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Home

"Jada, Jada, Jada Jada Jing Jing Jing"

I WAS BORN AND RAISED in the house in the Bronx that my great-grandfather had built in the 1860s. For the early years of my life, my whole world was that house and the neighborhood around it.

One of the earliest memories I have is Uncle Oswald's return to that house from World War I. He was my mother's brother who had been in Europe with the 15th Regiment, an all-black regiment with a white colonel, a Colonel William Hayward. I remember standing on the first landing of the steps in front of the house with my brother and three boy cousins. I couldn't have been more than four or five. We were all preschoolers. We stood there with great anticipation all bundled up in winter clothes, each of us holding little American flags. The adults were all out there too. As I remember, the older relatives had stayed home all day looking after us and cooking. The middle-aged people and young adults went to the parade in Manhattan. They'd come home full of excitement. The soldiers had marched to the band of James Reese Europe of the black 369th. But everyone was home now. It was shortly after nightfall—I remember the street lamp was on—and there we were, all rowed up on the first landing of the stoop.

And when the car drove up, a big touring car with my uncle, his buddies (all officers) and Colonel Hayward, there was such excitement! I can remember the screeching and screaming and the hugging and the kissing and the just contagious family joy at the soldiers' returning. Most of our neighbors from

across the street—Italian, Polish and Irish—were there too. All the kids got thrown up in the air and bounced by all the soldiers. I can remember being thrown up in the air by Uncle Oswald and Colonel Hayward and the others. This was a *real* celebration. But it was the family part that was so impressive. That memory has remained a powerful one for me. My feeling about what a family is and how much a family can love each other comes from that memory. At times it's been a real source of strength.

Years later, when I was about to be shipped to Europe for the Red Cross during World War II, I told my parents—who were, of course, quite unhappy about my going into the war—I told them that they could look forward to welcoming me back. Somehow that didn't make them feel better. But I meant it. Uncle Oswald's return to us, the glorious joy of welcoming back a member of the fold, that scene is the foundation of what family means to me.

My feeling about those early years is that I was happy. I took for granted the security, stimulation, and joy of living in what is now called an "extended family." When I was very young, there were four generations in the house. There was my great-grandfather, Durock Turpin, who had built the house, and my great-grandmother, Anna Elizabeth Turpin; my grandmother Martha Jane Turpin and her husband, Peter DesVerney. There was Uncle Durock, the elder son of my great-grandparents; Big Aunt Jane, great-grandfather's sister; Little Aunt Jane, widow of great-grandfather's brother Henry; Mama's sister Gertrude and her husband Walter; Mama and Daddy; my brother Jack and I; and the three sons of Gertrude and Walter. That's a lot of people, isn't it? But the house was large, large enough for family members from outside New York to be always coming to visit and to be comfortably housed there. And large enough to be the family funeral home. Anytime *anyone* in the family died, the body would be shipped to that house and put on display in the front parlor, a room that could be shut off by a large sliding door set in a wide arch. As a child, it seemed to me there'd be a new body there every Friday. But great-grandfather was the patriarch. He ruled not only that household but the entire family. And he took responsibility for burying everybody.

He'd had that house built in 1869 when he married Anna Elizabeth Cochran. In their early years in that house, great-grandfather had a barber shop up in the Williamsbridge area. This was a largely black area north of our house, but his barbership was for whites. He'd travel back and forth with his own horse and buggy. Great-grandpa and Great-grandma had married in New

York but both had come separately from the same plantation in Goochland County, Virginia. He was the youngest of nine children of a white Virginia planter and an African woman this planter had bought in Baton Rouge and later married. Another one of their children, Henry, was one of the carpenters on the house. And a third was Big Aunt Jane, who was a widow and lived with us. Their white father's name was Edwin Durock Turpin. And, after buying my great-great-grandmother off of a slave ship in Baton Rouge, he renamed her "Mary." What I remember most is that my great-grandfather just adored his African-born mother.

