

WANDERING IN  
STRANGE LANDS

A DAUGHTER OF THE GREAT  
MIGRATION RECLAIMS HER ROOTS

MORGAN JERKINS

AUTHOR OF THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER  
*THIS WILL BE MY UNDOING*



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I N S T R A N G E  
L A N D S

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## Prologue

### *The Milkman's Baby*

I WAS SEVEN years old when I learned that I wasn't my father's only daughter. He pulled me to his side and said he had something to show me. I assumed that it was a gift. He would regularly visit me at my mother's home, bringing niceties along with his charisma and swagger. Instead, he pulled out his wallet and showed me photos of three girls before saying, "These are your sisters." The oldest was eleven years my senior, the middle child was eight years my senior, and the last was just fifteen months my senior. I don't remember saying anything in response. I didn't have the words to express what I felt. Later, I learned that my father not only had three other daughters, but a wife and a dog, as well. They were, from all appearances, the picture-perfect family. I felt like an outsider among my blood, a feeling that would stay with me until I was an adult.

My original birth certificate indicates that my story is half missing. I was born Morgan Simone Regis Jerkins; the Simone and Regis were officially my middle names. My mother's name is Sybil Yvonne Jerkins, but there was a blank spot where my father's name should've been. My parents weren't married. In fact, when I was conceived, their relationship had already run its course. The details as to what happened are debatable, but nevertheless there was an omission. On paper, half of my lineage is unknown, although I've known my father my entire life. When I came into this world, almost a month early, my dad took one look at me and jokingly said, "That's the milkman's baby," because I was so light. I was the lightest person in my church congregation and people would often make jokes about my skin to my mother. They'd assume that my father was white because I burned in the sun, or they'd say whatever melanin I had would be lost in the winter. I took all the jokes in stride because I knew that I was loved nevertheless. But on the

inside, I was in immense pain because I knew that in many ways my maternal and paternal families were different with regards to their own histories.

My father was born and raised in Fayetteville, North Carolina, and migrated to the North to start his own medical business. Almost forty years and thirty offices later, he's one of the most prominent doctors in South Jersey. The resemblance between my father and me allows for locals to be able to connect the dots. There were moments in Macy's or at a doctor's office when someone would regard my face and know that I was my father's daughter. The connection would momentarily reaffirm my existence, but that feeling wouldn't last very long. I was more commonly known as Morgan Jerkins in schools and among friends. It was easier to be known this way because I was already living primarily with my mother. Throughout most of my childhood, I felt more like a Jerkins because my dad and his family were an enigma to me.

For one thing, my father's name, Jon, is spelled like a Frenchman's. His surname, Regis, is French as well. Unlike all the Baptists and Pentecostals I grew up with, he was raised Catholic. And most significant, he carried with him a kind of Southern respectability that, from my point of view, was very distinctive. My father was a first-generation migrant, while my mother was second-generation, and this difference was crucial. He was rooted, and she was flighty, never staying in one place for too long. Forgetfulness even of her family's past was not necessarily a bad thing for my mother. But for my dad, the past was everything. My father frequently travels to a home in North Carolina that's been in his family for over sixty years. When he speaks of Fayetteville, he tips his nose to the sky and grins. Although my father has been in the North since the early eighties, he knows there is nothing like that soil "down there," and that attachment to the land is something black Northerners, including my mother, just do not have.

There's been a certain air about him for as long as I can remember. Whenever he walked into a room, he projected authority. And whenever I visited my father's home, my mother would devote painstaking effort to making sure that I looked the part. I had to wear jewelry as a sign of sophistication, my clothes had to be ironed, and my posture had to be straight; I had to show that I was just as well adjusted as my three sisters, whom I envied tremendously. They visited my father's family more often than I did, and they'd met my paternal grandfather and had more memories of my paternal grandmother than I will ever have. When I first visited my

father's family in the South, people would incorrectly guess whose daughter I was, or they'd plainly state that they didn't know who I was. My father's family was always still mindful of the South, whereas my mother's family seemed to have always been in southern New Jersey.

