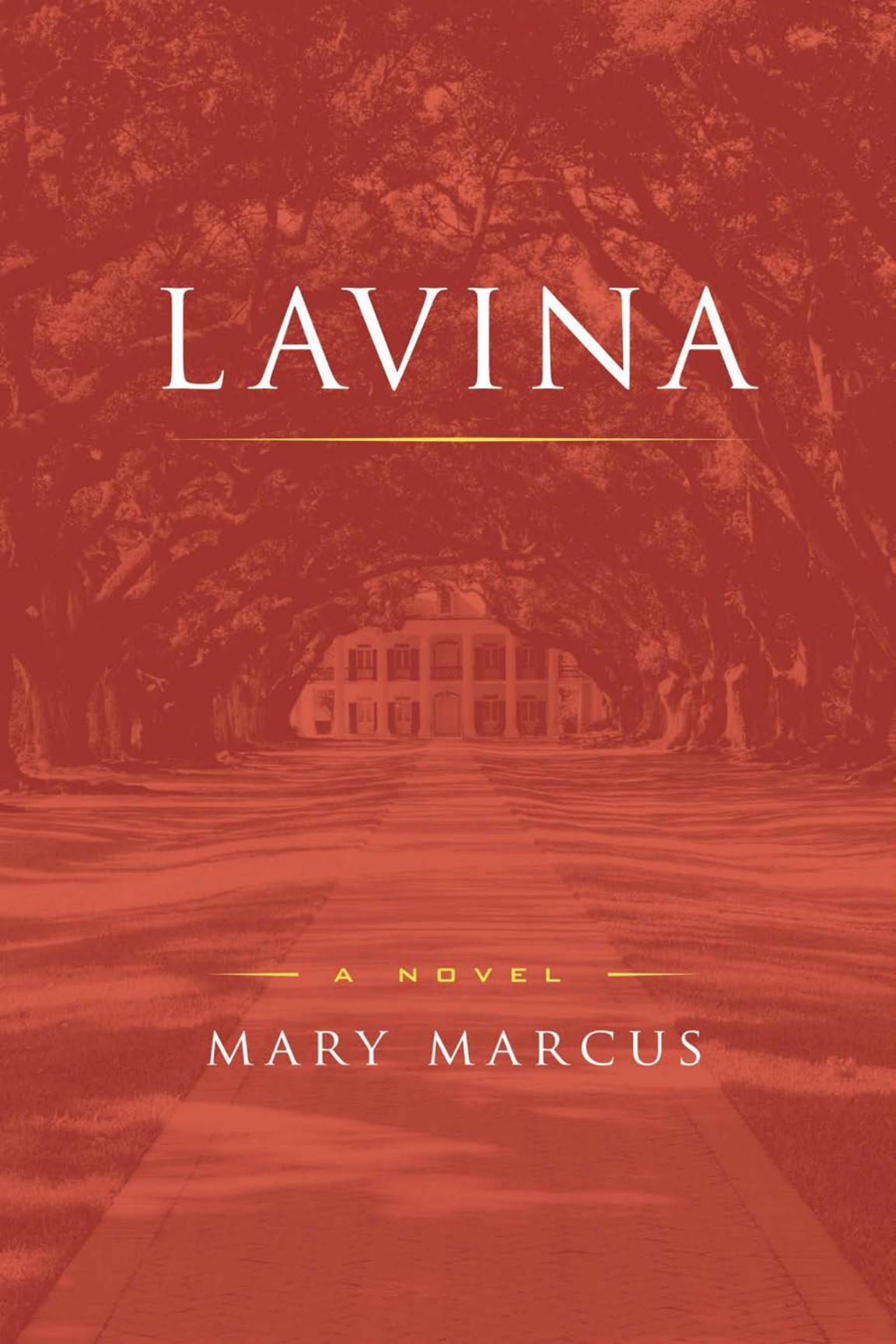
LAVINA
A NOVEL
MARY MARCUS

What I never understood to this day, to this very day, was how white people could have black people cook dinner for them, make them meals, but wouldn't let them sit down at the table with them. How can you dislike someone so much and have them cook for you? Shoot, if I don't like someone, you ain't cooking nothing for me, ever.
– Ray Charles

The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness. Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word *unspeakable*.
– Judith Herman

Blow the horn in Zion,
Sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly;
– The Book of Joel

*Me, I'm guessin' I'm a haint. Don' know another name for what I am. Ain't no angel 'cause I don' have wings. Anythin' that happen since I die, weren't like I thought it would be. Never seen my mother, the pearly gates of heaven, or the baby girl I lost 'for I had Billy Ray. What I sees is what I left behind.*

*A deep green summer in nineteen hundred and sixty three. Hot it were, but it were always hot hot in Louisiana in August. Some say you could fry chicken eggs on the cement. I died that summer, nearly every colored person in Murpheysfield come to my funeral. Coffin were shut, had to be. Them at the church, they did everythin' but call me Saint Lavina, her who died serving the Lord in the path for freedom. Why there was even a picture of me on the funeral program. Me in my best wig.*

*I sees two houses. My own, a rundown, no-count place I never finish payin' on with a dirt-poor yard and a broken front step. When it rain, the front flood and when it don', it just set there filled with red dirt and dust. Got too lazy to plant me any zinnias. Go inside and there's that old bathtub a settin' there in the kitchen and the hot water heater rustin' in the corner where the spiders spin them threads. Spider webs on account of I didn't spend near as much time in my own house as I did over at the Long's. It's a big ole white house on Fairfield with fourteen rooms I kept clean with my own hands and knees, lemon wax, and my purple feather duster.*

