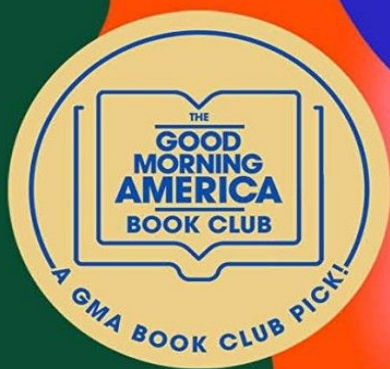


#1 New York Times bestseller

THE VANISHING HALF

a novel



BRIT
BENNETT

Author of The Mothers

The
Vanishing
Half

BRIT BENNETT

RIVERHEAD BOOKS

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For my family

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Part I

THE LOST TWINS

(1968)

One

The morning one of the lost twins returned to Mallard, Lou LeBon ran to the diner to break the news, and even now, many years later, everyone remembers the shock of sweaty Lou pushing through the glass doors, chest heaving, neckline darkened with his own effort. The barely awake customers clamored around him, ten or so, although more would lie and say that they'd been there too, if only to pretend that this once, they'd witnessed something truly exciting. In that little farm town, nothing surprising ever happened, not since the Vignes twins had disappeared. But that morning in April 1968, on his way to work, Lou spotted Desiree Vignes walking along Partridge Road, carrying a small leather suitcase. She looked exactly the same as when she'd left at sixteen—still light, her skin the color of sand barely wet. Her hipless body reminding him of a branch caught in a strong breeze. She was hurrying, her head bent, and—Lou paused here, a bit of a showman—she was holding the hand of a girl, seven or eight, and black as tar.

“Blueblack,” he said. “Like she flown direct from Africa.”

Lou's Egg House splintered into a dozen different conversations. The line cook wondered if it had been Desiree after all, since Lou was turning sixty in May and still too vain to wear his eyeglasses. The waitress said that it had to be—even a blind man could spot a Vignes girl and it certainly couldn't have been that other one. The diners, abandoning grits and eggs on the counter, didn't care about that Vignes foolishness—who on earth was the dark child? Could she possibly be Desiree's?

“Well, who else's could it be?” Lou said. He grabbed a handful of napkins from the dispenser, dabbing his damp forehead.

“Maybe it's an orphan that got took in.”

“I just don't see how nothin that black coulda come out Desiree.”

“Desiree seem like the type to take in no orphan to you?”

Of course she didn't. She was a selfish girl. If they remembered anything about Desiree, it was that and most didn't recall much more. The twins had been gone fourteen years, nearly as long as anyone had ever known them. Vanished from bed after the Founder's Day dance, while their mother slept right down the hall. One morning, the twins crowded in front of their bathroom mirror, four identical girls fussing with their hair. The next, the bed was empty, the covers pulled back like any other day, taut when Stella made it, crumpled when Desiree did. The town spent all morning searching for them, calling their names through the woods, wondering stupidly if they had been taken. Their disappearance seemed as sudden as the rapture, all of Mallard the sinners left behind.

Naturally, the truth was neither sinister nor mystical; the twins soon surfaced in New Orleans, selfish girls running from responsibility. They wouldn't stay away long. City living would tire them out. They'd run out of money and gall and come sniffing back to their mother's porch. But they never returned again. Instead, after a year, the twins scattered, their lives splitting as evenly as their shared egg. Stella became white and Desiree married the darkest man she could find.

Now she was back, Lord knows why. Homesick, maybe. Missing her mother after all those years or wanting to flaunt that dark daughter of hers. In Mallard, nobody married dark. Nobody left either, but Desiree had already done that. Marrying a dark man and dragging his blueblack child all over town was one step too far.

In Lou's Egg House, the crowd dissolved, the line cook snapping on his hairnet, the waitress counting nickels on the table, men in coveralls gulping coffee before heading out to the refinery. Lou leaned against the smudged window, staring out at the road. He ought to call Adele Vignes. Didn't seem right for her to be ambushed by her own daughter, not after everything she'd already been through. Now Desiree and that dark child. Lord. He reached for the phone.

