

Voices in the Mirror: An Autobiography

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The famed photographer, film director, writer, and composer recounts the dramatic story of his life, from his poor Kansas origins, through his breaking of racial barriers, to his triumph in America and abroad

GORDON PARKS is the author of numerous books of poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and photography, including *The Learning Tree* and *A Choice of Weapons*. He is the recipient of a plethora of honorary degrees and awards, including the National Medal of Art. He is also a film director and composer, and wrote the music and libretto for *Martin*, a ballet honoring Martin Luther King, Jr. One

I was born in the small town of Fort Scott, Kansas. Clumped in the vastness of the prairie, it was proud of its posture as part of a free state, while clinging grimly to the ways of the Deep South. Blacks and whites moved about in deceiving air, seeming to avoid any sort of relationship that might somehow damage their pride. And as they lived, so were they consumed, one race by despair, the other by intolerance. It was a place with an inner music of its own; a tormenting music that provoked our black souls. The grade school was segregated but the high school wasn't--mainly because the town fathers couldn't scrounge up enough money to build a separate one. But even inside those walls of meager learning, black students had to accommodate themselves to the taste of salt. We were not allowed to participate in sports or attend social functions. The class advisers warned us against seeking higher education, adding, "You were meant to be maids and porters." College for us, they said, would be a waste of time and money.

Both the Empress and the Liberty theaters spoke silently, with small signs for blacks pointing toward the "buzzard's roost." From there only could we watch Hoot Gibson and William S. Hart chase Indians across the silent movie screens. White eating places warned us not to poke our heads through their doors or there would be trouble, and we were not allowed to drink a soda in either of the two drugstores. Even the graveyards shunted black burials to unkempt outer fields. Law was white, and issued death to blacks with the flick of a thumb. The executioner was a tobacco-chewing sheriff named Kirby. Humiliated or enraged, most blacks had to take in whatever spirit the white town fathers gave, and that spirit usually kept them in darkness. But there were other blacks with outsized courage, who showed that death was nothing to fear. They too were gun-minded, and as mean as Kirby was, he wasn't stupid. When the opposition became too fierce his old Harley Davidson churned up dust.

In retrospect, I consider myself lucky to be alive--especially when I remember that four of my close friends died of senseless brutality before they were twenty-one. I also consider myself lucky that I didn't kill someone. There was always the opportunity to do so--out of self-defense or uncontrollable anger, and not because of any wrongdoing of my own.

Reflecting now, I realize that, even within the limits of my childhood vision, I was on a search for pride, meanwhile taking measurable glimpses of how certain blacks, who were fed up with racism, rebelled against it.

In 1921, when I was nine, the Tulsa, Oklahoma, race riot took place. Whites invaded the black neighborhood, which turned out to be an armed camp. Many white Tulsans were killed and rumors swept through our community that the fury would spread into the state of Kansas

and beyond. At this time Martin, a cousin of mine, decided he would go south to work for a mill that had offered him a job. My mother, knowing his temperament, pleaded with him not to go, but he caught a freight train headed south. Months passed and we had no word of him. Then one day his name flashed across the nation as one of the most wanted men in the country. He had killed a white mill hand who had called him a "dirty nigger" and spat in his face. He had killed another while fleeing the scene.

He came one night. I remember it was raining and I lay in the darkness of my room listening to pounding on the roof. Suddenly the window next to my bed slid up and Martin, soaking wet and cautious, scrambled through the opening. I started to yell as he landed on my bed, but he quickly covered my mouth with his hand and whispered his name, frightening me into silence. He went straight to my mother's room and shook her awake. She prayed over him and then tried to persuade him to surrender. He refused. He went to our old icebox, filled a paper sack with food and went out the same way he had entered. Two weeks later, trapped by lawmen on the viaduct between Kansas City, Kansas, and Missouri, he shot one and escaped again.

None of us ever saw or heard of him after that. But I had sleepless nights wondering if he would be caught and also killed. And I said a prayer for him each night--remembering the huge slabs of peanut brittle he used to bring me, and the thrilling rides he used to give me on the back of his old motorcycle. I loved Martin like a brother. He was a gentle kind person until he was abused or wronged in some way, then he was all fury. Many years later when we were both in Kansas City, his brother Claude pointed at a beaten junkie lying on the sidewalk on Paseo Boulevard. "That's Martin," he said, shaking his head.

