

I.

THE MAMMOTH TEARDROP

Life in South St. Louis during the 1950s



WHEN I GREW UP IN ST. LOUIS IN THE 1950S, IT WAS A town of contradictions: at once brawny and slumbering, industrial and mom and pop, ethnically diverse and staunchly segregated, corn fed and among the ten largest cities in the United States. It was also known as the American city that typified the most Northern of Southern cities and the most Southern of Northern. St. Louis's own poet Fannie Cook called it "a Northern town with southern exposure." Shaped like a mammoth teardrop, St. Louis was divided in its white and Negro populations between its south and north poles. Some colored people had resided alongside whites on the south side during the nineteenth century, and their children even had attended public and parochial schools with whites.

By the early twentieth century, however, most blacks lived within the northeast quadrant of the city, with a substantial morsel bitten from its center. Not many Negroes dared to board streetcars that ran past Chouteau Avenue, the invisible dividing line between midtown St. Louis and the intimidating south side, although public transportation in St. Louis was never restricted

by race. The only exceptions to this unwritten rule were those who lived within the Shaw (midtown) and Carondelet (far south side) neighborhoods. My parents did more than merely travel across this border; in 1947, they decided to live in the south side's bosom. No crosses were burned on our minuscule front lawn, and the residents didn't flee to the suburbs when we arrived. Largely blue-collar folk, some of them were clinging by a hangnail to their own homes, rented or otherwise, and couldn't imagine moving anywhere. By contrast, my father practiced law and was a prominent civil rights leader. "If you can't get Perry Mason, call Attorney Grant," increasingly became a motto for any colored person in a jam. We had the first television set, air conditioner, and garbage disposal on our block, and I got the fanciest hula hoop to wiggle my hips around in. But no amount of money or status could shield us from bigotry.

Before kindergarten, I received the first of many lessons on being colored in the United States from a neighborhood boy, who was even younger than me. When he glimpsed the soles of my feet, he wondered why they were white, then told me to go back to Africa. Although I couldn't handily pinpoint the continent on a map, I had a vague notion that my ancestors were born there. From the Tarzan movies I'd seen, however, as well as an African cannibal who chased the Little Rascals one week on TV, shouting "Yum, yum, eat 'em up!," Africa didn't seem very inviting.

Fortunately, our next-door neighbors presented no major problems. Italian Americans owned a two-family flat that hugged our house to the west. They were friendly from the moment they moved in, and I made my first best friend with their middle daughter, Mary. We even almost shared a birthday. Like most best friends, she and I had our spats. As our rows intensified, we sometimes resorted to flinging racial epithets at each other. "Nig-

ger” packed a bigger punch than “dago” or “wop,” so she usually won. I always felt ashamed when I called her a name because my parents warned that it proved nothing and settled even less. But sometimes I couldn’t resist. After we dried our eyes and let a few days pass, one of us would end the standoff by calling out across the backyard fence, “Can you come out and play?” and we would be inseparable all over again.



David M., David W., Mildred, and Gail Milissa Grant, ca. 1952.

I knew she didn’t mean any real harm, and at times she came to my defense. One day, she, her sister, and I played King of the Hill on their patch of a front yard; a man approached, slowed his pace, and stared me down.

“Are you a nigger?” he asked.

On impulse, she slapped the same question back in his face; he did an abrupt double take before stepping quickly down the sidewalk. At times, Mary withstood another of the era’s most insulting labels. I was used to having south siders occasionally yell “nigger” at me as they sped by in their cars. When she was with me, she might get tagged as a “nigger lover” as well.

She and I would roam the nearby blocks together, talking to everyone we met. One time a woman invited us into her living room. She was a widow without children and she wanted to show us her collection of urns, filled with her dogs’ ashes and strewn across her mantelpiece. I remember wondering where her husband’s ashes were, but they were nowhere in sight. We tried to enliven the summers by putting on plays and skits in my basement or backyard garage and were assured of at least one in the audience. We’d force Mary’s little sister to sit and watch as we donned homemade costumes, acted out several parts, and tried to remember our lines.

Mary and her family crowded together on the ground floor in a four-room apartment where I spent many summer afternoons with her and her mother and sister, watching soap operas. Her paternal grandparents lived above them. Her grandfather, who had been a carpenter and always sported starched overalls, never learned English, but his wife spoke it fluently, with only a whisper of an accent.

Our neighbor to the east was, in fact, colored, so technically, we couldn’t lay claim to having integrated our neighborhood. But Mrs. Lewis was so light skinned that, as a child, it never occurred to me that she was a Negro. My own mother looked almost white and so did some of her friends who lived on the north side. In spite of their keen features, straight hair, and buttermilk skin,

they were all clearly colored women to me. My parents never referred to Mrs. Lewis's race, so I never thought twice about it. I just remember that she draped herself in black, seemed roped to the ground whenever she plodded through her backyard, and never spoke to anyone. Later on, I learned that there were four or five other colored families living within a six-block radius of our house. We were like a few freckles, scattered across an otherwise lily-white face.

When Mrs. Lewis died, another Italian American family bought her house, and they were cordial. My father even nestled the owner in his arms as he died years later from a sudden heart attack; Daddy rushed to his side when he heard his wife come screaming from her house. Yet we rarely, if ever, socialized as families in either of our neighbors' homes or they in ours.

