

# Ella: Family Stories, Family Secrets

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## 1. Missing Woman

Who was she? When she left, what was she thinking? Where did she go, and why?

Here is what I know: She was very beautiful. Her hair was the blackest black, and so were her eyes. She was born Ella Seagroves in Huntsville, Alabama, probably in the mid-1880s. She had a sister named Nettie, and a brother, too, I think, though I remember that only vaguely, and his name not at all. I don't remember ever hearing anything about her father. Her dark beauty caught the eye of my great-grandfather, Will Ragsdale, when she was still very young. So, for that matter, was he. They must have married sometime around 1901 or 1902, when Will would have been twenty or twenty-one and Ella still in her teens. Probably those ages weren't all that unusual for marriage, especially among poor people, in those days. I don't know how they met, though surely I was told the story by Grandpa, who so loved to tell me stories about his childhood and youth when I was small. Perhaps her father or brother was a millworker like Will; the 1890 census in Huntsville lists four men named Seagroves who were mill employees.

But however they met, they did marry, and their son Lonnie, my mother's father, "Pop" to me, was born in 1903. Not long after that—I think in 1906, when Ella would have been maybe twenty-one or so—while Will was at work at the cotton mill one day, she cleaned the house to its usual spotlessness and she bathed little Lonnie, three at the time, and dressed him in clean clothes and took him to a neighbor's. When Will came home she was gone, without a word, and without a trace.

I come from several generations of first children who married young, and my great-grandfather was only fifty-nine when I was born. Lonnie, my mother's father, was only eighteen when my mother was born. Her mother, Elyse Wilhoite, was five years older than Lonnie. My mother married at eighteen and I was born when she was nineteen.

My great-grandfather was probably the most significant person in my early life. He retired from the cotton mill in Chattanooga, where I was born, when I was six, and after we moved first to Alabama and

then to Virginia, he spent most winters with us, being my “pupil” when I wanted to play school and was the teacher, my “customer” when I wanted to play store and was the storekeeper, taking me to Saturday movie matinees every week. One of the family photographs I most cherish is of five generations of us: Grandpa, Pop, my mother, me, my two children. People are astonished when I tell them that my great-grandfather lived until I was almost thirty and knew my children. And it is astonishing, given the late marriages and later child-bearings that are the norm today.

I saw Ella’s mother and her sister Nettie once, when I was eight and my parents, great-grandfather, and I visited Huntsville in the summer of 1948. I think the Alabama State Fair was in Huntsville at the time because I have a vague memory of going to the fair on the same visit, of the sticky cotton candy I loved and the thrilling rides like Crack-the-Whip and the voices of midway barkers luring passersby in to see the “freaks”—the Fattest Woman in the World, the Wild Man of Borneo, the Bearded Lady, the Hermaphrodite (for adults only).

My great-grandfather, my beloved Grandpa, was sixty-seven that year. He had wanted to go to Huntsville to see his mother-in-law, Grandma Seagroves—Ella’s mother. My great-grandfather visiting his mother-in-law! And I was there, a long-legged, awkward, and dreamy child. Nettie was there too; she took care of, cared for, her mother, who was old and bedridden and blind.

It was high summer, and the Alabama heat was oppressive and sticky, making us all listless and intensifying the odors of the house—dust, the ghostly residues of cooking, the sweat and scent of old clothes, old furniture, bodies. In Grandma Seagroves’ bedroom the yellowed paper window shades were drawn against the summer heat. The room was dim and smelled of stale urine. A pale and moulty canary, its cage hung on a tall stand near the bed, was very still and peered fixedly at us visitors, though with little interest. Grandma Seagroves, with Nettie’s help, struggled to a sitting position on the side of the bed, the better to be sociable. She was a bulky woman, dressed in some sort of wrapper, thin and dark, over her nightgown. Her blind eyes were rheumy and streaked with yellow. Long wisps of thin gray hair escaped from combs and floated around her head and shoulders. She wanted

to touch me, pet me—her great-great-granddaughter, the latest twig of Ella's tree. She smiled wanly but with evident great pleasure and groped for me. I shrank back against my mother, embarrassing all of us, but the old woman's odor dizzied me and I was afraid of her. My mother's great-grandmother. My great-great-grandmother.

