



# 1



I ENJOY VIEWING MAPS and the globes at school as it makes me dream. I live in the largest state of Texas, along the muggy and swampy Gulf coast. The summers are really hot and humid here. Folks call this area of southeast Texas the Golden Triangle, where there's a large Cajun Texan population. In our Lapland, we have gumbo cook-offs, Cajun festivals, crawfish boils, and zydeco radio. The part of the Golden Triangle that my family lives in is Orange, Texas.

The year is 1991, and majority of our small town is segregated. We have pecan and moss trees canopying the paved streets. But somehow, the town was named Orange, like the fruit. You'll hear some black folks call our town the Fruit.

Occasionally, I see prints of burnt orange and yellow tints in the late-evening hazy skyline far above me. Black

birds fly high above, embracing the sunset, while crickets chirped throughout the night. Traffic parades through our neighborhood street every evening, with homeboys blasting the latest rap music rumbling in their dashboards and trunks. Some of our neighbors are to blame for most of the congested traffic. Our neighbors keep a lot of company over at their house, but their folks never block our driveway. I think that's 'cause most people around here think my momma is the police 'cause she works at the county jailhouse.

Around here, blacks and white folks work and go to school together, but they hardly play together outside of that. There's racial tension, and the railroad tracks divide our town along class status and color lines. We live on the east side of the tracks.

I've heard black folks complaining about how mean the white people are here in Orange especially in nearby Vidor, which has a history of the Klan. My folks believe some whites are mean too. They talk about how whites work hard to keep black folks down. Daddy complains about not finding a good job 'cause of the *white man*.

To me, if it's that bad, then we all need to move away from here! There are a million places on this earth where we can live. It's just that simple to me. I see myself living a new life away from here. I dream of living in a big city with crowded streets packed with all walks of life, tall skyscrapers, and the everyday hustle and bustle. But it's just a dream I see every day in my head.

“Erin and Erika, get up and do yo’ chores! Da dishes are dirty, and fold up my clothes!” Daddy yells at the top of his lungs.

“In a minute, I wanna finish watching my show.”

Daddy stumbles over me and then steps over Erika, who is sitting Indian style on the living room floor. He turns the television off during the last five minutes of our program. It’s our Saturday off, and we love to watch *Teen Summit* on BET. He never wants us to enjoy ourselves at anything.

Erika jumps up and runs to the TV. As I’m standing up to my feet, Daddy pushes Erika, and she falls into my chest.



“Hurry up, Erin, you’re walkin’ too slow!” my twin sister, Erika, fusses at me.

I don’t see what’s the big hurry is. Erika and I sprint out of the front screen door leaping off the porch of our duplex. We’re far away from Daddy, and we are way too fast for him to catch us once we cross Park Street.

Erika is thirteen minutes older than me. I was a breech, and that’s why my sister gets to claim she’s the oldest. Sometimes we call each other Twin. I get annoyed when someone asks us if we have the same birthday. Of course we have the same birthday! Another crazy question people ask is if we can feel each other’s pain. Thank God we don’t feel anything. I’m so glad, ’cause my sister sometimes gets those

headaches. And I don't like it when we get teased by people who ask which one of us is the prettiest or the smartest twin. It's an unfair question 'cause God made us both as equals.

I hate when people tell us that we look identical, 'cause we're fraternal twins. I know for a fact anyone can tell us apart. For one, I'm a bit taller, and Erika is heavier than me. Maybe some people think we look alike 'cause sometimes we wear the same hairstyle, but I never call folks out. I just let them boast and rave about us being twins. It's a good feeling to have someone admire us for being something.

My grandmother Mary is actually my great-aunt. She's my maternal great-grandmother's sister. It's kinda confusing, but she and her husband, Theodore, adopted my mother, Doris, when she was a baby 'cause my maternal grandmother couldn't take care of her. Sometimes my mother acts like she came from an orphanage, but she was adopted within her family. She had a relationship with her maternal mother, but at times, my mother seems sad whenever she talks about being adopted.

My maternal great-grandmother and maternal grandmother passed away not too long ago. I remember they loved Erika and me. Erika and I turned eleven years old a few weeks ago.