"You think they fixin to stay?" the line cook asked.

"Who knows? She sure seem in a hurry though," Lou said. "Wonder what she hurryin to. Look right past me, didn't wave or nothin."

"Uppity. And what reason she got to be uppity?"

"Lord," Lou said. "I never seen a child that black before."

IT WAS A strange town.

Mallard, named after the ring-necked ducks living in the rice fields and marshes. A town that, like any other, was more idea than place. The idea arrived to Alphonse Decuir in 1848, as he stood in the sugarcane fields he'd inherited from the father who'd once owned him. The father now dead, the now-freed son wished to build something on those acres of land that would last for centuries to come. A town for men like him, who would never be accepted as white but refused to be treated like Negroes. A third place. His mother, rest her soul, had hated his lightness; when he was a boy, she'd shoved him under the sun, begging him to darken. Maybe that's what made him first dream of the town. Lightness, like anything inherited at great cost, was a lonely gift. He'd married a mulatto even lighter than himself. She was pregnant then with their first child, and he imagined his children's children's children, lighter still, like a cup of coffee steadily diluted with cream. A more perfect Negro. Each generation lighter than the one before.

Soon others came. Soon idea and place became inseparable, and Mallard carried throughout the rest of St. Landry Parish. Colored people whispered about it, wondered about it. White people couldn't believe it even existed. When St. Catherine's was built in 1938, the diocese sent over a young priest from Dublin who arrived certain that he was lost. Didn't the bishop tell him that Mallard was a colored town? Well, who were these people walking about? Fair and blonde and redheaded, the darkest ones no swarthier than a Greek? Was this who counted for colored in America, who whites wanted to keep separate? Well, how could they ever tell the difference?

By the time the Vignes twins were born, Alphonse Decuir was dead, long gone. But his great-great-great-granddaughters inherited his legacy, whether they wanted to or not. Even Desiree, who complained before every Founder's Day picnic, who rolled her eyes when the founder was mentioned in school, as if none of that business had anything to do with her. This would stick after the twins disappeared. How Desiree never wanted to be a part of the town that was her birthright. How she felt that you could flick away history like shrugging a hand off your shoulder. You can escape a town, but you cannot escape blood. Somehow, the Vignes twins believed themselves capable of both.

And yet, if Alphonse Decuir could have strolled through the town he'd once imagined, he would have been thrilled by the sight of his great-great-great-granddaughters. Twin girls, creamy skin, hazel eyes, wavy hair. He would have marveled at them. For the child to be a little more perfect than the parents. What could be more wonderful than that?

—

THE VIGNES TWINS vanished on August 14, 1954, right after the Founder's Day dance, which, everyone realized later, had been their plan all along. Stella, the clever one, would have predicted that the town would be distracted. Sun-drunk from the long barbecue in the town square, where Willie Lee, the butcher, smoked racks of ribs and brisket and hot links. Then the speech by Mayor Fontenot, Father Cavanaugh blessing the food, the children already fidgety, picking flecks of crispy chicken skin from plates held by praying parents. A long afternoon of celebration while the band played, the night ending in a dance in the school gymnasium, where the grown folks stumbled home after too many cups of Trinity Thierry's rum punch, the few hours back in that gym pulling them tenderly toward their younger selves.

On any other night, Sal Delafosse might have peeked out his window to see two girls walking under moonlight. Adele Vignes would have heard the floorboards creak. Even Lou LeBon, closing down the diner, might have seen the twins through the foggy glass panes. But on Founder's Day, Lou's Egg House closed early. Sal, feeling suddenly spry, rocked to sleep with his wife. Adele snored through her cups of rum punch, dreaming of dancing with her husband at homecoming. No one saw the twins sneak out, exactly how they'd intended.

