Paper Garden

Back in the days when life was easy and you could walk down the street at night and not worry about anybody knocking you over the head with some blunt object and taking all of your pocket change, Miss Mamie Jamison, the neighborhood kids' godmother who gave us money and candy and let us hide in her parlor when the big boys chased us from the playground, took seriously ill one summer and had to be put to bed. Her daughter, the one all the way from New York, moved in with her, often dressed in nothing but what looked like black body suits and tall fruit-basket hats like that Chiquita woman wears on banana peels. If it wasn't black body suits, she was wearing a pair of men's trousers and shirt along with a mighty fine pair of work boots. But despite her icky clothes, she looked like a movie star from the silent screens: deep, dark black hair, thin red lips, and that pale powdery skin color, like she was waiting for some invisible director to yell "action!" and

give her the go-ahead to say her lines like that was the only thing God created her for.

Of course, the only reason the Chiquita woman, Miss Marion, wasn't talked about like a dog too much by the other ladies in the neighborhood was because she was from New York. Meaning Miss Marion obviously knew what the latest fashions were and knew much more about fads and styles than these country women, including my own mama, would ever know in their whole life-time. This was also why she was called "Miss" Marion even by the old folks—the way she spoke, calling everybody darling and sweetie and always saying how much she loves somebody, even complete strangers she met walking down the street. You would have thought they were blood relatives.

My mama was the main gofer over Miss Marion and would come home just about every other day with some catchy word or phrase that she had heard Miss Marion say, or what someone else had heard her say. Once, while leaving out the door to go to a Daughters of the Confederate Army meeting, Mama said to Papa and me, "I'll be back in about an hour. Chow." When she closed the door, Papa, with a puzzled look on his face, looked up from his evening paper and asked me, "What dog?"

Something was happening to the town of Harper. All the women wanted to be Miss Marion, ordering just about every dress and hat and scarf and shoe that the Sears and Roebuck catalog had to offer. Even the men, down to the youngest and up to the oldest, watched Miss Marion out of the corner of their eyes. We watched how she switched her way through town knowing full well everybody was looking at her in a skirt that was at least ten inches too short and ten years ahead of Harper's time. Eddie T. sat on that old tree stump at the end of the main street playing his harmonica. Though he claimed that he was blind, he wrote and sang a song about her that teetered on the edge of vulgarity, sometimes drawing a good crowd and a nice pile of spending money in his ragged hat that he kept between his feet, if it was a Saturday.

Even Papa, whenever he saw Miss Marion coming up on our side of the sidewalk, all of a sudden had to go check the oil in the car, or he had to go clip the hedges, or the grass was too tall and he had to go cut it. I think Mama knew what Papa was up to, but it was a summer and it was hot and the price of ground beef had dropped and life was just too wonderful so Mama didn't say anything. "At least he's away from that paper," she said. It was true: Papa had about three weeks worth of Harper's Sentinel's

piled up on the coffee table. Most times now, he spent looking out the big picture window.

It wasn't long before Miss Marion had announced that she would start giving acting lessons down at the community center, since she had some acting degree from NYU and saw that it was not only a good deed but "an absolute duty"—another one of her catchy phrases that she almost wore out—that she bring some of her "expertise" back home to those who weren't as fortunate as herself.

So, to be honest, I wasn't the least bit surprised when I came home from playing kickball with Terry and Kicky when Mama asked me if I were planning to take any acting lessons from Miss Marion—as if we had already discussed it before.

"I thought you were going to play football this summer, Sonny Buck?" Papa asked me, not even giving my head the chance to let the first question sink in good.

"And what's wrong with acting lessons?" Mama asked Papa in that tone of voice that said you best watch what you say.

Papa caught the hint, so he shuffled around in his favorite chair, the one that sits in front of the television set, then he lowered his newspaper just enough so we could see his eyes. "There's nothing wrong with taking acting lessons if that's

what Sonny Buck wants to do. I just thought maybe he wanted to play football since he's been playing for the last three summers."

"Well, missing football this year is not going to kill him none. I think it will do you some good to expand your culture, Sonny Buck. I'll give you ten dollars." Then she gave Papa that look that told him that he had better not bid against her. And when he didn't, she said, "Good. Now that's settled. The class starts Monday."

I looked over at Papa, but he was already behind his paper again. So there I was.