Grandma Mary's house is only two blocks away from our duplex. Erika and I are walking past an abandoned lot across the street from our house. The lot used to be a car wash. I pray there aren't any stray dogs in the alley before

we cross the next block onto John Street. Once we cross John, we'll pass Mount Zion Baptist Church and walk up Mary's block on Fifth Street.

The ground is slightly damp from the morning rain shower. I can feel the steam smacking against my ankles and up my knees as we're crossing over John Street heading up Fifth Street.

"Hallelujah, no stray dogs out!" I say.

Erika rolls her eyes at me. She's not afraid of dogs, like I am. She wants us to get a family dog, but they act so mean. Every dog that I've come across has snapped at me like I'm its enemy. I used to love watching *Lassie* on Nickelodeon. Lassie loved Timmy, and he was Timmy's hero. I think Lassie was the perfect dog. But that's only on TV 'cause I've never seen a dog act that way in real life. The mangy dogs around our 'hood are out for blood!

"Come on, girl," Erika says. "Hurry and catch up wit' me. I hope dat man don't mess wit' us." She snatches a crusted fallen tree branch for our protection.

We always see winos and drug addicts wandering along our neighborhood streets. Most of them have sunken-in faces and missing teeth, with matted dirty hair. They usually smell like rotten garbage or urine. There's even more winos and crackheads who walk up and down my grandmother's street. It's weird how some of them don't seem to know where they are or how they got here. I can't imagine being that lost here on earth.

Grandma Mary lives a few houses down from the housing projects up the road. The projects is like a little town, and to some folks around here, it's a town landmark. Twin and I aren't allowed to walk down there. But most of the kids who ride our school bus live down there. In my opinion, we are all living in the ghetto even though my parents work hard at their jobs. They work hard, but we're not rich enough to move across town, and we aren't poor enough to get food stamps and a HUD house.

It normally takes less than ten minutes to walk to my grandmother's "little shack." Those are her words, not mine. She jokes and calls her house a little shack. It has two bedrooms with three beds in her home. One bed is in her living room, and she calls it the little bed. I love the little bed 'cause it's perfect for an afternoon nap. I take naps often in that bed when I visit her house after school.

We make it to Grandma's as we tiptoe quietly past our aunt Jane's house. Jane lives in the bungalow at the front of the lot, and Grandma's bungalow is behind hers. I hate when my aunt wants the scoop on things. If I tell Jane the truth, she'll tell Momma, and that will get back to Daddy. Then all hell will break loose, so I never confide in Aunt Jane 'cause she can't keep quiet.

"Hey, Grandma." I reach for her shoulders to give her a hug.

She bends over and reaches downward with her bony arms stretched open wide. She's like our second mother.

Erika and I also call her Momma. It gets confusing at times when I sometimes say “Momma” and my momma and grandma both answer at the same time.

Mary fusses every time Erika and I walk to her house, and this time is no different. She always fears someone will kidnap us. I don’t see how that can happen in this nosy small town. Mary is a religious woman of God, but she’s also overprotective, paranoid, and superstitious.

As soon as I enter through her screen door, I spill my guts. “He’s so mean to us! He called me a stupid ass.”

I’m comfortable confiding in my grandmother. My mother tells us that what’s said and done at home stays in our home. No one else in our family spends as much time with Grandma Mary as Erika and I do. She hasn’t snitched on us so far.

“Momma, before he hit me wit’ da belt, I ran out da front door into da street.”

Mary frowns and shakes her head softly from side to side, the motion dangling her paper-bag curls down her jawline. Then she exhales long and hard before asking, “Did Doris work today?”

My momma is never home when stuff hits the fan. She works too much, and mostly during the evenings. It’s a Saturday afternoon, yet she is working late.

I tell Grandma the rest of what happened, which is our normal everyday life at home behind closed doors.

“Da Bible says to honor yo’ father and yo’ mother.”

I hate when Mary says that to me. Did she just hear me say that Daddy tried to beat me to death? Grandma Mary is in her late eighties, and is from a different generation.

“How, when Daddy treats us like dat?” Erika fires back, smacking her hands against the armrest of her chair.

Grandma hisses, shaking her head and turning her backside toward us as she reaches for her recliner to sit.

I can't help but roll my eyes at her. It's a good thing Mary can't see my eye rolling 'cause she's blind in both eyes. She can see colors, lighting and can read some lettering, but she's legally blind.