The idea hadn't been Stella's at all—during that final summer, it was Desiree who'd decided to run away after the picnic. Which should not have been surprising, perhaps. Hadn't she, for years, told anyone who would listen that she couldn't wait to leave Mallard? Mostly she'd told Stella, who indulged her with the patience of a girl long used to hearing delusions. To Stella, leaving Mallard seemed as fantastical as flying to China. Technically possible, but that didn't mean that she could ever imagine herself doing it. But Desiree had always fantasized about life outside of this little farm town. When the twins saw *Roman Holiday* at the nickel theater in Opelousas,

she'd barely been able to hear the dialogue over the other colored kids in the balcony, rowdy and bored, tossing popcorn at the white people sitting below. But she'd pressed against the railing, transfixed, imagining herself gliding above the clouds to some far-off place like Paris or Rome. She'd never even been to New Orleans, only two hours away.

"Only thing waitin for you out there is wildness," her mother always said, which of course made Desiree want to go even more. The twins knew a girl named Farrah Thibodeaux who, a year ago, had fled to the city and it sounded so simple. How hard could leaving be if Farrah, one year older than they, had done it? Desiree imagined herself escaping into the city and becoming an actress. She'd only starred in one play in her life—*Romeo and Juliet* in ninth grade—but when she'd taken center stage, she'd felt, for a second, that maybe Mallard wasn't the dullest town in America. Her classmates cheering for her, Stella receding into the darkness of the gym, Desiree feeling like only herself for once, not a twin, not one half of an incomplete pair. But the next year, she'd lost the role of Viola in *Twelfth Night* to the mayor's daughter, after her father had made a last-second donation to the school, and after an evening sulking in the stage wing as Mary Lou Fontenot beamed and waved to the crowd, she told her sister that she could not wait to leave Mallard.

"You always say that," Stella said.

"Because it's always true."

But it wasn't, not really. She didn't hate Mallard as much as she felt trapped by its smallness. She'd trampled the same dirt roads her entire life; she'd carved her initials on the bottom of school desks that her mother had once used, and that her children would someday, feeling her jagged scratching with their fingers. And the school was in the same building it'd always been, all the grades together, so that even moving up to Mallard High hadn't felt like a progression at all, just a step across the hallway. Maybe she would have been able to endure all this if it weren't for everyone's obsession with lightness. Syl Guillory and Jack Richard arguing in the barber shop about whose wife was fairer, or her mother yelling after her to always wear a hat, or people believing ridiculous things, like drinking coffee or eating chocolate while pregnant might turn a baby dark. Her father had been so light that, on a cold morning, she could turn his arm over to see the blue of his veins. But none of that

mattered when the white men came for him, so how could she care about lightness after that?

She barely remembered him now; it scared her a little. Life before he died seemed like only a story she'd been told. A time when her mother hadn't risen at dawn to clean white people's houses or taken in extra washing on the weekends, clotheslines zigzagging across their living room. The twins used to love hiding behind the quilts and sheets before Desiree realized how humiliating it was, your home always filled with strangers' dirty things.

"If it was true, then you'd do something about it," Stella said.

She was always so practical. On Sunday nights, Stella ironed her clothes for the entire week, unlike Desiree, who rushed around each morning to find a clean dress and finish the homework crushed in the bottom of her book bag. Stella liked school. She'd earned top marks in arithmetic since kindergarten, and during her sophomore year, Mrs. Belton even allowed her to teach a few classes to the younger grades. She'd given Stella a worn calculus textbook from her own Spelman days, and for weeks, Stella lay in bed trying to decipher the odd shapes and long strings of numbers nestled in parentheses. Once, Desiree flipped through the book, but the equations spanned like an ancient language and Stella snatched the book back, as if by looking at it, Desiree had sullied it somehow.

Stella wanted to become a schoolteacher at Mallard High someday. But every time Desiree imagined her own future in Mallard, life carrying on forever as it always had, she felt something clawing at her throat. When she mentioned leaving, Stella never wanted to talk about it.

"We can't leave Mama," she always said, and, chastened, Desiree fell silent. She's already lost so much, was the part that never needed to be said.

