Christmases Gone

The town was so wonderfully contained for me in those Christmases of childhood that I could hardly have asked for anything else: the lights aglitter in front of the established homes on the hills and down in the flat places, the main street with its decorations stretching away to the bend in the river—a different place altogether from the scorched vistas the town gave us in summer. There was an electricity in the very atmosphere then, having to do, I know now, with pride in the town’s sudden luster, and when we went caroling and gave our Christmas baskets to the poor white people in the neglected apartment houses and the Negroes in the shacks on stilts in the swamp-bottoms, on those cool crisp nights after school had turned out for the holidays, I would look into the delta at the evening star bright and high in the skies and think to myself: There is The Star itself, the one that guided them there to the new child. To this day when I hear “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” that town for me is really Yazoo.

When does memory begin? I remember a Christmas pageant in the church when we were 5 years old. Our teacher had borrowed one of the Turner twins to be Jesus, promising the Turners that no one would drop her on the floor. Kay King was Mary, I was Joseph, and Bubba Barrier was the innkeeper. When I knocked on

LI Magazine, December 24, 1978
the door, Bubba Barrier was supposed to open it, thrust his head out, and say, in a booming injunction: “No room in the inn!” We had practiced this to adult perfection. But when the night came, Bubba was flustered by the dozens of parents and relatives crowding the church sanctuary. When I knocked on the door of the inn, he opened it with diffidence and said: “Willie, we done run out of space.”

For me those mornings of Christmas were warm with the familiar ritual. We would wake up at dawn in our house in Yazoo—my mother, my father, my dog Old Skip, and I—and open the presents. My mother would play two or three carols on the baby-grand—then we would have the sparsest of breakfasts to keep room for the feast to come. Under the purple Mississippi clouds which, much as we prayed for it, never brought snow, we drove the forty miles south to Jackson to be with my grandmother, Mamie, my grandfather, Percy, and my two old incurrigible great-aunts, Maggie and Susie. The drive itself is etched in my heart, the tiny hamlets of the plain where white and black children played outside with their acquisitions of the day, the sad unpainted country stores with the patent medicine posters trimmed in tinsel, and finally the splendid glimpse of the capitol dome and the ride up State Street to the little house on North Jefferson.

They would be there on the gallery waiting for us, the four of them, and we would all go inside to exultant embraces to exchange our gifts—modest things for sure, because we were not rich—and examine what we had given each other in much detail, and then sit down and catch up on our tidings. And the smells from the kitchen! The fat turkey and giblet gravy and corn-bread stuffing and sweet potatoes with melted marshmallows and the nectar and ambrosia and roasted pecans and mince-meat pies! My two great-aunts bumped into each other every now and again and wished each other Merry Christmas, while the rest of us sank into the chairs by the fire and awaited what my grandmother Mamie was making for us. Christmas songs wafted from the chimes of the church down the way, and my grandmother would dart out of the kitchen and say: “Almost done now!”

Then, at eleven in the morning, never later, we would sit at the ancient table which had been my great-great grandmother’s: my grandfather Percy and my father at opposite ends, my mother and great-aunts on one side of it, my grandmother and I on the other, Old Skip poised next to my chair expecting his favors. We would sit there for two hours, it seemed, all of them talking about people long since departed from the earth, about vanished Christmases. The clock on the mantle in the parlor would sound each quarter-hour, and my great-aunts would ask for more servings and say: “My, ain’t this good?”

I would look around me every year at each of them, and feel Old Skip’s wet nose on my hand, as if all this were designed for me alone. Then, after the rattling of dishes, we would settle in the parlor again, drowsy and fulfilled, and talk away the dreamy afternoon. Finally my grandmother, standing before us by the fire, would gaze about the room and always say, in her tone at once poignant and bemused: “Oh, well, another Christmas come and gone.”

They are all dead now, each one of them: Mamie and Percy and my great-aunts Maggie and Susie, buried in a crumbling graveyard on a hill; my mother and father in the cemetery in Yazoo; Old Skip behind the house.

Only I remain, and on Christmases now far away from home, I remember.