"Martin?" I asked in astonishment.

"Yep--my brother and your cousin, but he wouldn't know either one of us. He's in another world. I spoke to him one day, told him who I was and tried to shake his hand. 'I never laid eyes on you, man,' he said, and walked away."

Two words, "dirty nigger," and spit in the face had turned Martin Brown into a rageful murderer. To call what he did an act of rebellion is to beg the question. Those two nasty words cost three men their lives and another his soul. Unless you are black like me and millions of others who have been called "nigger" "darky" "shine" and other names that arouse anger and humiliation, I have no understanding to ask of you. When I was a child the indignities came so often that I began to accept them as normal. I too fought back, but not as viciously as Martin.

I was only twelve when another cousin of mine, Princetta Maxwell, a fair girl with light red hair, came from Kansas City to spend the summer at our house. One day she and I ran, hand in hand, toward the white section of town to meet my mother, who worked there as a domestic. Suddenly three white boys blocked our path. I gripped my cousin's hand and we tried going around them, but they spread out before us.

"Where you going with that nigger, blondie?" one snarled to my cousin.

We stopped. The youngest one eased behind me and dropped to his hands and knees, and the other two shoved me backward. Pain shot through my head as it bumped against the sidewalk, and I could hear Princetta screaming as she ran back toward home for help. I caught spit in my face, and a kick in the neck. I jumped up and started swinging, only to be beaten down again. Then came a kick in the mouth. Grabbing a foot, I upended its owner, scrambled up and started swinging again. Then suddenly there was help--from another white boy. Waldo Wade was in there swinging his fists alongside mine. The three cowards, outnumbered by the lesser count of two, turned tail and ran.

Waldo's left eye began puffing up as we walked along nursing our bruises. "How'd it all start?" he finally asked.

"They thought Princetta was white."

"Idiots," he answered. "Hell, I know'd she was a nigger all the time." Waldo and I had trapped and fished together all our lives, but only through the delicacy of the situation did I resist busting him in his jaw.

Because of similar incidents Princetta had to leave before her vacation was over. She was never to come back and visit us again. As her train pulled out, I asked my mother why whites hated us so much. She was silent for a few moments, trying, I'm sure, to find an answer that would last me for a lifetime. Finally she said, "All whites don't hate you, son. And those that do are in such bad trouble with themselves they need pitying. They're not worth worrying about."

That fight was sort of a turning point. Slowly the frustration was boiling into anger, pushing me to the edge of violence, creating one emotional crisis after another. Why, I was beginning to wonder, had God made some people black and others white? One terrible night I dreamed that I was white, but my skin seemed flabby and loose, so I kept trying to pull it into shape--trying to make it fit. Finally I awoke, frantically clutching my long underwear. Shaking my head at such a crazy dream, I looked closely at my underwear. Well, the damn things were white. Nobody sold black underwear. At least not for boys.

Where could I begin to build pride? In church, God and the saints and angels were always white. In school the textbooks always showed my ancestors picking cotton, dancing jigs or strumming banjos. Africans were always depicted as savages. My history books never mentioned heroic blacks like Hiram Revels, Peter Salem, Benjamin Banneker or Harriet Tubman. Much later I read about Russia's great poet Alexander Pushkin and France's revered novelist Alexandre Dumas, but not until years later did anyone tell me that they were men with black blood.

So in a black and white world anything whiter than I became my enemy. At fourteen I began to strike out--suddenly, quickly and at times without reason. One day, in a fit of temper, I struck my twenty-two-year-old invalid brother (he was a couple of shades lighter than I). Immediately ashamed, I attempted to apologize. Understanding my frustration, he smiled and waved me aside, and I ran from the room humbled and with tears welling. It hurt

many times worse when I was told by my sister Gladys that he was incurably ill. Just before he died the following winter he called me to his bedside. "Pedro," he said, using his nickname for me, "for the life of me I don't know why you're so mad at the world. You can't whip it the way you're going about it. It's too big. If you're going to fight it, fight with your brain. It's got a lot more power than your fists."