*I left two chirrun behind, and them two I can see like it were yesterday. My own boy, golden brown and shinin', comin' soon on bein' a man. A handsome man as you'd ever see. Little harmonica in his hand, he were born to play that thing, funny sound it make, touch you way down in your toes. He Billy Ray Davis, born at the Confederate Charity Hospital, middle of the night in November. Next day I took him home 'cause they needs the bed and we was strong.*

*Now, my girl, she were white as an egg, born to a sickly woman what never take care a her. She start off growin' like some old weed in the yard. I knows*

*right away she stronger than any of them pretty flowers. She Mary Jacob and she settin' at the kitchen table with her nose in some thick old book. She tappin' on the black-and-white floor. That chile, she love to read. And when she read, she tap.*

*You can't turn back the hands of time. The seasons they come and go, no matter that you ain't there no more to feel the hot of August and September turn into the cool of October. And you can't feel November in your knee when November come. But you remember what your life was, and a lot of it were full of pain like your knee always was. Pain don' hurt you when you die. That ole blackbird pain, he fly away. You ain't happy when you is dead. But you ain't so sad neither. Ain't like living. One moment you is happy, then you turn around you is sad.*

*Them that dies watchin' over them that lives and that's the truth. But that's all we can do. Can't reach out and give them two a shake and a talkin' to, like I'd like to. Wouldn't hear me if I did. That don' mean I ain't watchin' to see what happen. I is always watchin' . . . I is always watchin'.*

# NOW
# (THE EARLY NINETIES)

# DESCENDING

There's no such thing as a direct flight from New York to Murpheysfield, Louisiana. I'd gotten one of those cheap seats that stopped in Pittsburg and Atlanta. By the last leg, the plane was all but empty; my seat mate, like almost everyone else, had gotten off. I was alone and completely paranoid. I didn't know someone had actually been watching me since New York. I thought I was jumping out of my skin because of where I was going and who I was going to see. I remember hoisting myself up to take a look around the plane. Way in back two old ladies sat alone, bent over their knitting; empty seats all around them. In front, on the other side of the aisle, I didn't see a person, just a fold-down tray with some balled up napkins, a swizzle stick, and three empty bottles of airline booze knocked down like baby bowling pins. A lush, I decided.

I gave him a name right away, even before I actually saw him.

The call had come the week before. I walked into the kitchen, pressed the button on the answering machine and heard her strident voice—distant but familiar—an enemy I'd known all my life.

"Mary Jacob, this is your sister! We're at the Shumpert Hospital. I'm puttin' Daddy on the line."

Then, an earsplitting clunk of the phone being dropped. I cringed even before the real shocker, his deep voice full of sadness.

"Child, I want you to come home. I'm longin' to see you."

"You're *what?*"

Since then I'd spoken to Kathryn twice in one week; we normally spoke maybe twice in five years. I still had not spoken to my father again. My sister's insistent drawl was in my head, like a catchy tune

I didn't want to be there. *"You ever heard of a kidney machine, sister? Poor Daddy has to go on one. We're takin' him home tomorrow. Did I tell you I'm engaged again? My fiancé is up in New York City right now. If you take that morning flight next Tuesday, why, he'll probably be on it too. He's comin' to see me and to help me out with poor Daddy. Why, I don't believe I've ever met your husband or your son."* S-u-uhn like it has three syllables instead of one.

In back of a barf bag, I found the laminated safety card with the little stick figures free-falling into space. I studied what to do if we landed at sea.

Not that there's a sea anywhere near Murpheysfield. Down below were pine trees, farm fields, and red dirt, the color of blood when it dries.

I looked up from the disaster card and saw a big blond man, hands grasping the top of the seats, barreling down the aisle, bringing with him a whiff from the bathroom, the nasty soap, the smell of shit, the lush of the three empty booze bottles. He stopped in the aisle, stared at me pointedly and started doing a kiss-y thing with his lips.

"Mind your own business, dick head." I didn't say that. Nor did I explain myself to the stranger. Why should I?

"Look, I'm not the kind of person who makes out with her seatmate on an airplane. I was acting out, or more to the point, he was kind and handsome, and he listened." Instead, I stared down at my watch and waited for this stranger to take his seat and quit harassing me. I didn't really care that the red-faced man thought I was wild.

The plane felt like it was sinking. My gut did too. I had a catch in my throat, I wasn't breathing very well. I was halfway hoping Big Daddy would be dead by the time I got there. Yet, I was curious. The old man had never asked for me before; this last wish was his first.

And being down there, I could skip marital therapy . . .

"Tell me a little about your parents, Mary Jacob. What was their relationship like?"

"I don't remember. My mother died when I was twelve. I was sent away to boarding school after that. I never saw much married life."

"You don't remember anything; that's unusual. And is your father alive now?"

"Yes."

"Did he remarry?"

"Three times."

"And what's your relationship like with him?"

"We don't have a relationship."

"That sounds sad."

"We're not one of those close families."

"How do you feel about that?"

"I don't feel much at all; it's the way it's always been."

"Well, it sounds sort of sad to me."

Then the kindly gaze that's seen it all turns on my husband. "And Peter, are you from a close family?"