Great-grandmother, Anna Elizabeth, was the daughter of a black American-born woman named Anna and an Indian named Running Cock who had bought Anna from this same planter. Isn't that something? Turpin owned slaves while he was married to an African woman. Anyway, the Indian freed Anna and married her. But she died in a fire when her two children—Anna Elizabeth and William—were still very young. The Indian father didn't feel he could raise a girl by himself, so he sent Anna Elizabeth back to the plantation to be raised by his deceased wife's mother, Aunt Nell, who was still the enslaved cook of Edwin Durock Turpin. (Running Cock kept William with him.) The little girl became a little worker, removing suckers from tobacco and doing chores in the house. Since she was free, however, wages were paid to her Indian father. I still have a doll and a cocoa set that belonged to her grandmother, the plantation's cook. That's how this little farmed-out girl, my great-grandmother, became the playmate of the planter's children, one of whom was my great-grandfather. So, you see, my great-grandparents had known one another since childhood, and it was when they married that great-grandfather went to the Fordham area of the Bronx to buy property to build a house on.

Great-grandfather loved to tell the story of how he chose that particular location. He had come up to Fordham and was surveying the area, looking at land on each side of the road. He saw a plot he liked and went over to the other side of the road to get a good look at it. A white man who had a house on the same side great-grandfather was standing on came up to him and said, "I understand you're going to buy land but you certainly don't want to buy across there." And Great-grandpa, who physically had taken after his white father (he was quite fair with cobalt blue eyes and blond hair), wanted to know why. The man said, "Because niggers live over there." So Great-grandpa just said, "Oh.

Is that so?" And proceeded to buy property right next to this disparager of black folks. Great-grandpa built his house there and lived in it with my great-grandmother, whose skin was brown and whom he lovingly called his "little black Betty." He really enjoyed what he had done and enjoyed talking about it, telling us this story with a great twinkle in those blue eyes. The house is still there, actually. It's on 187th Street between Washington Avenue and Park Avenue.

My grandmother Martha, my mother Maude, and I were all born in that house. Three generations. In fact, we were all born in the same room, the guest room, which was also the "birthing room." And my eldest daughter, Gretchen, almost made it. She was born in Fordham Hospital, but, two days later, she and I were back in that same room.

It was a three-story house with a cellar and another elevation called a "summer kitchen" between the cellar and the first floor. The house was set on two lots so there was lots of space around it—a big backyard and large side yards. The front of the house was right at the sidewalk. Altogether there were about fourteen rooms. On the first floor, there was the front and back parlor, a dining room, an alcove that was used as a kind of library, two bedrooms behind the back parlor, and another bedroom near the kitchen. Upstairs there were five bedrooms. But there was only one bathroom in the whole place. And, before my time, the house didn't even have that. Originally, it just had a wash-up place and a portable zinc tub. Later, the stationary tub was put in.

On the back of the house was a porch outside the first-floor bedrooms and a veranda above the porch. In the evenings before dark, the adults would sit on the veranda, facing the yard with its trees and flower beds. And we kids would usually join them. There was a specialness to those evenings. We'd choose a lap to sit on. There were plenty of wicker chairs out there but we preferred a cozy lap and loving arms around us. A record would be playing on the Victrola and, if it was too dull for our youthful taste, we'd asked for a jazzier tune, like "Jada, Jada, Jada Jada Jing Jing Jing." And one of us might slide down from a lap and do a dance on the tiled floor of the veranda. The grown-ups would always laugh and give us hearty applause—which would encourage another child to slide off a lap and dance or recite a "pome." Whatever we did, it would be warmly received. Then we'd fake sleepiness in order to get ourselves carried up to our bedrooms. And the game was that when you were put onto the bed, you'd open your eyes widely and giggle and be called "You

little rascal!" by the grown-up who'd been pretending to believe your fraud. Those evenings were special.

The porch underneath was where my grandmother had the table and chairs for the tramps who would come from the New York Central railroad tracks. The family never sat there; it was just for feeding these nomadic men who were called tramps and hoboes in those days.