But it wasn't bad. Come to find out, all the mothers in the neighborhood—except for Kicky's mama—made their kids go see Miss Marion for acting lessons, which consisted mainly of remembering some line from a Shakespeare play and reciting it while she shouted how you should be standing, or lecturing you on the proper facial expression, or having fits on when you should be breathing. And if you weren't doing it just right, she would just get all undone: flapping her arms, twisting her face, then sometimes dropping to her knees and saying, "Lord, please help me educate these ignorant people." That ignorant part was something we didn't feature too well and Debra Ann told her so, being since Debra Ann was

brought up that way; that is, brought up to cuss grown folks out and not think twice about it.

But Miss Marion took an interest in me. She didn't yell when I read, but watched me with her mouth hanging open, telling everybody to knock off the noise back there—mainly Kicky and Terry and another boy we called Scootie, who could make funny noises with his armpits. Miss Marion said that I was talented.

What'd she say that for? I recited Shakespeare for Mama and Papa almost every evening before, during and after dinner. Papa said that I was real good. Mama said I was a born actor. A genius was the word Miss Robbins—the school's English teacher who doubled as the drama coach in the springtime—used one night when she came over just to hear me read a few lines from A Midnight Summer's Dream. I was good. No lie. I imagined myself going to Hollywood, or to New York like Miss Marion, and becoming a real actor like James Cagney or Humphrey Bogart and star in films where I get to shoot the bad guy and run off with his dame because he's nothing but a big gorilla and she had been giving me the eye all along at the bar between sippings of tequilas and straight shots of brandy. I was Othello hanging upside down from the big tree in our front yard; I was Romeo on the football field. At the groceries: Puck. At the gas station

with Papa: Macbeth. Then Henry VIII, then Hamlet, then King Lear and I couldn't stop. Terry and Kicky couldn't keep up and came close to hating me, something I couldn't blame them for. For I was crazy. I figured if I didn't make it in pro football, at least I had my acting talents to fall back on.

But the jist of this story really didn't kick in until about a month later, a July evening; Terry and Kicky were over my house for dinner: Terry was fat and would eat anything that couldn't get up and run, but Mama always invited Kicky over because she said Kicky was from a dysfunctioning family on account of his daddy been to jail about ten times and his mama was always hooking up with somebody who was going to Memphis for a couple of days. So, sometimes, if Kicky didn't eat with us, he didn't eat.

"So, how's the acting coming along?" Papa asked Terry and me.

Terry, between mouthfuls of some hot meatball dish—a recipe Mama got from Miss Marion – said, "It's okay. We studying Romeo and Juliet. Can I have some water?"

"Oh, that's nice," Mama said. "I remember in the springtime the senior class would always put on Romeo and Juliet out on the front lawn of the school. That's how we paid for the prom

every year. I was Juliet. We decorated the whole stage with honeysuckles and white clovers and I wore a crown of white roses." Mama smiled. "I was beautiful then."

Papa said, "What do you mean? You're still beautiful."

Mama looked up at Papa, just like everybody else at the table did. I remember one time he was telling everybody down at the lodge how his boy was going to make the football team and go on to play for some Ivy League school. But I remember getting cut the first week of tryouts, so I hid out over Kicky's house all day long. It didn't do any good; Papa knew exactly where I was because Debra Ann told him out of spite on account of me not wanting to carry her books after school. When he found me, he said, "Let's go home, Sonny Buck," and the way he said it I knew I had let him down. At home Papa got on the phone and called an emergency meeting being since he was sort of like the vice-president of the lodge. He told me to come with him. When we got there all the men were fussing and wondering what was so important. Then Papa said, "This is my son, William 'Sonny Buck' Jackson and he didn't make the little league football team. If he never makes any other team in his life, he's still my boy and I love him. And if any of you say anything out of pocket, I'll bust

your damn noses." Then we went down to Olive Branch and he bought me a beer at Tang's. Papa said not to say anything about the nose busting or the beer drinking being since he was sort of like a deacon at church. That was the only time I ever remember Papa saying or doing something profound and not being behind his paper.

At the table Mama put her napkin up to her face and dabbed at the corner of her eyes. "Frank, you're so kind. I love you. I love you all." Then she got up and went around the table kissing everybody. Just like Miss Marion, except Mama wasn't performing. Even Kicky probably wanted to cry; I don't think he had ever been kissed by his mother.