Her daughter Ella having been born, as well as I can figure, in the mid-1880s, Grandma Seagroves must have been born sometime in the 1860s, so would have been in her eighties that year of our visit. I was eight, my young mother twenty-seven, my great-grandfather—my mother's grandfather—sixty-seven.

Nettie was old, too, as far as I was concerned—probably in her midsixties. I don't know if Ella was older or younger than Nettie; they must have been close in age. I don't know if Nettie ever married. That day she smiled and patted me. Uncomfortable with familiar caresses from a stranger, fearing the imminent crush of an embrace, I stayed on the move, slipping and sliding away from her. But I was curious, too. Grandpa had told me about Nettie, and I had always felt an odd fascination with her name. No one else I knew was named Nettie. Possibly it was a nickname, but for what? Jeanette, maybe? Or Antoinette perhaps, a name that seems somehow too exotic for the family I remember. Now, seeing her for the first time, I stared at her hair. Short, gray, tightly curled. Her name suggested "hairnet" to me, and sure enough, she wore one: soft gray, delicate as a spider's web, it restrained her tight gray curls with unspeakable, nearly invisible tenderness; the merest shadow of boundary lay at Nettie's hairline, and the wispy force of the net gathered itself at her widow's peak into an infinitesimal knot. I remember her smiles, some iced tea with not enough ice and with lemon wedges bobbing in the glasses. I remember all of us standing around in the living room of the dim house, its shades and curtains also drawn against the heat. Grandma Seagroves didn't leave her bedroom. It was understood, I think, that she hadn't long to live, so that this visit would be the last time Grandpa and my mother would see her.

I don't remember much about the house, except that it was small and white, that the furniture was dark, that dust motes danced in the rays of sunlight that made their way in through holes in the curtains or cracks in the shades. A white picket fence surrounded the yard, but

some pickets were missing and the fence wanted a fresh coat of paint. I can't recall much about the neighborhood, either, though I can see in my mind's eye that the adjacent houses were surrounded by overgrown trees and shrubs, and I saw that black families occupied a few of the nearby houses. The neighborhood as I remember it—though I couldn't have said this then, wouldn't have understood it—was well past whatever gentility it had once had, the whole area in decline, in the way of old working-class neighborhoods near the hearts of Southern cities. Green and white metal awnings, flecked with rust, curved over the front windows. (Keeping what out? Keeping what in?)

Ella was a vivid absence that day, though no one spoke of her, at least in not in my hearing: the wayward daughter/sister/wife/mother who, by skipping out, had made herself more troublingly visible than she ever could have been if she had stayed in the traces. She was the knot holding this tangled skein of kinship together. Grandma Seagroves' lost daughter. Nettie's lost sister. Grandpa's lost wife. Lonnie's lost mother. My mother's grandmother, my great-grandmother. Great. Grand. Mother. Her coal-black hair and eyes.

Grandpa's hair had been black too, I'd been told. Now it was almost white. But their son Lonnie's hair was dark brown, thick and kinky, and my mother's hair lighter brown, almost blonde, and thick and wavy. My hair was dark blonde, very thick, and in my childhood "straight as a stick," as my mother used to complain. Shorter pieces stuck out like bristles from the tight braids my mother plaited in my hair each morning. When I was eleven or twelve and on the threshold of womanhood, it began to curl, at first softly around my temples, then finally in waves that turned to ringlets in damp weather. We grow paler and more tame, it seems, our coloring more subdued and our hair less unruly, with each passing generation.