—

ON THE LAST DAY of tenth grade, their mother came home from work and announced that the twins would not be returning to school in the fall. They'd had enough schooling, she said, easing gingerly onto the couch to rest her feet, and she needed them to work. The twins were sixteen then and stunned, although maybe Stella should have noticed the bills that arrived more frequently, or Desiree should have wondered why, in the past month alone, their mother had sent her to Fontenot's twice to ask for more credit. Still, the girls stared

at each other in silence as their mother unlaced her shoes. Stella looked like she'd been socked in the gut.

"But I can work and go to school too," she said. "I'll find a way—"

"You can't, honey," her mother said. "You gotta be there during the day. You know I wouldn't do this if I didn't need to."

"I know, but—"

"And Nancy Belton got you teachin the class. What more do you need to learn?"

She had already found them a job cleaning a house in Opelousas and they would start in the morning. Desiree hated helping her mother clean. Plunging her hands into dirty dishwater, stooping over mops, knowing that someday, her fingers would also grow fat and gnarled from scrubbing white folks' clothes. But at least there would be no more tests or studying or memorizing, no more listening to lectures, bored to tears. She was an adult now. Finally, life would really begin. But as the twins started dinner, Stella remained silent and glum, rinsing carrots under the sink.

"I thought—" she said. "I guess I just thought—"

She wanted to go to college someday and of course she'd get into Spelman or Howard or wherever else she wanted to go. The thought had always terrified Desiree, Stella moving to Atlanta or D.C. without her. A small part of her felt relieved; now Stella couldn't possibly leave her behind. Still, she hated to see her sister sad.

"You could still go," Desiree said. "Later, I mean."

"How? You have to finish high school first."

"Well, you can do that then. Night classes or somethin. You'll finish in no time, you know you will."

Stella grew quiet again, chopping carrots for the stew. She knew how desperate their mother was and would never fight her on her decision. But she was so rattled that her knife slipped and she cut her finger instead.

"Damn it!" she whispered loudly, startling Desiree beside her. Stella hardly ever swore, especially not where their mother might overhear. She dropped the knife, a thin red line of blood seeping out her index finger, and without thinking, Desiree stuck Stella's bleeding finger in her own mouth, like she'd done when they were little and Stella wouldn't stop crying. She knew they were far too old for this now, but she still kept Stella's finger in her mouth, tasting her metallic blood. Stella watched her silently. Her eyes looked wet, but she wasn't crying.

“That’s nasty,” Stella said, but she didn’t pull away.

ALL SUMMER, the twins rode the morning bus into Opelousas, where they reported to a giant white house hidden behind iron gates topped with white marble lions. The display seemed so theatrically absurd that Desiree laughed when she first saw them, but Stella only stared warily, as if those lions might spring to life at any moment and maul her. When their mother found them the job, Desiree knew the family would be rich and white. But she’d never expected a house like this: a diamond chandelier dripping from a ceiling so high, she had to climb to the top of the ladder to dust it; a long spiraling staircase that made her dizzy as she traced a rag along the banister; a large kitchen she mopped, passing appliances that looked so futuristic and new, she could not even tell how to use them.

Sometimes she lost Stella and had to search for her, wanting to call her name but afraid to send her voice echoing off the ceilings. Once, she’d found her polishing the bedroom dresser, staring off into the vanity mirror adorned by tiny bottles of lotions, wistfully, as if she wanted to sit on that plush bench and rub scented cream onto her hands like Audrey Hepburn might. Admire herself for the sake of it, as if she lived in a world where women did such a thing. But then Desiree’s reflection appeared behind her, and Stella looked away, ashamed, almost, to be seen wanting anything at all.

The family was called the Duponts. A wife with feathery blonde hair who sat around all afternoon, heavy-lidded and bored. A husband who worked at St. Landry Bank & Trust. Two boys shoving each other in front of the color television set—she’d never seen one before—and a colicky, bald baby. On their first day, Mrs. Dupont studied the twins a minute, then said absently to her husband, “What pretty girls. So light, aren’t they?”