“Ya'll can stay wit' me till yo' momma get off,” she offers.

Erika glances in my direction for my response. I agree to stay put for a few hours till the coast is clear.

Grandma doesn't have a lot, but I always feel safe in her home.

“I don't know what to think 'bout Anthony sometimes.” Grandma pressing her backside into the cushions of her recliner to sit down, and crossing her legs. “He never comes to church, and he can't get a good-payin' job.” She pauses for a moment, shaking her head, and then goes on to say, “He just don't come to church! I never did like dat 'bout Anthony.”

I share with Grandma about the other incident that recently happened when Daddy got angry with me. All he cares about is fishing. He was working at the sandy brown wooden table situated in our backyard. He uses the table to gut the catfish he caught at the riverbank uptown.

“Bring me dat,” he ordered me.

I made my way over to the toolbox sitting along the tailgate of his truck. I have small hands, and the box slipped out of them, smacking into the ground.

Daddy screamed at me for the entire neighborhood to hear, “You so stupid! You can’t pour piss out a boot! You make a dead man cuss!”

I can’t be that stupid. I usually make the A and B honor roll. Sometimes I make all Bs, and that’s considered smart for a fifth grader.

“Get up, girl!” he kept yelling at me while he reached for a towel to dry off the stinky blood and fish guts on his hands. The pain was so sharp, piercing through my body like a pointed knife and cutting through my soul.

My knees knocked and trembled as I stood there. I wanted to make a run for it. Daddy is always angry at everything. It’s either the white man at his job or another white man around town or the black man who did get lucky and caught a break instead of him. It all seems to piss him off.

I wasted his gadgets on the ground, but I didn’t break anything. I regained the strength in my knees to bend them to reach down and pick up the mess I made. I raised my head slightly and kept my eyes glued to him to make sure he wasn’t reaching to hit me. I felt straining in my chest while my heart pounded rapidly, but I refused to cry that time. I’ve learned that crying seemed to make him even meaner.

My grandmother presses her lips tightly and listens quietly to my recollection of the horrid event that took place a few days ago. “Ya’ll stay wit’ me till Doris gets off.”

She always seems to forget that I have to live with him permanently. I can only escape for so many hours, and then I’ll have to return back to my nightmare.

Grandma continues mumbling under her breath, “I don’t know why Doris won’t do sumthin’ ’bout Anthony.” She rocks back and forth in her recliner.

A few hours have passed, and my mother arrives to pick us up. “I’m so damn tired, ya’ll. Dey worked my ass off today,” she whines, as she entering the house and slamming the screen door behind her. She’s standing in the doorway with her hands across her full hips.

I can hear Aunt Jane’s footsteps as she scrapes her house slippers hard along the sidewalk and up Grandma’s steps. She peeks inside the living room area from the screen porch.

“Chile, I heard dat one of dem Willie boys got arrested,” says Jane.

“Yeah, dey picked him up last night,” Momma confirms.

Momma can’t say a lot about any inmates ’cause she can lose her job at the county and never work in Corrections again. But that never stopped family and nosy folks around here from asking her questions. People love to gossip in this town. They’ll spread rumors regardless if they’re true or not.

My heart flutters every few seconds. Hopefully, Daddy has calmed down before we get home. When he tells his

side of the story, he always plays the victim. I can't figure out how he's able to turn the tables like that. I'm tired of walking on eggshells, 'cause it isn't working. Maybe I'm too noisy when I walk inside the living room. Or I answer him too slowly when he asks me a question. All I know is he hates Erika and me.

We've arrive home, and our next-door neighbor, Mr. Thompson, is sitting outside on his porch. He's always polite, and he never bothers us.

"How you doin', Mrs. Guyer?" he speaks.

Momma waves at him and walks up the steps ahead of Erika and me. I'm taking my sweet time getting out of the car. I wish I knew how to drive 'cause I would've driven in the opposite direction.

Mr. Thompson let me use his telephone once to make a call. He doesn't have a lot of furniture in his living room. I had to step over the trash and filth along the cracked wooden floors, but he had a working telephone. I wonder why he never calls the police when my sister and I scream at the top of our lungs when we get a whipping. As nosy as Mr. Thompson is, he could at least come over from next door to check out the scene. He hasn't come over yet during one of our fights. But hopefully, he will one day 'cause Daddy always acts a fool about something on our side of the duplex.