## 2. Dowd

As I grew older and Grandpa deemed me ready to hear more about Ella, he gave me a few more details about her story, as many as he had to give, I suppose, and they were precious few. Only after I was a married woman did he tell me, sitting at my mother's kitchen table one winter afternoon when the two of us were alone in the kitchen, about

trying desperately to find Ella, finding and following traces of her from town to city all over the South. He finally traced her to Memphis somehow, and, leaving Lonnie with Grandma Seagroves, went there to find her. The address he had been given turned out to be a “dowdy house,” he said with tears in his eyes even then, more than half a century later. A *dowdy house*, I guess, was his term for a house of prostitution. He waited there in the shadows outside the house for her to come out or come home. He knew she was there or would return, though I don’t know how he knew. Finally, late in the evening, he heard a laugh he recognized as hers and watched her coming down the street on the arm of a “fancy man,” he told me, perhaps a gambler from the riverboats. Will stepped out of the shadows; Ella stopped in her tracks, her laughter stilled. “I’ve come to take you home,” he said. She tossed her black curls, froze her features, and said to the fancy man, “I never saw this man before in my life.” And turned away and walked into the house with her companion.

Years afterward (I don’t know how many years, though probably fewer than ten, because this happened before the war began in 1914), Will heard that she was back in Alabama, had “taken up with a railroad man,” he told me, and was dying. Probably it was tuberculosis, the great killer in those days of poor Southern folks. Will sent word that he wanted to come see her once more and to bring Lonnie with him: “Tell her that her husband wants to see her,” he’d said. She sent word back: the railroad man was her husband now, she said; she had no call to see anybody else. And she died without Will or Lonnie ever seeing her again.

He never got over the pain. Never married again. Sitting at my mother’s kitchen table that winter afternoon sometime in the late 1960s, Grandpa told me the story, more than half a century after it happened, and tears rolled down the creases in his cheeks. The freshness of his anguish astonished me. Ella had broken his heart when she left, and it had never healed. He loved her at that moment as much as he had ever loved her, with all the power of his great loving heart.

Oh, she was a bad woman, all right, everyone in my family knew that, though Will never said it, never said anything at all to cast a shadow on her. He just shared the mystery of her disappearance with

me. Somehow I understood the regret and guilt he felt but couldn't repair; he never knew, never had a chance to find out, just what had gone wrong and why. He never told my mother about finding Ella in the dowdy house, perhaps because he didn't want to hurt her, or didn't want Lonnie to find out that his mother had been a "fancy woman." Lord knows Lonnie had troubles enough without being told that, his own young wife dead of tuberculosis, leaving him with a three-year-old daughter, my mother, and a son not yet two. A second marriage to a good hardworking woman who had a son, and then together three more children. And all the time the drinking, and other women. Most of all the emotional damage and distance, the tensions that built in him and sometimes erupted in frightening displays of rage and violence. All the while, though, he held down his job as a letter carrier for the post office and fed his large family through the Depression. Thinking about it now, I wonder if he knew what had become of his mother. Even if Will never told him, there were others, Nettie, and Ella's mother. Probably they heard the story from Grandpa, and Lonnie would have been all ears for stories about his lost mother. Maybe, if he had heard the stories, even whispers, when years later the demons of drink and lust drew him, he figured he had it in him. It was his mother, showing up again at last.

Still, even if he didn't know about where Will had found her in Memphis, everybody knew she was a bad woman because she had left her child, and everybody, including me, knew that was the worst thing a woman could ever do. Lonnie, Pop to me, had grown up motherless. Sometimes, when he was small, he stayed in Huntsville with Nettie and Grandma Seagroves while his father moved around the South from mill to mill, always looking for better work. And sometimes, when he was older, Will took Lonnie with him to the new jobs in the new mills. They'd live in boarding houses where they shared a room and took their meals at the common table. I don't know who looked after Lonnie while Will was at the mill. Will knew about being a motherless child; he'd been one himself, because his own mother had died in childbirth with his younger brother Artie when Will was not yet two. He didn't remember his mother at all. So he lavished on his only child all the love he himself as a child had needed so much but never had.

Probably that's why it had been so important to him that Ella be a good mother to Lonnie. And I guess she was a good mother, for as long as she was there. A picture of Lonnie when he was a baby shows him dressed in white ruffles, shoes, a cap. He looks every inch the petted darling.