Mr. Dupont just nodded. He was an awkward, fumbling man who wore Coke-bottle glasses with lenses so thick his eyes turned into beads. Whenever he passed Desiree, he tilted his head, as if he were quizzing himself.

“Which one are you again?” he’d ask.

“Stella,” she sometimes told him, just for fun. She’d always been a great liar. The only difference between lying and acting was whether your audience was in on it, but it was all a performance just

the same. Stella never wanted to switch places. She was always certain that they would get caught, but lying—or acting—was only possible if you committed fully. Desiree had spent years studying Stella. The way she played with her hem, how she tucked her hair behind her ear or gazed up hesitantly before saying hello. She could mirror her sister, mimic her voice, inhabit her body in her own. She felt special, knowing that she could pretend to be Stella but Stella could never be her.

All summer, the twins were out of sight. No girls walking along Partridge Road or sliding into a back booth at Lou's or heading to the football field to watch the boys practice. Each morning, the twins disappeared inside the Duponts' house and in the evening, they emerged exhausted, feet swollen, Desiree slumping against the bus window during the ride home. Summer was nearly over and she couldn't bring herself to imagine autumn, scrubbing bathroom floors while her friends gossiped in the lunchroom and planned homecoming dances. Would this be the rest of her life? Constricted to a house that swallowed her as soon as she stepped inside?

There was one way out. She knew it—she'd always known it—but by August, she was thinking about New Orleans relentlessly. The morning of Founder's Day, already dreading returning to the Duponts', she nudged Stella across the bed and said, "Let's go."

Stella groaned, rolling over, the sheets knotted around her ankles. She'd always been a wild sleeper, prone to nightmares she never talked about.

"Where?" Stella said.

"You know where. I'm tired of talkin about it, let's just go."

She was beginning to feel as if an escape door had appeared before her, and if she waited any longer, it might disappear forever. But she couldn't go without Stella. She'd never been without her sister and part of her wondered if she could even survive the separation.

"Come on," she said. "Do you wanna be cleanin after the Duponts forever?"

She would never know for sure what did it. Maybe Stella was also bored. Maybe, practical as she was, Stella recognized that they could earn more money in New Orleans, send it home and help Mama better that way. Or maybe she'd seen that escape door vanishing too and realized that everything she wanted existed outside of Mallard.

Who cared why she changed her mind? All that mattered was that Stella finally said, “Okay.”

All afternoon, the twins lingered at the Founder’s Day picnic, Desiree feeling like she might burst open from carrying their secret. But Stella seemed just as calm as usual. She was the only person Desiree ever shared her secrets with. Stella knew about the tests Desiree had failed, how she’d forged her mother’s signature on the back instead of showing her. She knew about all the knickknacks Desiree had stolen from Fontenot’s—a tube of lipstick, a pack of buttons, a silver cuff link—because she could, because it felt nice, when the mayor’s daughter fluttered past, knowing that she had taken something from her. Stella listened, sometimes judged, but never told, and that was the part that mattered most. Telling Stella a secret was like whispering into a jar and screwing the lid tight. Nothing escaped her. But she hadn’t imagined then that Stella was keeping secrets of her own.

Days after the Vignes twins left Mallard, the river flooded, turning all the roads to muck. If they’d waited a day longer, the storm would’ve flushed them out. If not rain, then the mud. They would’ve trudged halfway down Partridge Road, then thought, forget it. They weren’t tough girls. Wouldn’t have lasted five miles down a muddy country road—they would’ve returned home, drenched, and fallen asleep in their beds, Desiree admitting that she’d been impulsive, Stella that she was only being loyal. But it didn’t rain that night. The sky was clear when the twins left home without looking back.

—

ON THE MORNING Desiree returned, she got herself half lost on the way to her mother’s house. Being half lost was worse than being fully lost—it was impossible to know which part of you knew the way. Partridge Road bled into the woods and then what? A turn at the river but which direction? A town always looked different once you’d returned, like a house where all the furniture had shifted three inches. You wouldn’t mistake it for a stranger’s house but you’d keep banging your shins on the table corners. She paused in the mouth of the woods, overwhelmed by all those pine trees, stretching on endlessly. She tried to search for anything familiar, fiddling with her scarf. Through the gauzy blue fabric, you could barely see the bruise.