Only recently have I learned where my maternal grandparents were born. They once lived in Atlantic City and eventually moved to a quieter and whiter suburb in Atlantic County to give my mother and her three siblings a better life. But no home has been in our family name for longer than twenty-three years. My mother moved more than ten times in the earlier part of her life. These vicissitudes might signal an erratic nature to an outside observer, but my family was simply conditioned to believe that movement meant advancement. Every home had to be better than the last. Being too grounded might lead to stagnation. We weren't rooted like my father's family. The Regises' oral histories were abundant, whereas those of the Jerkinses were vaguer and incomplete.

Much of my conversation with my mother's side of the family is characterized by whispers and silences. My maternal grandfather would place a fake mouse outside the door of his children's bedroom whenever grown folks were about to talk, so that my mother and aunt would not eavesdrop. My mother was never that severe in her approach, but I knew that I might be scolded if I stepped outside of my bedroom when adults were conversing. This was one way in which knowledge of who I am and where I came from was kept from me. Even when I was given the space to speak with an adult, like my mother, the conversations were full of dead ends. As a child, if I ever inquired about why we sang a particular song at a family dinner or why we held certain superstitions, I was never satisfied with the answer. "That's just what we do" or "That's just what black people do" was never good enough for me. As an adult, I've realized that my family simply didn't know how to draw connections with how they think, act, and navigate their lives in a way that forges a community of relatives. They might've been satisfied in the unknown, but I wasn't.

No one spoke about the past—the goal was to move forward and never look back. Neither my mother nor I has taken a trip to the South to visit family. We don't talk about the soil like my father and his people. We can talk about the make and model of cars with more accuracy than about the flora and fauna of our homeland. While my father prides himself on origins, my mother prides herself on originality. She believes that you can create your

own identity as long as you keep moving.

I moved to New York in 2015 as a way to not get stuck, forging an identity as an author and editor in the hub of the publishing world. When people would ask me where I was from, my throat would dry up. “New Jersey,” I’d reply. If pressed, I’d specify, “southern New Jersey.” And if their curiosity hadn’t cooled by then, I’d say “Atlantic City”—the most famous locale in the state’s southern region. This response would leave me feeling ashamed for two reasons: (1) southern New Jersey doesn’t seem so fashionable, and (2) I knew that wasn’t the full story. I knew that my Jerkins line had to be as storied as my father’s, but I didn’t know those stories. How did both families arrive in the same county? How did this Southern man and this Northern woman meet in a hospital, fall in love, and create me? I felt I was midway between two poles, constantly in flux as to who I was and where I came from. My body, like my lineage, was a mystery. Because I didn’t have a full narrative from either of my two families, I was not confident in my identity and culture. A sense of loss defined both components. My half-baked statements about my heritage stemmed from a particularly insular Northern upbringing.

Yet my story is not uncommon. From 1916 to 1970, six million African Americans made a grand exodus from the South to the Northeast, Midwest, and West Coast in search of a better life. This exodus is most commonly known as the Great Migration. Some had families waiting for them at the other end, while others just took a chance to start anew in a place where no one knew their names. Many families allowed their memories to evaporate along with the steam of the locomotives on which they arrived. Many didn’t want to talk about their traumatic experiences in the South. Folks like me are the result of these omissions. I’ve spoken to people whose families are generations deep in the North, to investigate this pestering suspicion that we are still intuitively linked to the South. Often, at the start of these conversations, I’d hear an apology. The people I spoke with didn’t know where their families migrated from, and if they did, they never visited. Or they knew where their families migrated from, but didn’t know why their ancestors left or if any family remained on ancestral land. Their grandparents and great-grandparents didn’t talk about the past, so they didn’t know how much help they would be to my project. I’d assure them that I knew what it was like to carry blank spaces and missing pieces. We held no confidence in our origins as African Americans. We resided at terminal points in history,

unable to look back.