So what lured or wrenched her away? Was it romance? Love? Lust? Or something else—some secret that helps to explain her dowdy house adventure? Some news she got, some awful surprise? Or someone threatening to reveal a secret she had kept buried, hidden from her husband, a secret too terrible to be known without destroying the life they had built together?

### 3. Aporia

Here's what I don't know, what I want to know, but what I can never know: Why did she leave? It is a hole, a gap in my family history, one that can never be filled with facts, so my imagination has been drawn to it all these years. It's a hole I must try to fill with speculations, with *stories*. Why she left, where she went, are questions I've asked myself again and again about this woman whose genes I carry within me, from whom I have perhaps inherited some traits. After all, I've skipped out on husbands too, two of them, though not so abruptly, and not without warning. And I didn't leave my children behind, would never, ever have done so.

One story, an obvious possibility to be found also in fictional characters like Madame Bovary, Anna Karenina, and countless others, is that she sought and found romance. She had, after all, married very young, probably too young. Led by the feeling so poignantly expressed many years later in Peggy Lee's song "Is This All There Is?"—a question I came to ask myself too, long years after her death—perhaps she could not imagine living out her life as the wife of a poor millworker and the mother of a small boy. Did she have a lover, someone who promised her the excitement her respectable life lacked? Had some handsome man waltzed by one day and stolen her heart? Grandpa had told me she was vain of her beauty, and she loved to get dressed up and go out. She dressed her dark curls and enlisted her husband's help in lacing her stays tighter and tighter to make her waist tiny; he objected, and they argued. It couldn't be healthy, he

said, to lace yourself up like that so you scarce could breathe. And besides, it was unseemly for a married lady. No doubt her exhibitions of vanity frightened him.

They argued, too, about what Ella did all day while he was working at the mill. He told me this with great sadness all those many years later after he had retired from the mill and stayed home all day and started helping his daughter-in-law, Lonnie's wife, with the housework. The house had always looked the same to him, he said; it just never occurred to him how much work it took to keep it looking that way until so many years later when he was home all day and found out. He wished, I could tell, that he had understood then, when it mattered; he wished he could tell Ella that now he knew how hard she had worked to keep the house looking always clean and neat as a pin, how much he now appreciated how hard she must have worked. But it was too late.

Maybe she was a woman who chafed at the limitations imposed on women of her day. What options did she have for a larger life? Maybe her vanity was one way she could imagine of gaining some kind of power, the power of a beautiful woman over men. Maybe, when men looked at her with desire, or promised something better than what she had, she felt the rush of being in charge. It might have been the only way she knew to escape the confines of her narrow domestic and marital life. If she left home, husband, and child for love, her shame must have been profound when she was abandoned and need drove her to use her beauty, her body, to stay alive. At times when desire has led me into deep waters, this is the story of her disappearance and what I know of her fate that has felt the most convincing to me.

At other times, when I chafed at the confinements of my life as just a wife and mother (though motherhood has been the greatest joy of my life), when I longed for something more, something better, when I imagined other possibilities for myself, I've thought of Ella. Maybe she would have chosen a different path for herself if she could have; maybe she would be glad for the expanded possibilities I had and finally claimed for myself. If that was the case, Ella's resistance to her woman's role came to full flower in me, when second-wave feminism caught me up and shaped me into the passionate feminist scholar and teacher I am today.

But that is not the only story I have imagined.

Another story: As in all families, there were subtexts in mine, things that were occasionally spoken obliquely, whispered occasionally, but never openly acknowledged and accepted. One was that my great-grandfather Will was Indian. I assume he was only part Indian because of his blue eyes, though there are a great many blue-eyed Indians now, and there have been for a very long time, since romantic and sexual liaisons between Indians and English colonizers began in the seventeenth century. I don't know if his Indian ancestry came through his father's line or his mother's. I don't know which tribal group he came from. Maybe none of that is important. What is clear is that no one in my family embraced that part of our heritage and identity. There were small signs, such as Lonnie teasing his father by calling him "Big Chief Sore-Tail" whenever Grandpa was quietly cross about something or other, probably Lonnie's bad behavior. And then there were the prominent cheekbones, Grandpa's and Lonnie's, and Lonnie's olive-ruddy skin, which turned up two generations later in my brother too.

