

THE SECRET

MY FATHER, JAMES WITHERSPOON, is a bigamist. He was already married ten years when he first clamped eyes on my mother. In 1968, she was working at the gift-wrap counter at Davison's downtown when my father asked her to wrap the carving knife he had bought his wife for their wedding anniversary. Mother said she knew that something wasn't right between a man and a woman when the gift was a blade. I said that maybe it means there was a kind of trust between them. I love my mother, but we tend to see things a little bit differently. The point is that James's marriage was never hidden from us. James is what I call him. His other daughter, Chaurisse, the one who grew up in the house with him, she calls him Daddy, even now.

When most people think of bigamy, if they think of it at all, they imagine some primitive practice taking place on the pages of *National Geographic*. In Atlanta, we remember one sect of the back-to-Africa movement that used to run bakeries in the West End. Some people said it was a cult, others called

it a cultural movement. Whatever it was, it involved four wives for each husband. The bakeries have since closed down, but sometimes we still see the women, resplendent in white, trailing six humble paces behind their mutual husband. Even in Baptist churches, ushers keep smelling salts on the ready for the new widow confronted at the wake by the other grieving widow and *her* stair-step kids. Undertakers and judges know that it happens all the time, and not just between religious fanatics, traveling salesmen, handsome sociopaths, and desperate women.

It's a shame that there isn't a true name for a woman like my mother, Gwendolyn. My father, James, is a bigamist. That is what he is. Laverne is his wife. She found him first and my mother has always respected the other woman's squatter's rights. But was my mother his wife, too? She has legal documents and even a single Polaroid proving that she stood with James Alexander Witherspoon Junior in front of a judge just over the state line in Alabama. However, to call her only his "wife" doesn't really explain the full complexity of her position.

There are other terms, I know, and when she is tipsy, angry, or sad, Mother uses them to describe herself: *concubine*, *whore*, *mistress*, *consort*. There are just so many, and none are fair. And there are nasty words, too, for a person like me, the child of a person like her, but these words were not allowed in the air of our home. "You are his daughter. End of story." If this was ever true it was in the first four months of my life, before Chaurisse, his legitimate daughter, was born. My mother would curse at hearing me use that word, *legitimate*, but if she could hear the other word that formed in my head, she would close herself in her bedroom and cry. In my mind, Chaurisse is his *real*

daughter. With wives, it only matters who gets there first. With daughters, the situation is a bit more complicated.

IT MATTERS WHAT you called things. *Surveil* was my mother's word. If he knew, James would probably say *spy*, but that is too sinister. We didn't do damage to anyone but ourselves as we trailed Chaurisse and Laverne while they wound their way through their easy lives. I had always imagined that we would eventually be asked to explain ourselves, to press words forward in our own defense. On that day, my mother would be called upon to do the talking. She is gifted with language and is able to layer difficult details in such a way that the result is smooth as water. She is a magician who can make the whole world feel like a dizzy illusion. The truth is a coin she pulls from behind your ear.

Maybe mine was not a blissful girlhood. But is anyone's? Even people whose parents are happily married to each other and no one else, even these people have their share of unhappiness. They spend plenty of time nursing old slights, rehashing squabbles. So you see, I have something in common with the whole world.

Mother didn't ruin my childhood or anyone's marriage. She is a good person. She prepared me. Life, you see, is all about knowing things. That is why my mother and I shouldn't be pitied. Yes, we have suffered, but we never doubted that we enjoyed at least one peculiar advantage when it came to what really mattered: I knew about Chaurisse; she didn't know about me. My mother knew about Laverne, but Laverne was under the impression that hers was an ordinary life. We never lost track of that basic and fundamental fact.

WHEN DID I first discover that although I was an only child, my father was not *my* father and mine alone? I really can't say. It's something that I've known for as long as I've known that I had a father. I can only say for sure when I learned that this type of double-duty daddy wasn't ordinary.