Also, on this back porch was a long window box where herbs grew. One of the herbs was mint that would be pinched off for Great-grandfather's mint juleps. Part of his plantation legacy was an abiding faith that mint juleps in summer and lemony hot toddy in winter did wonders for the "system."

Underneath the back porch, near the entrance to the summer kitchen, I had my children's-sized furniture: a set of chairs and a table that folded up as a bridge table would. This area was all paved. One time, when I was eight, I sat down on the table with my fingers curled under the table top. I was laughing at something, I remember. And the table folded and cut the tips off my fingers. Just the tips of the two center fingers, about a quarter of an inch. I must have really cried out because the grown-ups were all around me immediately. My great-grandmother, Anna Elizabeth, put the disconnected tips back on to my fingers and wrapped them in cobwebs—she believed the cobwebs were curative and would make the tissue adhere—and they rushed me to the doctor's. I was very bloody, a real mess. But the doctor was able to stitch the tips back on. One of my warmest memories came out of the horrible event: it's the memory of my brother Jack staying at my bedside that night to hold my arm up. The doctor said it had to be kept elevated. So Jack kept my lower arm pointed toward the ceiling while I slept. He was only six; and he stayed by me all night. Later, there was some kind of infection. They had to cut into the fingers and drain them. I missed about six weeks of school. But the other students would bring my lessons to the house—the school was right up the street—and the teacher, Mrs. Mary Mahrs, would come at the end of the week and work with me. It all worked out OK. I'm alright now. It was my right hand but today you can scarcely find the scars. Time does heal all.

Since I was the only girl, I had the room over the library to myself. The four boys—my brother and three cousins—were in two bunkbeds in a larger room over the front parlor. That was the parlor where the bodies of relatives would be put on display. As I said, relatives from all over the country would ship dead people to our house to be "laid out" in the bay window of the front parlor.

These bodies would be banked with flowers, and purple crepe would be draped over the double front door. The tall pier mirror had to be covered with sheets so that the body would not be reflected. That was considered bad luck. The body stayed there for a three-day period and then was taken to the church where the minister would preach over it. From there, it would be taken to Woodlawn Cemetery and interred in a large family plot. And all the people from the funeral would come back to the house and there'd be a quiet lunch with very good food.

As kids, we'd try to avoid those bodies. To get to the second floor where our bedrooms were, we'd have to go up the stairwell next to the front parlor where the bodies were. We'd run past the parlor as fast as we could, whispering, "Dead people in there!" The boys were not crazy about the fact that their bedroom was right above that front parlor. And mine was almost over it. But none of us dared say anything. Sleeping over dead people was a way of life.

Fortunately, all those funerals were interspersed with many joyous celebrations. On the first of May, we had a special feast to welcome spring. Great-grandpa knew the official first day of spring was March 21st, but he thought May 1st was a more fitting day. So that's when our family celebrated the coming of spring. We'd have a great feast that was always exactly the same: stuffed baked shad, fresh asparagus just drenched in Hollandaise, mashed potatoes, glazed carrots, hot homemade Parker House rolls, a tossed salad, and iced tea and lemonade. For dessert, there'd be both lemon meringue pie and mile-high chocolate layer cake. Wonderful! Shad is a boney fish and there was always a great ceremony about getting "the bones out for the children"—who, on special occasions like this, ate in the dining room with the adults.

Birthdays provided another reason for celebration. And in a house with that many folks, there were birthdays galore. We even had birthday celebrations for our parrot (unimaginatively called "Polly") and for the disagreeable cat, Xantippe. And we celebrated Great-grandfather's sister Kate's birthday too, even though she was long dead. This was a family that really liked shared "occasions." The funeral occasions, though, we kids could have done without.

One of my favorite things about my bedroom was that it looked out to a lovely mulberry tree. It had come to grow on the side of the house in a very interesting way. When my mother's mother was a very little girl, she was playing just outside the house and was offered some mulberries by a visiting cousin. Apparently, she had on a very pretty pinafore. All excited, she called