It is a fact that anyone whose origins are in the Deep South and who has Indian ancestry is likely also to have some black ancestry. Indian communities from the early years of European colonization welcomed runaway slaves, intermarried with them, assimilated them fully into the tribal group. William Loren Katz takes up the relatedness of the nation's two racial outsider groups in his book *Black Indians: A Hidden Heritage*. And that, of course—I realized this only ten or fifteen years ago—is the reason my family, deeply Southern and thus carrying in its baggage all the prejudices common to the South, never talked about Grandpa's Indian "blood." Being white was too important.

These days, Indian wannabes proliferate, people take pride in having Indian ancestry, so that even my mother, who valued respectability above all else, began to talk openly about Grandpa's being part Indian in the last years of her life. And to think of him as a little Indian boy goes a long way to explain some of his personal history. After his mother's death, an older sister, Elizabeth, cared for her younger brothers, Eddie, Will, and Artie. Their father was a "drummer," Grandpa told me, a traveling salesman, though I don't know what he sold. Elizabeth too died, in a smallpox epidemic when the boys were still young, and their father was forced to farm the boys out to a childless couple who gave them food and shelter in exchange for work on their

farm. And food and shelter was not all they got. The Thors—Grandpa loved to tell stories about the cruelty of “Old Man Thor,” as he always called him—were not satisfied to exploit the boys’ labor. Thor himself must have been a certifiable sadist. He sent the boys one by one after dark alone into the woods to the well when the cries of the “painter”—panther—that lived in the woods could be heard, just to terrify them, and he succeeded. Whenever one of them displeased him for some trivial reason, he wrapped a rope around the boy’s ankles, hoisted him up head down by the rope thrown over the rafters, and beat him with a leather strap until he bled or lost consciousness.

The boys slept in an unheated lean-to, and Eddie, the oldest, contracted a severe cold and earache. Thor provided him no medical attention or care. Will and Artie woke up one morning to find Eddie dead in his bed. The two ran away from the Thor place and survived for a while by sucking raw eggs they stole from people’s henhouses. Someone in the town where they ended up—Scottsboro, maybe, where Will and Artie had been born—found out, somehow, that their father had also died. The two little boys were orphans, alone in the world. A preacher and his wife took them in for a while—perhaps a charitable gesture to those “little Indian boys”—cleaned them up, fed them, and sent them to school—the only schooling Will ever had. It was enough to enable him to read and to write, though laboriously. A couple who had no children wanted to adopt Artie, who must have been seven or eight at the time, and he moved with them to Texas. They must not have adopted him legally, though, because his name did not change. The brothers did not see each other again until they were grown. The preacher and his wife who had been housing and feeding the boys moved on, and Will, before he was ten, was on his own, working in one of the textile mills that were becoming so common throughout the South and boarding at a boarding house. He earned, he never tired of telling me, fifty cents a week, and paid a quarter of that for room and board to the lady who ran the boarding house. He worked six days a week, twelve hours a day, this being around 1890, before the passage of child labor laws.

And so, hardworking and honest and tenderhearted despite, or perhaps because of, all his troubles, he grew to be a man, met Ella Seagroves, fell in love, and married. He might have mentioned to her

casually at some point his being part Indian; maybe he revealed that part of his history in a moment of unguarded intimacy when he wanted her to know him wholly. Perhaps his mixed-race identity is part of what moved her to reject her husband and child, to flee and to leave her child behind.

Or maybe she had a secret of her own.

Another story, this one more painful but probably equally plausible: Several years ago, when I read for the first time (but not the last) Judson Mitcham's beautiful novel *The Sweet Everlasting*, I stopped dead on page 10 when I read what the narrator, Ellis Burt, a simple white Southern country boy grown to a young man, says about Susan, the woman who becomes his wife, when he sees her for the first time:

When I looked at Susan that first time, I didn't have a clue, though it's a fact that she could have been a picture in a book. I mean, she stood out right away from everybody around her—blackest hair I'd ever seen on a white woman, and dark eyes.

