COME HERE AND WATCH

I've never been to Mississippi. But my grandparents made sure that it became part of who I am.

BY LYLETTA ROBINSON

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"COME HERE AND WATCH."

That's what my mother would say. Nothing written down. Nothing measured. She taught my sister and me how to prepare a sweet potato pie by sight, smell, and taste. It's how she'd learned.

Despite my solidly Midwestern upbringing, the Mississippi in my family runs deep—which is ironic, since neither my mother, my sister, nor I have ever been there. When my maternal grandparents became a part of what is now known as the Great Migration, they ran north toward hope and opportunity and settled in Gary, Indiana. Once there, they started a family and raised my mother and my aunt. My grandfather worked at U.S. Steel and my grandmother was a domestic.

When I was younger, the stories of the South scared me—and Mississippi, in particular, terrified me. The lynchings. The sharecropping. The Klan. Emmett Till. I'd overheard the whispered conversations not meant for younger ears, about why someone had to leave in the dead of night. Those whispers contradicted the stories my grandparents shared about the beauty of a sunrise over a favorite creek or the specialness of Sunday dinner with family after church. My grandparents left for reasons I'll never know and can now only speculate, but I suspect that those reasons were to literally save their own lives. Or, perhaps, factory work in a Gary steel mill for my grandfather was preferable to back-breaking field labor. Nonetheless, the full and true story of why they left was buried with them. What remains are my memories of flour-sack mattresses stuffed with chicken feathers, hiding money in coffee cans, kerosene lamps providing light during a storm, and the horrible taste of Black Draught laxative.

> What nourishes your body when you're younger nourishes your spirit when you're older.

Both of my grandparents were born before 1910. When they were growing up, their families grew or hunted most of what they ate. That legacy continued once they arrived in Gary. One of my most vivid childhood memories was watching my grandparents prepare squirrels to cook after my grandfather returned from hunting in unincorporated areas on the outskirts of Gary.

But try to talk about sustenance to a six-year-old who is bawling her eyes out because she thinks her grandfather is hurting a squirrel as he skins it. To me, meat was something you got at a grocery store, wrapped in plastic on a Styrofoam tray, not on a string with other small game to be eaten for dinner. Despite my tears, my grandfather skinned and dressed his catches. After the animals had been properly dressed, my grandmother brined them in a saltwater bath as the first of many steps before they wound up in a simmering pot. I can't recall if those squirrels became part of a stew or some other dish. I was so jarred by the experience that I knew I wouldn't eat that meal. Still, I learned a deep lesson: Work with what you have, and you can elevate humble and simple fare to life-affirming cuisine.

The complexity of our Mississippi ties seemed to arise from my grandparents' longing for the familiar cadence of Amory and Houlka (their hometowns), despite the knowledge that there would have been limits on their personal growth and ambition if they had stayed. I sensed they were very proud of their hometowns. They missed their siblings and other family members left behind, yet they rarely referenced Mississippi positively—except for when it came to food. They reminisced over cutting collard greens from the field and serving them for dinner the same day. They praised the sweetness of a freshly caught and fried catfish.

Depending on the day or the mood, Mississippi was either sacred or profane. Doing things the "right way," the Mississippi way, was a lesson as valuable as any we could learn in school. At home, I'd be tutored in making a proper homemade Crisco crust for a pie. I gleaned the importance of sending red clay up north for people who literally wanted a taste of home. I listened to my great-uncle lament not being able to purchase a freshly killed chicken for Sunday dinner, and my grandmother longing for access to a garden plot when segregated and crowded conditions meant that there was no room for one.

In the summertime, snapping beans, picking greens, and shucking corn for canning were normal Saturday chores in my hometown of South Bend, Indiana. They were expected and inevitable. The golden age of processed food—the 1970s—was in full swing, so teaching children about homegrown food wasn't exactly in vogue. My mother learned how to can fruits and vegetables

from *her* mother. In turn, she instructed us.

How could we possibly understand the lessons she taught us? For us children, learning how to prepare and cook vegetables meant missing out on Saturday cartoons. Our mother was giving us the gifts of self-sufficiency and marketable skills, yet we didn't even realize it. What child would? We were expected to do as we were told, so we did what children do: made the drudgery of prepping the vegetables into games. Who can snap the most beans or shuck the most ears of corn?

Eventually, the monotony of the work was broken when I observed the practiced hands of my mother. Seeing her prepare home cooked feasts was magical. Even though I was too young to know it, I was establishing a connection with my food and a connection to the generations of women before me who, whether through necessity, servitude, or gratitude, also had to learn how to preserve their food.

What nourishes your body when you're younger nourishes your spirit when you're older: the smell of fresh beans and the crispness of their snap; the accomplishment of baking your first sweet potato pie; the sense of legacy you're entrusted with when you're learning family recipes. The renewal of community brought about by a family dinner. I learned patience, planning, active listening, collaboration, and even how to manage disappointment from the many simple acts required to plan and execute a meal.

There is a comfort and connection in the food of my grandparents that I've only come to recently appreciate as an adult. I've come to realize that you never really leave the Magnolia State, but simply take her spirit with you wherever you land.

A Chicagoan by choice but Hoosier by birth, Lyletta Robinson has had words and opinions in ChicagoNow*, the* Chicago Sun-Times*, and the* Listen to Your Mother *reading series.*