And right then and there I made a vow that if ever the moon and the sun and all the constellations ever decided to twist, switch up, collide or explode in the heavens and cause me to lose my mind and want to run away from home, I was going to take these two beloved people with me.

After dinner, Mama told me to take a plate of rum muffins over to Miss Marion. She told Kicky and Terry to go with me, but they suddenly claimed to hear their mothers calling them. So I had to go by myself. I picked up the plate and said "Chow" to everybody.

When I got to house, I was standing in an open doorway. "Miss Marion?" I peeped in, looking into a dark living room full of bulky antique furniture, the stench of Vick's vapor rub and the confined wet musty smell like after a long hot summer rain creeping out on the porch with me and tingling my nose. "Miss Marion?" I repeated.

"William, is that you?"

I peeped farther into the room and saw a figure move in a chair over in a corner. "Yes, this is me."

"Well, why you out there? Come in here."

I walked in, bumped into something, and she clicked on a table lamp.

She had been drinking. She wasn't wearing a hat. Her hair was down and she was more white than usual except for her eyes: bloodshot and veiny red-like.

"You okay, Miss Marion?"

"I couldn't be better," she said slowly, and then she brought a glass up to her mouth and sipped.

I stood there watching, not knowing what to do, but then I remembered why I had come. "My mama sent you these." I held the plate out in front of me. "She made rum muffins."

She laughed. "That's all I need." She downed the rest of her drink. Then she frowned up at me

like I was something awful. "Do you know how evil the world is?"

"Excuse me?" I asked, steady holding onto the plate of muffins because I was too nervous to do anything else.

"The world is full of evil. You knew that, didn't you?"

"Ahh...yes, I knew that."

"But you know, I don't think anybody else knows about this world but me and you." She burped. "I don't think most folks know they're mean. If they don't know any better, how do you expect them to act good? You see what I'm saying, William?"

"Yes, I think so."

"You know what bad thing I did one time? I made this fat girl cry. When I was up in New York I went to this restaurant with this friend of mine and he brought his girlfriend with him. She was as big as a house. I don't know what Judd saw in her. She must've pissed Jack Daniels. I don't know. Anyway, I think I was drinking, I can't remember, but I remember telling this girl that I bet she eats a lot. Then Judd tells me that she's a vegetarian. A vegetarian. Can you believe that, William? A three hundred pound vegetarian?"

I shook my head no.

"I couldn't believe it either. So I ask him what in the hell has his vegetarian been snacking on? A damn California redwood? I thought it was funny, but she started crying and Judd was trying to hush her up because everybody was looking at us. The more she cried the louder I got until they put all of us out of the restaurant. They didn't have good food anyway. But now I feel so bad about what I said. I got to tell everybody what I've done. That's my punishment." She grabbed some tissue from a roll of toilet paper and dabbed at her eyes and blew her nose. "You know, I think this world would be lot better place to live if everyone would just do as I say. Know what I'm talking about, William?"

"Miss Marion," I hesitated, "are you drunk?"

"Not yet, but I have the potential of becoming an outstanding alcoholic. You just give me time."

I didn't say a word. I picked up the roll of toilet paper and tore some off, and out of nervousness started playing with it as Miss Marion was steady talking—mainly about how much money her mama had spent on her education and now she can't even find an acting job off Broadway. I twisted the paper—tucking it here, pulling it there, twisting the bottom—until finally, I had created a little flower, something between a carnation or a rose, but a nice looking

flower just the same. We both looked down at the object in my hand; I think I was more surprised.

She took the flower from me and started crying. "You know what this is, William?"

"A paper flower?"

"No," between sobs, "this is beauty. Painful beauty. You're just like me. You can look right through pain and see the beauty of it. This is painful beauty. Thank you, William."

I was ready to go home. I tried to throw a hint by moving closer to the door and shuffling my feet like I suddenly heard someone calling my name.

"Sit down, William," she said, "and make me some more," handing me the roll of paper. She refilled her glass, then leaned back on the couch. "You got it, William."

"Got what, Miss Marion?" I asked, steady making the paper flowers.

"It! You got that third eye right here—" she tapped her forehead—"and you can see right down that narrow line. I can't see that line as clearly as I want to. I never seen anybody read Shakesphere like you can. How do you do it? You ain't got to answer that. Most folks who are good at something usually don't know how they do it."

Since it wasn't a big roll, I had quickly made about twenty flowers and they were on the floor around my feet.