I knew something right then because that was so like the phrase I'd heard so often from Grandpa when he talked about Ella: "Blackest hair you ever saw on a white woman, black as a blackbird's wing. And the blackest eyes."

In the novel, a few years after their son is born, Susan tells Ellis "the whole truth about some things" and confesses to him that her "daddy was white" and that her "mama [didn't] look colored at all, but she was. Her mama and daddy was supposed to have been real light-skinned, and they say her mama's hair was just like mine."

Ellis writes, "The Bible says we shall all be changed, in the twinkling of an eye." And at that moment, Ellis loses sight of the reality of Susan, this woman he has loved so deeply for years, and the hate-filled racism that permeated the air he breathed as he grew up and lived in the Georgia of the 1940s takes hold of him, and that hateful racist culture speaks through him:

"You just gonna sit there and just like that you gonna tell me I married a nigger? . . . All these years, and the worst of it—goddamn you to hell, goddamn you—you done made my boy a

nigger too, put your own nigger blood in his veins and made him a nigger too. *My boy, my boy.*”

Disaster follows; their son ends up dead and Ellis loses Susan. He has decades to taste the bitter fruit of regret and sorrow. Like Will, sorrow tempers Ellis, and he becomes a quietly caring and compassionate man whose only happiness is found in memories of times when he and Susan and their boy were together.

I've taught this novel for years in my “Writing About Race” class at MIT. Students love it, and they understand it as an example of the craziness of the prohibitions against racial mixing. As I tell them, and as Susan in Mitcham's novel makes clear, the idea of racial “purity” is just that, an idea, in no way a reality, because all of us are mixed, one way or another. As Albert Murray has written, “The United States is in actuality not a nation of black people and white people. It is a nation of multicolored people. There are white Americans so to speak and black Americans. But any fool can see that the white people are not really white, and that black people are not black. They are all interrelated one way or another.”

Reading and teaching this novel always makes that day in Huntsville in 1948 rise up vivid in my memory. The black families in the neighborhood. The slim perch of respectability to which the Seagroves clung.

And I think of Ella. Maybe a knock came on the door one day while Will was at work, from someone who had a grudge or a claim of some sort, someone who had some knowledge of her family history that could destroy the life she had built, change her child's future. It was 1906, and Jim Crow was alive and well in the deep South. Miscegenation laws were in place and enforced. It only took a drop of black “blood.” If she could pass, and did, who could blame her? What does being white, or being black, mean anyhow? This is the only version of her story I have imagined that can explain her decision to abandon her child. And her descent into the oldest profession, her finding refuge in the dowdy house.

If this version of her story is true, I'm sure Will never knew. And as I write this, I must say again that I have no facts, just small shreds of evidence and a lot of speculation. I grew up a blonde and blue-eyed girl, and I have enjoyed all my life the privileges of whiteness. I don't

want to deny that fact in wondering about the racial history of my family. It is the racial history of countless supposedly white Southern families, after all, whose ancestors hid or denied the forbidden passions that led them to cross the boundaries of race despite the warnings and the dangers. That white slave masters assumed a right of sexual access to the black women they or their friends owned, resulting in a profoundly racially mixed black population in this country, we all know, acknowledge, take for granted. That it sometimes was love and desire that led to racial mixing is a fact too often denied. But that mixing, forced or chosen, is our racial history, and as James Baldwin has written, "People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them."

Maybe the real story of Ella Seagroves is a combination of two of the stories I've spun here—a lover who led her astray and away and who left her when he learned her secret. It would have been an easy thing to do. What recourse did she have but to trade on the only asset she then possessed, her beauty? She would have been but one among many women in the brothels along the Mississippi with a trace of black "blood." I weep for the ill will human beings have held toward each other, and for Ella, if a remote fact of family history forced her away from her husband and child and into the arms of fancy men. I'm glad for her if some unknown man cared enough for her, was enchanted enough by her beauty, however tarnished, to take her in and live with her as his wife. The pain of her story, though, is part of my story too and that of my whole family and is with me always, until I breathe my last.

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