I was about five years old, in kindergarten, when the art teacher, Miss Russell, asked us to draw pictures of our families. While all the other children scribbled with their crayons or soft-leaded pencils, I used a blue-ink pen and drew James, Chaurisse, and Laverne. In the background was Raleigh, my father's best friend, the only person we knew from his other life. I drew him with the crayon labeled "Flesh" because he is really light-skinned. This was years and years ago, but I still remember. I hung a necklace around the wife's neck. I gave the girl a big smile, stuffed with square teeth. Near the left margin, I drew my mother and me standing by ourselves. With a marker, I blacked in Mother's long hair and curving lashes. On my own face, I drew only a pair of wide eyes. Above, a friendly sun winked at all six of us.

The art teacher approached me from behind. "Now, who are these people you've drawn so beautifully?"

Charmed, I smiled up at her. "My family. My daddy has two wives and two girls."

Cocking her head, she said, "I see."

I didn't think much more about it. I was still enjoying the memory of the way she pronounced *beautifully*. To this day, when I hear anyone say that word, I feel loved. At the end of the month, I brought all of my drawings home in a cardboard folder. James opened up his wallet, which he kept plump with

two-dollar bills to reward me for my schoolwork. I saved the portrait, my masterpiece, for last, being as it was so beautifully drawn and everything.

My father picked the page up from the table and held it close to his face like he was looking for a coded message. Mother stood behind me, crossed her arms over my chest, and bent to place a kiss on the top of my head. "It's okay," she said.

"Did you tell your teacher who was in the picture?" James said.

I nodded slowly, the whole time thinking that I probably should lie, although I wasn't quite sure why.

"James," Mother said, "let's not make a molehill into a mountain. She's just a child."

"Gwen," he said, "this is important. Don't look so scared. I'm not going to take her out behind the woodshed." Then he chuckled, but my mother didn't laugh.

"All she did was draw a picture. Kids draw pictures."

"Go on in the kitchen, Gwen," James said. "Let me talk to my daughter."

My mother said, "Why can't I stay in here? She's my daughter, too."

"You are with her all the time. You tell me I don't spend enough time talking to her. So now let me talk."

Mother hesitated and then released me. "She's just a little kid, James. She doesn't even know the ins and outs yet."

"Trust me," James said.

She left the room, but I don't know that she trusted him not to say something that would leave me wounded and broken-winged for life. I could see it in her face. When she was upset

she moved her jaw around invisible gum. At night, I could hear her in her room, grinding her teeth in her sleep. The sound was like gravel under car wheels.

“Dana, come here.” James was wearing a navy chauffeur’s uniform. His hat must have been in the car, but I could see the ridged mark across his forehead where the hatband usually rested. “Come closer,” he said.

I hesitated, looking to the space in the doorway where Mother had disappeared.

“Dana,” he said, “you’re not afraid of me, are you? You’re not scared of your own father, are you?”

His voice sounded mournful, but I took it as a dare. “No, sir,” I said, taking a bold step forward.

“Don’t call me sir, Dana. I’m not your boss. When you say that, it makes me feel like an overseer.”

I shrugged. Mother told me that I should always call him sir. With a sudden motion, he reached out for me and lifted me up on his lap. He spoke to me with both of our faces looking outward, so I couldn’t see his expression.

“Dana, I can’t have you making drawings like the one you made for your art class. I can’t have you doing things like that. What goes on in this house between your mother and me is grown people’s business. I love you. You are my baby girl, and I love you, and I love your mama. But what we do in this house has to be a secret, okay?”

“I didn’t even draw this house.”

James sighed and bounced me on his lap a little bit. “What happens in my life, in my world, doesn’t have anything to do with you. You can’t tell your teacher that your daddy has

another wife. You can't tell your teacher that my name is James Witherspoon. Atlanta ain't nothing but a country town, and everyone knows everybody."

"Your other wife and your other girl is a secret?" I asked him.

He put me down from his lap, so we could look each other in the face. "No. You've got it the wrong way around. Dana, you are the one that's a secret."