South siders were a motley lot. They included most ethnic groups in America at the time, and each had a distinctive style. The Dutch saw themselves as the epitome of cleanliness, with their frenzied window washing, persistently instructing their neighbors to follow suit. The Irish appeared a bit secretive, and the Italians anything but. Some others, derogatively referred to as "DPs" (displaced persons), were from Eastern Europe and spoke English with thick accents. The Germans opened their own beer hall just east of our house and a bakery to the west, where we were always served in spite of their obvious dislike of Negroes. My father savored greeting the owners with the German phrases he still remembered from elementary school. With mouths agape, they promptly delivered a warm slice of apple strudel or chunk of coffee cake. Although each group maintained some ethnocentricity by what it ate, or where it worshipped, or how it clung to its native tongue, they all seemed bound to one another by the tight rein they held on the neighborhood. Satisfied with their insular-

ity, they wanted their part of town to stay the way it was. The south side was a safe American harbor for them.

Ironically, we colored had reached North American shores long before any of them, yet we were treated like the newcomers. I soon learned that my family could trace its colored lineage back to some of my great-great-grandparents before we dissolved into check marks on census slave records. My father even personally knew one of his great-grandfathers who had come from Tennessee following emancipation. Furthermore, Daddy had female ancestors on his mother's side who had been snatched from Madagascar in the nineteenth century. Part of my family's lore included these two sisters, one of whom was Daddy's great-grandmother. Touted as teenage daughters of a chieftain there, they were reputedly stolen one day as they picked fruit or nuts in an outlying field; by the 1830s, they resided in Adams County, Mississippi. They were described as assertive and confident, so much so that Affie, the eldest, threw boiling water on the white doctor she worked for in Natchez when he insulted her. She escaped to her sister's, my great-great-grandmother, whose name remains a mystery to us. Affie refused to be called an African and, in her own patois, would state firmly, "Me no Africano! Me Malagash!" My father had other relatives, a maternal aunt nicknamed "Mattie" and her husband, who had traveled to South Africa in the early twentieth century as some of the first colored Baptist missionaries in Cape Town. It took me a while to see how firmly American I was, as opposed to my neighbors. As this finally dawned on me, I was astonished by the chutzpah of those so recently native born.

There were no Jews, at least none that I knew of until I entered adulthood and learned that they had owned the few stores we entered comfortably as children. At the neighborhood shoe store, the salesmen measured our feet alongside their white customers',

THE MAMMOTH TEARDROP

with the aid of a shoe-fitting fluoroscope, a tall, wooden cabinet where we would insert our feet to be x-rayed. We delighted in peering into it and wiggling our skeleton-like toes after they had determined our size. We had our footwear repaired at Sam's, where a white man commonly shined my father's shoes, an ironic role reversal I only came to appreciate fully as an adult. I looked forward to going to these stores because smiling salespeople always warmly greeted us.



Mrs. Mattie Murff, ca. 1920.

AT THE ELBOWS OF MY ELDERS

Houses on the south side were multistory and made from sharp-edged, red brick. Topped by pitched or level roofs, they had small backyards with narrow gangways that hopscotched between most homes. Some were single-family dwellings, but most were two-family flats, except for on the far south side, where ranch-style homes predominated and sat on broad, manicured lawns. Nearly all of the streets were clean and quiet, and the commercial sections orderly.



Unidentified neighbor, David W. Grant, and Maggie Johnson holding Gail Milissa Grant at the Grant home on Arsenal Street, 1949.

On the face of it, the near north side shared the same architectural ingredients with its southern half, but seemed to be wrapped in gauze, rendering most things a little less sharp. Some streets were a tad scruffy, others broad and direct. There was less open space, and some parts of the north side were unsafe. The more-residential neighborhoods were subdued, but the mercantile districts bustled. Everything looked as if it moved faster there—the cars, the people, and the moments. Amid the fanfare, however, there was a solidarity that oozed from the bricks and bound the community together. North siders knew who they were (Negroes), where they came from (mostly the South), and where they wanted to go (up the American social and economic ladder).

Overall, the two siders, south and north, had only fleeting contact but had explicit opinions about the other. Negroes considered white people deceitful and menacing, and whites saw Negroes as inferior and frightful. Each side would soon be compelled to interact and reassess its opinions. Through the work of colored individuals and communities throughout the United States, court cases were being filed against legal segregation and being won. For instance, in 1954 the Supreme Court ruled that “separate” education for Negroes could never be “equal” schooling and, even earlier (in 1948), outlawed racially restrictive covenants. Although years went by before even partial implementation of these legislative landmarks, America was being redefined. With all of these changes looming over everyone’s heads and the outcome far from certain, fear and racial tension branded the 1950s.

While some of our white neighbors grew antagonistic, the colored community from the north side of town posed another challenge. They wondered aloud, “Why do they want to live all the way over there? Who are they trying to be?” In fact, my parents’ friends found it so puzzling that they sometimes inserted a

meaningful pause before mentioning where we lived: “Did you know that Dave and Mildred live on . . . the south side?”

On the face of it, the reason was simple. As a recently married couple, they had little money. So when a close friend offered to sell them his family home at a bargain-basement price, they grabbed it.

I, too, silently questioned their motives. Although I did not connect all of the dots of their lives until adulthood, I eventually realized that they had mostly lived outside of the mainstream. These patterns, begun in childhood, continued throughout their lives and led them to buy a three-story house at 3309 Arsenal Street and integrate the heart of the very white near south side. Their tales helped me construct a picture of my parents before I knew them.