"We're not close, we're claustrophobic. My father died a couple of years ago. My mother lives in Brooklyn. Sometimes I think Mary Jacob's lucky."

"So your relationship's tough then?"

"She's my mother, she drives me crazy. She drives everyone crazy!"

And so on. As it turns out, according to our therapist, I have no role models. Though even Peter admits I'm a good mother and wife, and described me to Michael as *loving* and *devoted*, two words he normally wouldn't get caught dead using. Michael translated "loving and devoted" as Peter feeling left out of the picture. Maybe he's not in the picture because he doesn't want to be. Did I say that? I must have said that.

My best friend and collaborator Vincent, who is from New Orleans, doesn't see his family either. Maybe this is a southern thing. Still and all, he can paint a pretty clear picture of the afternoon his mother walked in his room and caught him with another boy: the sound of his mother gasping; pulling his pants up hastily, then covering the other boy; the way the light was coming in the window, the smell of new mown grass, the color of the sheets, and the texture of the blanket.

I wasn't so much sent away as dismissed, forgotten. Kathryn, who is five years older, married when she was eighteen and left home. Our mother died that same year. She was hardly cold before my father married my sister's best friend Van—also eighteen—and I was sent away. I was, I've always supposed, nothing more than a classic case of the unwanted child, too close in age to Van. And to

his third wife too. When his fourth wife Margaret was alive, though we never visited, she sent my children hundred dollar checks at Christmas time. In turn, I sent them a pot of tulips with a neutral non-denominational greeting and signed everyone's names. After Margaret died, Big Daddy Jack hit the road, until now.

"And Mary Jacob, when do you start remembering?"

"My memory kicks in pretty clearly at thirteen."

"What do you remember?"

I closed my eyes.

"The hospital bed in my mother's room being taken away. Boarding school. My friends there. My history teacher whose hands shook. The tree outside my dorm window, reading *Jane Eyre* for the first time. Summer camp in North Carolina. Water skiing. The way the boat lifts you up out of the water and you fly."

I opened my eyes. Peter was looking off in the other direction, bored or embarrassed, I couldn't tell. Michael nodded his head sympathetically. In maritial therapy there's quite a bit of sympathetic nodding.

"You remember a lot for someone who has memory problems."

"And Peter, how about you? What do you remember?"

"Thirteen was my Bar Mitzvah. I remember cringing when all the survivors started crying."

"Survivors, as in death camp survivors?"

"You got it."

"That's tough," said Michael.

"Vat you goyim know from tough?" replied my husband in the funny Jewish accent he uses to charm his way out of things.

"Do you think that your being a son of a camp survivor gives you permission to do things other people can't?"

Good question. Excellent question. Three points for kindly Michael. Though now that I had taken a crash course in infidelity, I suddenly could relate to why Peter had cheated. You don't think about death when you're acting out. Not the death camps, not your father's death, or your own fiery one falling down from the sky. Nor do you think about the biomedical instruments used to prevent

death (after I spoke to Kathryn, wanting to be prepared, I walked across the park to Mt. Sinai to look at a dialysis unit). Adultery—the turn-on—distracts the mind from its petty anxieties, its dutiful desire to do the right thing. And makes the wrong thing irresistible.

One minute we were total strangers, sharing the two-seat on the side of the plane. We talked for a while. He was handsome, he was kind, he had this gorgeous shiny black hair. Our faces were close together, close enough to smell his breath. His breath smelled good. Our legs touched and I reached up and ran my hand down his face, grazing his long black hair. Yes, I started it. Me, Mary Jacob. To get even? To say I could do it too? Maybe. Or like I said, I was just turned on. Though, Peter's affair wasn't the only reason we were in therapy. Just the excuse. Still, already I knew I didn't have the *sang froid* to be a cheat, because I was more than a little unnerved that the blond, red-faced man had seen us. What a jerk.

"Buckle up, ladies and gentlemen."

We were on the ground in Murpheysfield.

My hometown had a real airport now, not the landing strip I remembered. I was walking in the small terminal headed toward the rent-a-car counter, suitcase in hand. Four men were ahead of me and while I was waiting, someone came up behind, standing way too close. The whistle didn't tip me off (he was whistling along with the Muzak) but the smell of whiskey did. He brushed up against me, horribly familiar. I didn't need to turn around. I knew it was the lush from the airplane.

When it was my turn, I said my name softly so he wouldn't hear. But the woman behind the counter couldn't find my name or any record of my reservation number. Even worse, they'd run out of cars.

It's never any trouble pulling out my southern accent. Like my husband's Jewish one, it's always right there, just below the surface, another personality waiting to come out.

"My daddy's real sick," I said, letting the molasses drip, "and I'm awful worried." I mumbled my local address. The Hertz woman repeated it loud enough for the whole airport to hear. But never mind, the address had worked its magic, as I knew it would.

"Mary Jacob Assure," she said, like she wasn't sure how to say my name. I didn't correct her and say, Ascher. "Miz Assure let me

just take care of the gentleman behind you and then we'll see what we can do."

The big blond man approached the counter. I stood a little away, studying him. I saw his red face had once been handsome too. He was so loaded I could smell the whiskey from where I was standing. Still, drunk or not, he had no trouble getting a car. I thought he was probably getting my car.

As he weaved away, toward the exit sign, I couldn't take my eyes off him. When he reached the doorway, he turned and made another face. Not a kiss-y thing like before. He was pulling on his face to contort it. Two beefy fingers on either side of his eyes.