“Mama?” Jude said. “We almost there?”

She was gazing up at Desiree with those big moon eyes, looking so much like Sam that Desiree glanced away.

“Yes,” she said. “Almost.”

“How much more?”

“Just a little while, baby. It’s right through these woods. Mama’s just catchin her bearings, that’s all.”

The first time Sam hit her, Desiree started to think about returning home. They’d been married three years then, but she still felt like they were honeymooners. Sam still made her shiver when he licked icing off her finger or kissed her neck while she pouted into her lipstick. Washington, D.C., had started to feel like a type of home, where she might be able to imagine the rest of her life playing out without Stella in it. Then, one spring night, six years ago, she’d forgotten to sew a button on his shirt, and when he reminded her, she told him that she was too busy cooking dinner, he’d have to sew it himself. She was tired from work; it was late enough that she could hear *The Ed Sullivan Show* in the living room, Diahann Carroll trilling “It Had to Be You.” She lowered the chicken into the oven, and when she turned, Sam’s hand smashed hot against her mouth. She was twenty-four years old. She had never been slapped in the face before.

“Leave him,” her friend Roberta told her over the phone. “You stay, he thinks he can get away with it.”

“It ain’t that simple,” Desiree said. She glanced toward her baby’s room, touching her swollen lip. She suddenly imagined Stella’s face, her own but unbruised.

“Why?” Roberta said. “You love him? And he loves you so much, he knocked your head off your shoulders?”

“It wasn’t that bad,” she said.

“And you aim to stick around until it is?”

By the time Desiree found the nerve to leave, she hadn’t spoken to Stella since she’d passed over. She had no way to reach her and didn’t even know where she lived now. Still, weaving through Union Station, her daughter confused and clinging to her arm, she only wanted to call her sister. Hours earlier, in the middle of another argument, Sam had grabbed her by the throat and aimed his handgun at her face, his eyes as clear as the first time he’d kissed her. He would kill her someday. She knew this even after he released her and she rolled, gasping, onto her side. That night, she

pretended to fall asleep beside him, then, for the second time in her life, she packed a bag in darkness. At the train station, she raced to the ticket counter with the cash she'd stolen from Sam's wallet, gripping her daughter's hand, breathing so hard her stomach hurt.

What now, she asked Stella in her head. Where do I go? But of course, Stella didn't answer. And of course, there was only one place to go.

"How much more?" Jude asked.

"A little bit, baby. We almost there."

Almost home, but what did that mean anymore? Her mother might cast her out before she even reached the front steps. She would take one look at Jude before pointing them back down the road. *Of course that dark man beat you. What you expect? A spite marriage don't last.* She stooped to pick up her daughter, hoisting her onto her hip. She was walking now without thinking, just to keep her body moving. Maybe it was a mistake to return to Mallard. Maybe they should have gone somewhere new, started over fresh. But it was too late now for regrets. She could already hear the river. She started toward it, her daughter hanging heavy around her neck. The river would right her. She would stand on the bank and remember the way.



IN D.C., Desiree Vignes had learned to read fingerprints.

She had never even known that this was something you could learn until the spring of 1956, when walking down Canal Street, she spotted a flyer tacked outside a bakery window announcing that the federal government was hiring. She'd paused in the doorway, staring at the poster. Stella had been gone six months then, time falling in a slow, steady drip. She would forget sometimes, as strange as it sounded. She would hear a funny joke on the streetcar or pass a friend they once knew and she would turn to tell Stella, "Hey did you—" before remembering that she was gone. That she had left Desiree, for the first time ever, alone.

And yet, even after six months, Desiree still held out hope. Stella would call. She would send a letter. But each evening, she groped inside the empty mailbox and waited beside a phone that refused to ring. Stella had gone on to craft a new life without her in it, and Desiree was miserable living in the city where Stella abandoned her. So she'd written down the number from the yellow flyer pressed