Daddy isn't wasting any time yelling at us as we're walking into the living room. "Where da hell ya'll went?"

Momma is standing in the hallway with confusion written across her face. Erika and I try to hide behind her tall voluptuous frame. “Tony, why you hollerin’ so loud for? You gon’ wake up da dead!” she says.

My heart is pounding in my chest again. Damn, I can’t believe he still wanna whip us.

Momma looks down at me with her pissed-off face. She always take his word on stuff. She’s always missing in action and never wants to hear our side of the story. I run past him into my bedroom, a move that took me about four steps. Seriously, we have a tiny house.

Erika follows me.

“I’ma whoop dey ass for disobeying me!” he yells with thunderous bass. “Dey ran outta here before I could...”

He keeps on ranting, pacing back and forth, sharing his version of what happened this morning.

“It’s late, boy, just let it go,” Momma says. “I’m tired, and I don’t feel like hearin’ all dat shit.”

Momma must’ve had a really bad day at work. Any other time, she turns her head and keep her feet moving like nothing is happening to us. Maybe if Daddy ever hit her, she’ll put an end to all this madness.

“But dey deserve it, Doris.” Daddy continues to plead his case.

“No,” she says.

Our two-bedroom duplex is smaller than a matchbox. From the front-door entrance of our duplex, you can see

every room in the house. The bedrooms are not big enough to fit a king-size bed. Erika and I share a full-size bed. I like to sleep at the foot of the bed, and she sleeps at the head. I hope someday we get our own bedrooms and beds to sleep in.

We need a brand-new dresser. The drawers are broken in our current one, but we still fold our clothes and stick them inside like it's a cubbyhole. I hate hanging my clothes in our closet 'cause that's where all the roaches are. I'm glad the birds and mice stay inside the ceilings and the walls. So far, none have crawled inside of the house.

I can't look out of my bedroom windows anymore 'cause Daddy put aluminum foil on them to keep the room cool. It still gets toasty inside our bedroom. I peeled a small piece of foil off both the bedroom windows. I make sure my curtains are pulled over the hole to hide it. I think it's important to have a peephole to look outside into our backyard. Ever since that time someone broke into our house and stole Momma's record player, I be on the lookout. Sometimes, I see bums and winos walking through the alley behind our backyard fence through my peephole.

There are plenty of pecan trees canopying the roads on our side of the tracks. The streets are coated with trash and debris. Every day, I watch the winos, prostitutes, and drug addicts parade the streets. We don't have a lot, but our neighborhood isn't exactly the uppity neighborhoods, like Charlemont Place and the Thousand Oaks area near

International Avenue. Those neighborhoods are located on the other side of the railroad tracks about ten miles away.

That side of town is a different world. There are some prejudiced white people who live over there. There's a teeny tiny fraction of black families living out there, and they're the ones who made it.

Majority of the large houses are one-story, brick, and wide, with large manicured lawns. The streets are wider and the grass is much greener. Those white folks' lawns are so green they look like fake grass. No trash along their sidewalks and curbs but clean concrete streets. Most of the homes have rosebushes, with pretty pine and pecan trees. I pray we can move to the country-club neighborhood one day.

Finally, our bedroom has cooled down in time for us to go to bed. I take my position at the foot of the bed. I lie in bed on my backside, thinking about what my life will be like when I turn eighteen years old. I'll be able to do whatever I want without any permission. I can't wait to move away from here.

I lie awake and listen to the train whistling and passing through town. The train tracks are about a mile up the road, but it sounds like they are stretched across our backyard. I hear the wheels of the cars clattering against the wooden tracks. The train sounds like it's speeding over a hundred miles per hour. I always dream of hopping on one of the many trains that pass through town every day. I wonder where the trains are going.

I would love to go to Atlanta, Georgia. I read in our new *Ebony* magazine that Atlanta is one of the best cities for blacks. I can't believe there's a city where black people can work and have a lot of money.

The pictures of Atlanta in the magazine are very beautiful. Atlanta has hills and tall pine trees, with tall buildings and skyscrapers. I'll save the magazine for a souvenir.