According to historian and University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill professor W. Fitzhugh Brundage, “Much about the transmission of African American memory, for example, remains terra incognita. Historians have been silent about how deep structural changes in African American communities since the mid-twentieth century have affected the dissemination of African American memory.”<sup>1</sup> Much of the information lost during major internal migrations of African Americans has yet to be accounted for. Documentation takes precedence over oral history—a Eurocentric outlook that prioritizes the written word over our own voices. If we were to take my life as an example, documentation initially “proved” that half of my parentage was lost, even though I knew who my father was. I carried Regis as a middle name even while my father’s name was absent from my birth certificate. What of the countless families whose lives have been documented, yet whose realities offer an opposing narrative?

Because ruptures in cultural memory characterized much of my life and the lives of others in my community, I decided to consider these gaps an opportunity rather than an impasse. I was weary with my conception of self, of the diaspora, as one of loss. I was frustrated by how much had been lost from our arrival to the colonies during the transatlantic slave trade to the post-emancipation period, when we scattered across the country in massive waves. But the glimmering moment emerged when I wondered, if both of my families had been in this country for several generations, then could it be that a significant recovery of my family’s history could be made right here on this American landscape? The only way to find out was to make a journey in reverse and create symbolic bridges between those families who fled and those who remained on the lands of their people.

For this book, I traveled to the Georgia Lowcountry, to South Carolina, and to Louisiana to speak to some of the oldest microethnic groups of African Americans before traveling west of the Mississippi to further detail the effects of migration on memory and black identity in Oklahoma and California. I followed the migratory routes of yesteryear and discovered surprising similarities among African Americans of these particular regions regarding what they feel is at stake in their communities and who they are as a people. Each section is devoted to a particular region. In each chapter, I’ve included the scraps, rubble, and frayed threads of my personal history alongside those of descendants of migrants to illuminate how cultural

conditioning via religion and spirituality, connection with nature, or understanding of black identity has been altered through both systemic and personal forces. The undertaking has a dual purpose: to excavate the connective tissue that complicates but unites us as a people, and to piece together the story of how I came to be by going back and looking beyond myself—a liberating and healing pilgrimage.

Despite all the differences I encountered, I ultimately came away from my journey feeling that all is not lost. Much of our cultural history that has not been retained can be found in people you have yet to encounter and places where you have not yet traveled.

I know because I've met them, and they've been waiting to meet you, too.

## **Part I**

### *Lowcountry, Georgia, and South Carolina*

IF I WERE to travel through the migratory routes, like the Southeast to the North in reverse, I first had to nail down the purpose. I had the desire to reconnect with what I felt had been lost, once my families moved away from the South. But I shifted from asking myself, “What has been lost?” to rather, “What has not been fully explained but maintained whenever my family came together?” What were some of the traditions, anxieties, and sayings that were worth investigating? I had never been where my families came from in America, and arguably neither had my parents and their siblings, so these cultural aspects—albeit persistent—were full of gaps. I hoped that by returning to the South I could recover some of the reasons underlying why we black people do what we do that may have been lost or altered with the movement up North.

One of the most fascinating parts of my upbringing was how cautious my family could be about certain things. We stayed away from the water, and I knew that there had to be a deeper reason than that it would “damage” my hair. The contradictions tied to such cautions were intriguing. My elders despised rootwork and magic and yet believed they worked. Could there be a place where I could find people still connected to their ancestors enough to help me fill in the pieces as to how water and magic functioned in my ancestors’ lives?

I wanted to begin with my mother’s side, because her family’s story had fewer details than my father’s. Her father, my maternal grandfather, was born in Georgia, and that’s all I knew before I started planning my trip to the South. During the Great Migration, African Americans moved from all the states of the South but mainly from Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, and Georgia. Between 1910 and 1930, Georgia was the state with the largest emigration of black people—over 195,000.<sup>1</sup> Comparing 1950 and 1920, Georgia was the only state of the top five sendoff states aforementioned to

have a net decrease in its African American population—over 140,000.<sup>2</sup> There was also a geographical pattern to the migration. If your family was from Mississippi, chances are they wound up in Chicago. If your family was from Georgia, chances are your ancestors wound up in Philadelphia, as mine did at first.<sup>3</sup>

Georgia was where I wanted to begin my journey. I wanted to know about people who chose to stay connected to the land and all its abundance. I wanted to find out more about water, magic, and kinship networks before we distanced ourselves from our ancestral lands. But, before I could discover the unknown, I decided to start with what I did know—the only cultural component that did not change, from my experience, no matter which black home I visited in America: food. And it was through food that I was led not to all of Georgia but to a particular region, not to black people as a whole but to a specific ethnic group to which all African Americans are undoubtedly indebted.