Slant eyes. Ha ha. Very funny. Even though I live in a sheltered world where people would never behave this way, this guy felt really familiar, like a song I hadn't heard in a while, one whose words I knew by heart. I hated that he knew my name. He probably even knew my address. The Hertz woman had shrieked it loud enough to hear back home in New York. And still he lingered there by the exit sign.

"Bye Bye Mary Jacob, toodle loo!"

I raised my arm New York style and flipped him off. Toodle loo to you too, creep-o.

The exhilaration of doing that didn't last. Before I knew it, I was behind the wheel of a maroon econo-box morosely mulling over the last conversation with Kathryn.

"I'm gonna need you to sit there with him. We can't even keep a nurse, Mary Jacob. He pinches the pretty ones and makes fun of the ugly ones and won't do what they say. He's a livin' breathin' terror. I was thinkin' why it's a good thing he's weak as a kitten, or we'd never be able to control him. I was lookin' at him just today, thinkin' Daddy's an old man now."

Strong Jack Long, weak as a kitten? It seemed impossible. Like God or the devil being ill.

At a red light, I stopped and turned on the radio. Just a couple of notes let me know it was Billy Ray singing. There's nothing wrong with my musical memory. It was one of his very early hits, "Diamond Buttons."

I've always loved Billy Ray's music. I read somewhere a long time ago that, like me, he comes from Murpheysfield. We wouldn't

have known each other. Those were the days of Jim Crow, yet the singer has always felt like someone close. At signings, people tell me all the time that they feel close to me on account of my books. Perfect strangers will hold out their hands and call me by name like they know me. And I'm not even remotely famous outside my tiny little children's lit circle. But Billy Ray's been famous forever. As long as I can remember anyway. I even dream about him. Sometimes we are children in the dream and sometimes all grown up. We're always kissing in the dream, kissing and holding on to each other like we'll never let each other go.

Someone was blasting a horn at me. I was afraid to look in the rearview mirror. What if the lush was following me? I was in the poor outskirts between the airport and town—why is nowhere always a skirt?—a part of town that used to be referred to affectionately as "coon town" by the local white gentry. African American Town? Would that be the correct nineties terminology?

The announcer on the radio was saying Billy Ray would be playing tomorrow night in Murpheysfield, L.A., like it was Los Angeles, not Louisiana. Home of the not-so-great Mary Jacob Long, I was thinking. But I wasn't Mary Jacob Long. I was Mary Jacob Ascher. Mary Jacob Long didn't live here anymore. But like it or not, Mary Jacob Long was coming through loud and clear. And I didn't want to be inside her skin anymore than I wanted to be inside the crappy rented car heading toward Big Daddy Jack.

I tried to conjure up Joshua, my son, and Lizzie, my stepdaughter: the two clearest people to me on earth. But they seemed far away, hazy. Billy Ray playing the harmonica was who I was seeing.

The car was stuffy. I pushed some buttons and the windows went down. The air outside was soft and spring-like. So different from the frigid air I'd come from on a New York February morning. I was still in African American town. In the rearview mirror I saw a child on the dusty street. He was standing very still, watching me. It kept running through my head: *Run, run Billy Ray, run!* Then my old dream flashed before me, Billy Ray kissing me.

Keep going, I told myself, and I knew exactly how to go. To go straight for several miles, to turn left at the Seventh Day Adventist Church, a building made of tan-colored brick. Emblazoned across the back, is a huge neon cross with a Star of David dead center.

# ALTERNATE ROUTE

Red dirt and pine trees. Rednecks stopping at truck stops, a few cheap motels here and there . . . hundreds of miles of this. Floyd behind the wheel of the van was driving him nuts, sitting there with his thunder thighs open and the big sack of MoonPies wedged in there between his spread. When Floyd wasn't stuffing his face, he was doing rhythm on the steering wheel; those hands of his couldn't sit still for a second. The driver's MoonPies were bringing him back to his childhood, as if heading toward Murpheysfield weren't doing that and then some.

He was always hungry back then. If he'd been lucky enough to get his hands on a MoonPie, it could've been the only food he'd have until his mother came home from work, walking up their rickety step, calling out, "Sugar, I carried us home our supper." She'd be beaming from ear to ear as she set down a brown paper sack on the kitchen table. Inside there'd be a chicken back or neck, sometimes the dry, end piece of roast the Long's didn't want; some biscuit, a piece of soggy pie. Never enough to get really full. Not even close.

"Brothers and sisters, the great Billy Ray live in Murpheysfield tomorrow evening. Just drive over the border into Louisiana and see the legend himself performing at the Riverhouse."

Not bad, he thought, relieved that the radio stations were hip to it. I *am* a legend, he thought. But legends are old.

Floyd was grinning like a big baboon. He put up his hand to high five Billy Ray, who refused to return the gesture.

He watched Floyd's smiling baby face frown and listened as his hand dug in the noisy plastic bag and found more—he must have had forty of them by now—they were the small, bite-size MoonPies,

not like the ones he remembered. By this point on the tour, the singer knew whatever Floyd did was going to get on his nerves and he was trying to control himself. What he wanted to do was shoot him, kick him, piss on him, throw him out of the car, and leave him by the side of the road. He liked skinny blond Steve who was nodding out in the back seat much better. Steve didn't do his stuff in front of him, and he was grateful for that. And he sure wouldn't pull that cheap high five either. Maybe he'd nod his head. Maybe he'd say, *all right*. But he wouldn't high five and pop more MoonPies into his greedy pink mouth. The kid could play too. Usually, when you didn't show off and go into a lot of unnecessary jive, it went along that you could play, though Floyd could play too. He'd have had him out on his black ass day one if he couldn't do that.