Miss Marion dropped to her knees and ran her fingers through the flowers like they were gold coins. "These are beautiful." Then, like a sudden after-thought: "I'll be back. I got to go check on mama."

She disappeared down the dark hallway, leaving me alone in the parlor. I was trying to decide whether to leave, figuring that she was too drunk to remember whether I was here or not, but that wouldn't be a proper thing to do. By the time I had made up my mind to make a break for the door, Miss Marion came back with a flashlight and two new rolls toilet paper.

"Mama's doing just fine. Let's go."

"Where we going?"

Miss Marion looked at me like I had a hole in my head. "Outside. We're going to plant these beautiful flowers in the garden. You don't actually think that I'm going to let all of these flowers just multiply inside my house, do you?"

Though it was late, about eight or nine, it was still hot. Miss Marion started digging small holes in the empty garden with her fingers. She placed a flower in the hole and then she mashed the soft dirt around the paper stem. She was quiet, working quickly, stopping every once in a

while to take a sip from the bottle that she had brought out here, or to grab some more paper flowers from me, or to tell me where to shine the flashlight. This went on for about an hour until we had the whole flowerbed in the front yard covered in paper flowers.

Miss Marion started crying again. "This is just damn lovely!"

We stood there in the night looking at the paper garden. It really did look nice.

"You know, William, some things are just too good for this world." Then she looked up at me like she was expecting me to add to what she had just said. But I kept my eyes on the garden.

Fortunately, I heard Papa calling me and I told Miss Marion that I had to go. I started running down the street, pushing what she had said off to the side somewhere.

She yelled, "Good-bye, William. Come back in the morning and we can see how beautiful this garden looks in the daylight!"

"Okay," I yelled, running wildly in the middle of the street like I had just been set free out of a cage, looking back only once just in time to see her wave at me and take another sip.

But the next day it rained, a thunderstorm so terrible that even Mama said, "Maybe you shouldn't go to class today, Sonny Buck. Miss

Marion will understand." I sat in the house all day until the rain stopped around early evening.

Later I walked down to Miss Marion's house and stood in front of the paper garden. The rain had melted the flowers and the only thing that was left was soggy toilet paper all over the yard. I stared at the garden for a long time.

I knocked on the door, but there wasn't an answer. I peeped through the windows into the parlor but I didn't see anything. Once, I thought I saw Miss Marion ducking down the dark hallway, but I wasn't sure. I knocked on the door and yelled her name, but there was no answer. I went home.

Suddenly, everything changed. Not a change back, not a change forward, but a change like the closing scene of a play when the curtain comes down and you wonder were you really there. Like the melting of the paper garden was an omen of what was to happen next, Miss Mamie Jamison died toward the end of the summer. She was buried the next day, then the next day after that Miss Marion packed up everything in the middle of the night and left, and not too long after that the house was boarded up. Just like that. Then slowly Harper went back to the way it was: boring. Like a rubber band, Harper had stretched to accommodate one of its own, then quickly snapped back into place—nothing

different, but the same. My mother went back to her meatloaf on Mondays, spaghetti on Tuesdays, and pork chops, chicken, roast, noodles and stew on the other days. I went back to my football practices and Papa slipped back behind his paper.

Once, I wondered if Miss Marion was a real person, or if she was one of those fallen angels who comes to earth to earn her wings. You would wonder about anybody who steps into a person's life and charms and dazzles you, forces your imagination to soar higher than the heavens, then for no reason, quietly disappears, never realizing that someone has been left behind whose love for life is now running on an uncontrollable high. Though it didn't last long, for one brief moment in my life, I wasn't William "Sonny Buck" Jackson, the junior varsity football player. Instead, I was William "Sonny Buck" Jackson, the Broadway star, the Hollywood actor—the whole town not the town, but a stage; the townspeople not the townspeople, but the audience. Maybe Miss Marion knew what she was doing and was just giving me a taste of what could be, letting me know that there's a different world outside the four walls of Harper.

I wondered what had become of Miss Marion. I imagined myself traveling from town to town, city to city, looking for a Miss Marion.

Stories would spring up about me, about some kid looking for a friend that he met one summer. Toothless old men with guitars will be moaning some sad song about lost friendship and loneliness and how cruel the world can get without a good friend or a faithful dog. I will become a legend. Of course, some folks will say I never existed, but just somebody's crazy imagination gone wild. But that wouldn't get me down, since worrying about that kind of stuff doesn't bother me none anyway.