When I sit down to eat with my family, I call the food we eat soul food, but that name in and of itself indicates movement. As Adrian E. Miller, author of *Soul Food: The Surprising Story of an American Cuisine*, puts it, “‘soul food’ . . . [is] . . . the food of that area [interior South] that has been transported across the United States by African-American migrants who left during the Great Migration. . . . As people left the South, they did what any other immigrant group does: They tried to re-create home.” The word *soul* began to mean “emotional fervor” in the 1940s when black jazz artists, disillusioned because their white counterparts were getting better-paying gigs, infused their music with black church styles from the rural South to make their music something the whites couldn’t imitate.<sup>4</sup> With the advent of the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s and ’70s, black Americans, especially those who were products of the Great Migration, pushed for more autonomy and group similarities through music, literature, and food. There was an outpouring of creativity. This period produced such literary luminaries as Audre Lorde and Nikki Giovanni and music greats like Marvin Gaye and Curtis Mayfield. As for food, the famed Sylvia’s Restaurant in Harlem and Roscoe’s House of Chicken and Waffles in Los Angeles were established in the 1960s and ’70s, respectively.

I’ve come across some black people who won’t touch any soul food unless the cook has been vetted by an old auntie or other well-respected relative. Potato salad, for example, is one of the biggest responsibilities for

many black barbecues, and it's an honor not to be taken lightly. Aside from potato salad, there are many other popular soul food dishes that one might see on a Sunday or holiday table, such as macaroni and cheese, collard greens, chitlins, yams, sweet potato pie, or peach cobbler. These dishes originated down South, and Northerners continued to prepare them after the Great Migration. I'd never learned how to properly cook any of these foods, because I didn't think it was that important. I thought that standing over a hot stove for hours to feed a whole family, then cleaning up afterward was directly opposed to my burgeoning feminist ideals. Because the women in my family coaxed me to cook and fix people's plates more than they did my male cousins, all I wanted to do was set the table or watch TV like the rest of the guys as an act of defiance. I had to humble myself once I moved farther north to Manhattan and was living on my own.

I had finally been living in an actual apartment by myself after three years of rooming with two men from 2015 to 2016 and then squeezing into a cramped studio from 2016 to 2018. New Year's Eve was approaching, and I had a full kitchen all to myself. I always eschewed the Sunday dinner tradition due to having no family and not many friends in Harlem, but there was one ritual that I wanted to perpetuate in my home as a kind of christening: New Year's Eve dinner.

Every New Year's Eve, I could feel the heat surging in my mother's house. We'd go to a watchnight service\* at church and return home. Hours later, I would be sequestered in my room upstairs, but the smell of something heavenly would slip through the cracks in the door. I closed my eyes and envisioned the boiling yams or the black-eyed peas marinating in a large, black Crock-Pot on the counter. The black-eyed peas require the most attention for this meal. They have to soak in a pot of water overnight. A quick hot-water rinse will not do. Then the peas are drained in a colander before being placed in the Crock-Pot with bacon or smoked turkey legs, where they would soften for hours.

Unlike girls in my mother's generation, I was not forced to stand in the kitchen beside the women and watch them cook so that I'd be able to feed a family someday. The kitchen was the biggest indication of the generational divide. While my mother cracked eggs, grated cheese, and peeled potatoes, I was upstairs filling out scholarship applications, studying for exams, writing. I wanted to prioritize academic and professional success rather than the culinary arts. Food would have to wait. Until I finally did achieve that