"Now when I were backing Cookie and the Cupcakes," he'd say, at least a couple of times a day. Or "Little Anthony, he had to have a box underneath him when he sang, he were that small. Bobby Bland always rests himself between sets; he's old now. Never have played for BB."

He lit up a Kool though he knew it was bad on his voice and for years had been trying to limit his smokes to half a pack a day. Even in the joint, he had tried to do this. But knowing where he was going was hard on his nerves. Behind bars he could take. The shit that went along with making a comeback he could take. His girlfriend giving him the commitment shit—the getting married shit—he could take. But facing a Friday night alone in Murpheysfield, Louisiana was something else entirely. He hadn't stepped foot in the place since he was fifteen years old but that didn't change a single thing. Fine with him to see the whole town burned to the ground and all the white flesh barbecued.

"You come from around here, don't you, brother?"

"Yeah."

"Anybody we can call on your cell-u-lar phone, bro?"

Ever since they had started out on this tour, Floyd had been trying to get his hands on the singer's prize phone. Billy Ray knew it was better to ignore the smiling fuck, but part of him kept wanting his backup guy to understand the rules. That if you were cellular, you didn't have to tell every fool you got one. Showing it meant

something; to have one meant you ain't had the thing long enough for it to count.

"No mama, no sistahs, you don' mean?"

"I told you, motherfucker, leave it alone!"

"Okay, man. I was just thinkin' we could have us a meal. This road food is getting' on my nerves."

"Sure ain't spoilin' your appetite any. . . . Look at this floor."

"Man, I'm gonna clean up at the end of the day. I always does that."

The singer laughed. "You'd trade the best trim in the world for a plate of homemade fried chicken, huh boy?"

Floyd grinned from ear to ear and did a little more rhythm on the steering wheel.

"I don't know about that, man. I could use me a nice plate a trim."

Both of them laughed. Meanwhile, the east Texas station began to play a medley of the early songs. The ones that had sent Billy Ray to the top of the Motown charts, then on up the Top Forty all those years ago. The ones that could always get him management, a booking, and a cut of the cover charge but not at the major places anymore. That wouldn't happen unless he came up with a new hit. Unfortunately, for too long a while, he hadn't come up with anything at all.

He didn't remember recording "Billy Ray Loves the Apollo," the track they were playing now. By the time he recorded that album he was getting high as a kite during recording sessions and everywhere else come to that. But even clean, in the car next to Floyd, he could remember the excitement, the heat of the crowd screaming and, when he was up there, how the sound equipment warming up sent body rushes up and down his spine. Body rushes still happened, but not as sharp and sweet as they were when he was young. Maybe, he thought, because no one makes recordings like the one they were playing now. Today even performance recordings sounded smooth and technically perfect. Still, when it all came down, something was missing that weren't missing back in the sixties when he started out.

Sure, it sounded far away and old-fashioned. Sound engineering had come a long way. Maybe too long a way. Back when he was a kid on the road, you had to know your stuff. Hadn't he made his first live appearance on stage with nothing but a dime store harmonica in

his hand? A few lousy speakers and a mike no one would use today even to tape a message on their answering machine. Your talent had to carry you back then. There was no MTV with some faggoty Brit with a ponytail and his butt in the air, following you around with that steady-cam. Sound wasn't digital. Sound was sound: you made it yourself, fueled with your own heat and sweat.

The crowd was screaming on the tape. They screamed better in the old days too. He hadn't thought about the song they were playing now for he didn't want to remember how long. "Without Your Love" had been his first slow song, his first love song. No harmonica and minimum backup. His voice had to carry the whole thing and it fucking did, all right. He couldn't have been more than seventeen when he recorded this. Pulled it off so good, a couple of other performers had done more than all right with their version of it.

That was the real test of a song. If a song had enough in it, almost anyone could perform their version of it. You could do it bubble gum or soul. You could do it disco. Disco wasn't his thing, hid out getting high until it was over, though he was as high as a kite when he came back at the end of the seventies with an album that blew them away.

It was a funny thing about the old songs. The notes and words, they felt familiar and close, but no more close than other songs other people wrote. They were part of him, but not connected to him. Nothing seemed connected to him. Sometimes he thought being clean all the time was the trouble. He was more than halfway convinced Sarah and the boy were to blame. Billy Ray had never lived a normal everyday life like the one he'd been living for a while now, with a healthy dinner and regular hours. Part of him liked it though—the two of them were healing his mind and body—though the more he thought about it, the more it was clear that family life wasn't good for the hum, had probably even killed the hum off. Couldn't be anything else.

In the front window, the side window: red dirt, pine trees, and road signs. The inside of a prison cell wasn't a lot worse than Louisiana red dirt and pine trees. He thought anytime now they'd be running into one of them old cotton fields. When his mother was fifteen, she had picked cotton. She used to say she could remember it in her shoulders. "Billy Ray, Arthur, he settin' right here in my shoulders giving me the misery."