Then he patted me on the head and tugged one of my braids. With a wink he pulled out his billfold and separated three two-dollar bills from the stack. He handed them over to me and I clamped them in my palm.

"Aren't you going to put them in your pocket?"

"Yes, sir."

And for once, he didn't tell me not to call him that.

James took me by the hand and we walked down the hallway to the kitchen for dinner. I closed my eyes on the short walk because I didn't like the wallpaper in the hallway. It was beige with a burgundy pattern. When it had started peeling at the edges, I was accused of picking at the seams. I denied it over and over again, but Mother reported me to James on his weekly visit. He took off his belt and swatted me around the legs and up on my backside, which seemed to satisfy something in my mother.

In the kitchen my mother placed the bowls and plates on the glass table in silence. She wore her favorite apron that James brought back from New Orleans. On the front was a drawing of a crawfish holding a spatula aloft and a caption: DON'T MAKE ME POISON YOUR FOOD! James took his place at the head

of the table and polished the water spots from his fork with his napkin. "I didn't lay a hand on her; I didn't even raise my voice. Did I?"

"No, sir." And this was entirely the truth, but I felt different than I had just a few minutes before when I'd pulled my drawing out of its sleeve. My skin stayed the same while this difference snuck in through a pore and attached itself to whatever brittle part forms my center. *You are the secret.* He'd said it with a smile, touching the tip of my nose with the pad of his finger.

My mother came around and picked me up under my arms and sat me on the stack of phone books in my chair. She kissed my cheek and fixed a plate with salmon croquettes, a spoon of green beans, and corn.

"Are you okay?"

I nodded.

James ate his meal, spooning honey onto a dinner roll when my mother said there would be no dessert. He drank a big glass of Coke.

"Don't eat too much," my mother said. "You'll have to eat again in a little while."

"I'm always happy to eat your food, Gwen. I'm always happy to sit at your table."



I don't know how I decided that my missing teeth were the problem, but I devised a plan to slide a folded piece of paper behind my top teeth to camouflage the pink space in the center of my smile. I was inspired by James, actually, who once told me

how he put cardboard in his shoes when he was little to make up for the holes in the soles. The paper was soggy and the blue lines ran with my saliva.

Mother caught me in the middle of this process. She walked into my room and lay across my twin bed with its purple checked spread. She liked to do this, just lie across my bed while I played with my toys or colored in my notebooks, watching me like I was a television show. She always smelled good, like flowery perfume, and sometimes like my father's cigarettes.

"What are you doing, Petunia?"

"Don't call me Petunia," I said, partially because I didn't like the name and partially because I wanted to see if I could talk with the paper in my mouth. "Petunia is the name of a pig."

"Petunia is a flower," my mother said. "A pretty one."

"It's Porky Pig's girlfriend."

"That's meant to be a joke, a pretty name for a pig, you see?"

"A joke is supposed to be funny."

"It is funny. You are just in a bad mood. What're you doing with the paper?"

"I'm trying to put my teeth back," I said, while trying to rearrange the sodden wad.

"How come?"

This seemed obvious as I took in my own reflection along with my mother's in the narrow mirror attached to the top of my chest of drawers. Of course James wanted to keep me a secret. Who would love a girl with a gaping pink hole in the middle of her mouth? None of the other children in my kindergarten reading circle looked like I did. Surely my mother could understand this. She spent half an hour each night squinting at

her skin before a magnifying mirror, applying swipes of heavy creams from Mary Kay. When I asked her what she was doing, she said, "I am improving my appearance. Wives can afford to let themselves go. Concubines must be vigilant."

Recalling it now, I know that she must have been drinking. Although I can't remember the moment so well, I know that just outside the frame was her glass of Asti Spumante, golden and busy with bubbles.

"I am improving my appearance." I hoped she would smile.

"Your appearance is perfect, Dana. You're five; you have beautiful skin, shiny eyes, and pretty hair."