I remembered those words as I stood watching his coffin lowered into the grave. One day the truth of them would filter through the daily anguish of racism. But that day, still a long way off and smiling coldly, stood waiting. During those times, whites of Kansas acted as though they stood at the center of the universe; behaved as though we Negroes were just galaxies of negligible black flesh, swirling in and out of their orbit to serve them. It would have been impossible for them to understand what our lives were like; nor did they care.

But within our family at home life had many pleasures.

My mother, Sarah Parks, saw to it that her children ate regularly, and my father, Jackson Parks, worked the field around our small clapboard house to make that possible. He grew corn, beets, turnips, potatoes, collard greens and tomatoes. A few ducks and chickens supplied eggs, and my father always managed to have a hog to slaughter for the smokehouse, which was small and crude but served the purpose. Alongside that was a pathetic grape arbor that kept my belly feeling sweet. When my father was lucky enough to catch a big turtle, there was enough soup for a week. Mulberry, peach, persimmon and apple trees were in range for looting, and Mr. Wade's watermelon patch suffered a loss now and then. An outdoor water hydrant, which had to be thawed out during the winter, was a block away. Wooden barrels caught rainwater for washing clothes and bathing, and I remember it as being silvery and soft. I had chores befitting the youngest of the family. Those I hated most deserved my ire--getting up to fire three potbellied stoves, then emptying the slop jars in the outhouse that leaned toward the alley behind the cornfield.

There were a living room, dining room, two bedrooms and a kitchen. The beds were homemade and huge. They had to be. The girls slept in one, the boys in another--all sweet memories of small hardships to be endured by a family crammed together with love and kindness. Not once, during those years did I hear my mother or father raise a voice against one another nor, for that matter, against their children. Discipline and respect for one's elders took care of that. None of my brothers or sisters ever smoked cigarettes during their lifetimes. The boys smoked pipes after they were grown, but never in the presence of my parents. That privilege was left to my father.

Easter and Christmas provided the joyous times. I hunted for Easter eggs in the bushes and beneath the big oaks, then, scrubbed to a rawness, I dressed in my finest--which wasn't so fine--and hurried off to Sunday school. Christmas brought added beneficence. There was always the tree my father cut, to decorate; and presents to discover beneath it on Christmas morning--a small bag of marbles, perhaps a new stocking cap, rib stockings and a sack of peanut brittle. The present I treasured most was a BB gun my father and mother saved up for six months to buy. But it came with a warning: I was never to shoot at birds or animals. It was meant strictly for the red and white circular target that came with

it--or perhaps, for a skunk. But my ultimate joy was banging on our battered upright Kimball piano, which I had learned to play, by ear, at the age of six.

I will always consider my parents to be my just heroes. My fourteen siblings would, I am sure, have agreed with me. They made life more tolerable for all of us with their compassion and generosity. Yet neither of them would have thought what they did to earn our infinite respect was in any way extraordinary. Sarah Parks would have defied God Himself if what He willed her to do would harm another human being. She would have exonerated her disobedience by concluding that God had, for an instant, lost sight of His own teachings. Certainly, the devil found her a terrible enemy. Neither would she allow racism to drag her reasoning into the throes of its darkness. Without considering the consequences, she once took a homeless white child into our house to feed and clothe until a distant relative came to his rescue. That our black friends and neighbors disapproved of her actions made no difference. The boy was hungry, needed clothes and a roof over his head. A good number of whites, feeling guilt for not having done something for the child, had ungrateful things to say as well, but she gave them the same short shrift she had given the blacks. The sick or disabled, no matter what their color, found her at their bedside. And although we were dimly poor, she always scraped up a basket of food to take along. She was a thrifty woman as well. One of my brothers sent me an old bank book of my mother's that he had kept for many years. Between 1912 and 1925 she had managed to save ten dollars and eighty-two cents. I looked at it in the abundant light flowing through the windows of my apartment and for several moments I stood speechless. How, I wondered, had she managed all that bountiful food for our table, those sizzling pans of baked beans, sweet potatoes, apple pies and cobblers.

Other Books

Literature Lover's Book of Lists.

❓ ❓ ❓ ❓ ❓ . Items marked with an asterisk (*) are from the Pantheon Fairy Tale and Folklore Library , an outstanding series Mythology of the British Isles - Geoffrey Ashe The Norse Myths - Kevin Crossley - Holland * Norwegian Folk Tales ..."