Her voice still came back to him even all these years later, soft, musical, and sweet. He could remember her saying "Arthur" like she was right in the car with him. Not ten feet under in a cemetery he'd never been to. That was another thing, should he try and find out where she was buried? Had she been buried? Maybe after they murdered her, they just threw her tired old body in a ditch somewhere and let the dogs get at her.

"Brother, you mean to tell me, you don' even know one chick we can call on yo cellular phone? You gotta know at least one chick in this town. All we need is one, they always got friends."

A chick from Murpheysfield had been on his mind lately. If he hadn't met Sarah and Connor, he'd have never seen her picture as a grownup and, with her name, put it all together. Last year, he had even gotten his manager to get her home phone number; he had not been surprised that she had left the South and lived up in New York. It was in his mind that one day he was going to call her and they were going to talk about what happened. Six-year-old Connor loved her books, had a whole set of them, and was all the time asking to be read one at bedtime. The star of the books was a little black girl named Vina. Lavina was his mother's name. Billy Ray knew the girl in the books was named for her. His mother and Mary Jacob had been close. She had even kept a picture of Mary Jacob on her shelf in her room, right near her good picture of him and the empty frame where she put a little bit of the fuzz from the head of her baby who had died before he was born. Mary Jacob had saved his life, no question about that, though neither one of them could save his mother.

"She don' have to be a fox, man. Them ugly girls, why they is always so grateful when one of us shines our lights on them."

"Suck my dick, brother."

"Okay, Billy Ray. I hear ya. Nothin' we can't handle here."

It's bad for the performance not to get along. Floyd knew this and so did he. Bad enough they were playing Murpheysfield. But beggars can't be choosers. The new manager had arranged the tour without consulting him. Something that had happened in the old days too, but the pay was better. Even a million years ago the bread was better. Fucking blow. All that money up his nose. Using it had made him numb to everything around him, including who was cheating him and of course, cheating on him. What was the joke

they used to say in the seventies and eighties? "Blow is God's way of sayin' 'brother you gots to make more money.'" They used to laugh at that. Kept saying it over and over as they sucked up that nose candy. But, of course, the joke was on them. How they hoovered their way through tens of thousands of dollars of the stuff month after month. A million or two easy. Maybe even three.

"Just a few years ago, you were hot shit. This ain't Atlanta. Could be they still think you hot shit around here. Maybe we won't have to call. Maybe they be there waitin'."

Instead of killing him, hands around the thick, black neck, Billy Ray reached over and grabbed one of Floyd's MoonPies, which were soft from the sun, and spread it across his smiling baby face like butter on bread. He could have done more, but left it at that. Unfortunately, now some of the sticky chocolate was on his hands. Sarah called him a clean freak. And he did hate that sticky chocolate being on his hands. He didn't like anything on his hands but soap and water and afterwards a clean paper towel.

"What you tryin' to do brother, get us in a wreck?"

He ignored Floyd and lit up again. Already he was half a pack over the limit. And now there was chocolate on the Kool too. Floyd would have sucked his fingers clean if Billy Ray asked him, just to get at that last bit of sweet.

With the Kool between his lips, the singer leaned over, slipped off his new Italian loafer and wiped the chocolate on his thin silk sock. He took off his other sock, made the two into a ball and threw them on the floor of the van with the sacks from Floyd's junk food—let *him* clean it up. You always gotta make the best of a bad situation.

# ONCE UPON A TIME . . .

I was parked in the driveway of the big white house on Fairfield Street. It was the biggest house on the street and the only one that needed painting. Spring was out in all its glory in Murpheysfield, Louisiana, everywhere but here. Nothing soft and sweet grew around my father's house. On his wide front lawn, just the giant live oaks, almost black in color, snaking one into another, blocking out light. I longed to get out of the car and stretch my legs, but it was like the plane all over again, only worse. Now nothing separated me from what I didn't want to face.

*Home is where one starts from.*

The back door was open. I went warily inside. Soft sunshine poured in from the window above the laundry room sink. I didn't have to glance sidelong to know there was a window there, as surely as I could smell a faint odor of bleach, and a delicious hint of ironing and clean laundry. In my mind's eye, in slow motion, like a black-and-white movie on late night TV, I saw a large dark hand with a heavy metal iron moving up and back, up and back, hissing across the snowy white damask of the dinner napkins. The picture disappeared, went black like the end of a movie, but it left me with a good feeling, like a pebble tossed in a pond, a rippling of happiness. I almost never felt this way in real life. Why suddenly here of all places? Still it was as though the words themselves were imprinted in my brain, the same place where music and poetry lived: *nothing can hurt you here; here you are safe.* And that place seemed to be where I was heading, suitcase in hand. In the kitchen with the old wooden table and chairs. On the black-and-white floor, with the bread box and the icebox and the cake plate with the round glass cover, the

sunlight on it making it gleam. Someone was at the kitchen sink. She had a gray uniformed back with a neatly tied white apron bow at the waist. She turned to face me.

"Well, well, Miz Mary Jacob, they is waitin' for you. Miz Kathryn, she at the beauty shop, but Mr. Jack, he upstairs waitin' for you to walk up them steps."

The happy feeling was gone as quickly as it came. I felt my face flushing, a catch in my throat. Then sadness again.

"You don't have to call me Miss Mary Jacob," I told her gently, "just call me Mary Jacob, please."

"Yes'm."