"But no teeth," I said.

"You're a little girl. You don't need teeth."

"Yes, I do," I said quietly. "Yes, I do."

"Why? To eat corn on the cob? Your teeth will grow back. There is lots of corn in your future, I promise."

"I want to be like that other girl," I said finally.

Mother had been lying across my bed, like a goddess on a chaise lounge, but when I said that she snapped up. "What other girl?"

"James's other girl."

"You can say her name," Mother said.

I shook my head. "Can't."

"Yes, you can. Just say it. Her name is Chaurisse."

"Stop it," I said, afraid that just saying my sister's name would unleash some terrible magic the way that saying "Bloody Mary" while staring into a pan of water would turn the liquid red and thick.

Mother rose from the bed and got down on her knees so we were the same height. As she pressed her hands down on my shoulders, traces of cigarette smoke lingered in her tumbly hair. I reached out for it.

“Her name is Chaurisse,” my mother said again. “She’s a little girl, just like you are.”

“Please stop saying it,” I begged her. “Stop it before something happens.”

My mother hugged me to her chest. “What did your daddy say to you the other day? Tell me what he said.”

“Nothing,” I whispered.

“Dana, you can’t lie to me, okay? I tell you everything and you tell me everything. That’s the only way we can pull this off, baby. We have to keep the information moving between us.” She shook me a little bit. Not enough to scare me, just enough to get my attention.

“He said I was a secret.”

My mother pulled me into a close hug, crisscrossing her arms across my back and letting her hair hang around me like a magic curtain. I will never forget the smell of her hugs.

“That motherfucker,” she said. “I love him, but I might have to kill him one day.”

The next morning, my mother told me to put on the green and yellow dress that I’d worn for my school picture six weeks earlier, before the teeth were lost. She styled my long hair with slippery ribbons and strapped my feet into stiff shiny shoes. Then we climbed into my godmother’s old Buick, on loan for the day.

“Where are we going?”

Mother turned off Gordon Road. “I am taking you to see something.”

I waited for more information, poking my tongue into the slick space where my nice teeth had once been. She didn’t say anything else about our destination, but she asked me to recite my *-at* words.

“H-a-t is *hat*; b-a-t is *bat*.” I didn’t stop until I got to “M-a-t is *mat*.” By then, we’d pulled up in front of a small pink school building trimmed with green. Down the road was John A. White Park. We sat in the car a long time while I performed for her. I was glad to do it. I recited my numbers from one to one hundred and then I sang “Frère Jacques.”

When a group of children spilled out into the yard of the small school, my mother held up a finger to stop my singing. “Roll down your window and look out,” she said. “You see that chubby little girl in the blue jeans and red shirt? That’s Chaurisse.”

I found the girl my mother described standing in line with a group of other little kids. Chaurisse was utterly ordinary back then. Her hair was divided into two short puffs in the front and the shorter hair in the back was held down in a series of tight braids. “Look at her,” my mother said. “She hardly has any hair. She is going to be fat when she grows up, just like her mammy. She doesn’t know her *-at* words, and she can’t sing a song in French.”

I said, “She has her teeth.”

“For now. She’s your same age, so they are probably loose. But here’s something you can’t see. She was born too early so

she has problems. The doctor had to stick plastic tubes down her ears to keep them from getting infected.”

“But James loves her. She’s not a secret.”

“James has an obligation to her mammy and that’s my problem, not yours. Okay? James loves you equal to Chaurisse. If he had any sense, he’d love you best. You’re smarter, more man-nerable, and you’ve got better hair. But what you have is equal love, and that is good enough.”

I nodded as relief spread all over my body. I felt all my muscles relax. Even my feet let go and settled themselves limp in my pretty shoes.

“Am I a secret?” I asked my mother.

“No,” she said. “You are an unknown. That little girl there doesn’t even know she has a sister. You know everything.”

“God knows everything,” I said. “He’s got the whole world in his hands.”

“That’s true,” my mother said. “And so do we.”