms were barely paid a living wage. Imagine hauling your family from the South with all the hope in the world that you could do better. Yet all you have, all that you can do is not good enough to keep them alive and functioning. I could tell he was happy that I had witnessed the difficulties of his job. It was a way, I think, for him to validate that what was happening to him was real.

But my father, whom we called "MaDaddy," was more than his work. He was a great storyteller. Dad was also a pretty good guitar and harmonica player. He absolutely loved soul, jazz, and the blues, especially BB King.