I smiled at her, and she looked relieved and sort of scared—she couldn't possibly be afraid of me, could she? Then, a bell went off, crisp, staccato and she gestured to the oven, the place where the delicious smell was coming from. I was aware then, of standing there holding my suitcase, with a throbbing arm. Meanwhile, the old lady was padding toward the stove, and then stooping to open the oven. The smell was stronger with the oven open and the sweet buttery fruit smell filled the whole kitchen.

I walked toward her, feeling the heat of the oven. She was shorter than I was, thin and wizened, though when I first came in she seemed much larger and solid.

"That's a dewberry cobbler, isn't it? I thought dewberries didn't come out until the summer."

She was smiling angelically. "Now that's the truth. We freezes them, so as we can have them all year long.

"And tell me your name, please?"

"I'm Annie. Annie Hunt."

"Hello, Miss Annie." I held out my hand.

Annie Hunt smiled beatifically.

"Seriously, just call me Mary Jacob."

We were both smiling now. But I was sort of freaked out behind the smile. Had she been working here when I was little? Had I forgotten her too? I've always been friends with my babysitters and I still have my first cleaning lady—fifteen years later. Peter says I am too friendly. I get too involved in everyone's lives. That I overpay. And he doesn't know the half of it. Could it be possible that I forgot

all about who worked here? Obviously somebody took care of this huge place. More than one person, considering its size.

"How long have you worked here?" I asked. "We've never met. I'm sure I would have remembered you."

"I been workin' for Mr. Jack ever since Miz Margaret passed. I come here with Miz Margaret when she marry Mr. Jack. I worked for Miz Margaret for thirty years. Woulda been thirty-three years come July. And I promises her I will stay with Mr. Jack as long as he need me."

I was relieved I hadn't forgotten her. "I never met Margaret. She must have been a wonderful woman if you stayed with her for thirty years."

"Miz Margaret were an angel from heaven and she remember you. She were a friend of Miz Lil and Miz Margaret. Why she say, when you were a baby, she come here to this house and bring you a present."

Someone had brought *me* a present? It was all I could do not to grasp Annie Hunt's old wrinkled hands and ask her crazy questions: "Was I a good baby? Did I cry a lot? What was my favorite food? My first word? Did I like teddy bears or rabbits? Did I have a favorite dress? Who am I? What in the world ever happened to me here that I cannot remember?"

I put my suitcase down next to the old wooden table, pulled out a chair and sunk down in it.

"I guess I'm a little scared about going upstairs and seeing my father. I haven't seen him in such a long time. I hope you don't mind if I sit here for a bit."

"Course you are, honey. You sit yourself down, and I'll bring you some cobbler. Mr. Jack, he say I is to make you dewberry cobbler."

For me? He said that? I watched Annie padding around, first to the shelf to remove a dish, then to a drawer and on to the stove top where the cobbler sat. Presently, she set down in front of me a plate of the deep purple stuff in a pretty bowl with pink and blue flowers. The spoon that was in the bowl was heavy sterling and initialed. And no paper towel like at my house; here, a proper white linen napkin.

"Thank you so much," I smiled, taking a bite. The crust was light and crisp, the filling dense and way too sweet: lard and tons of white sugar.

"This is amazing," I said. "Why don't you sit down with me and have some?"

Annie Hunt, who had been smiling, put her hand over her mouth modestly as though I'd said something very risqué.

We both jumped at the jarring noise that was coming from the wall nearest the laundry room.

"Mr. Jack," Annie said, heading toward it.

Annie was engaged with some antiquated device on the wall that looked like something from Alexander Graham Bell's workshop.

"Yes sir," she was saying. "I'll tell her that."

"Mr. Jack says you is to come upstairs. He is waitin'."

I took another bite and chewed elaborately, like it was steak instead of purple mush. I took another, in no big hurry to leave the safety of the kitchen.

All too soon, I got to the last little bite and, when I did, Annie Hunt whisked it away and me out of there.

"Miz Kathryn, she say to use your ole room. I putcha clean sheets on the bed."

"Thank you, Annie."

And now, all at once, I was out of the safe kitchen and into free fall, that's how it felt, like the ground beneath my feet had given way. But I remembered it all: After the kitchen you come to a butlery, a long narrow room where the good china, linen, and crystal are kept. Connected to that, the dining room with the huge antique table spread out, and above it, an ornate chandelier with necklaces of crystal looping down.

My father's house had always come to mind when I played Clue with my children. Only no conservatory, never any flowers. Not even a stiff arrangement on the hall table like there used to be. Mary Jacob with her suitcase in the front hall. Mr. Long with his guns in the library. The library was in back, two huge rooms away, but I didn't have to stand in the library to see the glass front case. I knew what was inside. The shotguns, the deer guns, the bird guns, the pearl handled revolvers gleaming behind glass. Mr. Jack with his guns in the library. Mary Jacob on the stairs with her suitcase. The beautiful old runner was still on the stairs. I was on the large landing after the first set of stairs; it had a window seat with tall windows overlooking the driveway.

The door to my old room was shut. I opened it, expecting to see a four-poster bed, the dark wooden chest of drawers, the flower prints on the walls, the wooden bench. I even remembered my old bear that used to sit on the bed. Unlike the rest of the house, which was virtually identical, everything in here was different. Now there were twins with two suitcase holders at the foot of them. A writing desk, a chaise; soft floral chintz to match the wallpaper and curtains. It looked like a room at an expensive hotel. Any trace of me had been completely removed. Even though I had dumped my family years ago, it stung that I'd been dumped too.

I put my suitcase down. Then I went to the windows that faced the back of the house and opened one up as far as it would go. I stood for a moment looking out at the live oaks in back, taking in deep draughts of the clean fresh air.

In the upstairs hall, I hesitated, knowing it was time to see my father. I was remembering too, what Kathryn had said on the phone. "He's got to go on that kidney machine right away. Maybe you'll take him the first time."

Kathryn had gone on to say, "I was reading this article at the beauty shop that said when you always want to sleep it means you're depressed. He sleeps all the time now, Mary Jacob. I guess that means he's depressed."

"Yes, he probably is," I'd said. "Who wouldn't be at his age, in his physical condition?" What my sister Kathryn probably didn't know is that sleeping is a sure sign of progressive renal collapse. The poisons make you sleepy as they build up in your body. In the final stages you sleep all the time. There's no real pain and it's not a bad way to go . . . but I hadn't come to offer my advice.

By now, I was creeping toward the heavily carved four-poster bed, the same bed where my mother Lillian had repined for most of my childhood. According to Kathryn, Big Daddy's fourth wife Margaret had died up here as well.

The man in the bed was sleeping. I was glad of that because I was shocked down to the tips of my toes. Big Daddy Jack had shrunk.

He was stirring. I was so used to calling my father "Big Daddy" that I didn't know what else to call him now.

His eyes were fluttering open. One long, thin arm reached out for me. I was grasping his hand and that was a shock too. My father,

my own flesh and blood, was touching me. I'd imagined everything else but not that I'd be moved by holding my father's hand. Or that he would hold on like he didn't want to let me go.

I'm used to feeling sad seeing women my age walking arm in arm with their mothers on the street. But I've never thought much about having a father. Not consciously anyway. Now I knew I'd longed for a father too. Or maybe just the unbelievable fact that I had one. He was smiling at me as he held on. Deep lines ran down his haggard face. He was very handsome for a man his age, except for the teeth. They were the color of dirty ivory and his breath was foul like an old dog.

"I want to thank you, darlin', for coming home. I've been waitin' for you."

I stared at him, unable to speak. I didn't trust myself to speak.

Jack Long was still holding on. "Help me sit up."

I did as I was told, feeling the slippery silk of his pajamas on my hands, the bones in his thin back. Up close, his body didn't smell much better than his breath. Some of the smell was from cigarettes—there was an almost empty crushed pack and a crystal ashtray filled with butts next to the bed. But there was a prevailing other odor too.

"Here, Mary Jacob, sit yourself down on the bed." I did as I was told and placed myself at the very end of his big old bed, my back against the post. We were staring at each other frankly. Me looking at him, my father looking at me, unselfconsciously, the way children and animals look at one another. Neither one of us turning away, neither one of saying, "What are you staring at?"

He broke the silence.

"You're a fine lookin' woman, Mary Jacob. I'm glad to see you turned out just as you did. Good head of hair, you've kept your figure and looks; I approve of a woman keeping her figure. Tell me, do you smoke?"

"Not anymore."

"Drink?"

"Not much."

"What are your vices?"

"Curiosity, I suppose." And selfish men, but I didn't say that last part. Maybe I didn't want him to know so much about me.

"Eve bit into the apple of knowledge and we've never recovered."

"Men wrote that story."

"But it contained a fundamental truth about the nature of women. And anyway, Mary Jacob, it's still our world."

"Not for long."

Jack Long laughed a bitter little laugh. "Well, I certainly won't live to see it."

"It might do you some good."

My father reached for a cigarette, lit it, and smiled appreciatively. "It figures you're a blue stockin', daughter. But of course, I sent you to college. You're educated, unlike your sistah who has no intellectual curiosity whatsoever. I must say I'm enjoyin' this conversation."

I was enjoying the conversation too. It was certainly a novelty—sitting on my father's bed, shooting the breeze—even if by now I'd figured out the other smell was his necrotic flesh. He was sort of flirting with me; I was sort of flirting back. I wondered, is this what women did with their fathers: A safe venue for the male/female ongoing battle? I've watched my stepdaughter Lizzie try and relate to Peter. She can often be quite seductive—Peter responds to that. Peter isn't the greatest father either. He let me raise Lizzie practically on my own, and he hasn't been all that much better with Joshua. But Lizzie, when she was little, used to sit on his lap and call him Daddy. Joshua too. And Joshua used to say he wanted to marry me when he grew up. I didn't encourage him when he said that, but I knew it meant love and I was grateful that he loved me. I still am.

I couldn't recall ever sitting on this man's lap or running into his arms freely or happily or ever saying, "I love you, Daddy." Or him saying I was his little girl, or calling me sweetheart or honey, or calling me anything at all come to that. For as long as I can remember, when I thought of the man in the bed it was with a hard and rigid heart, knowing there was no possibility of love between us. Now, I wanted to know why. Not everyone was close, but most families were closer than us. Most families at least had their moments. Most families tried to fake it more than we did. Why did Jack Long want me suddenly? Was he trying to settle his debts? Did he believe in hell? Did he want to say he was sorry? Was he sorry?

He was holding my hand, and looking at me with frank pleasure.

"We have much to discuss, daughter, but waitin' for you has made me tired. You'll have to excuse me now. You'll sit with me later, won't you? I'm terribly glad you've come."

**Order Your Copy of Lavina by Mary Marcus TODAY**