CHAPTER THREE

PINK AND SISTER

While the descendants of Mississippi's antebellum elite had experienced steep economic and social decline in the decades following the Civil War, the descendants of slaves barely moved the needle of progress in their favor during those same years. True, they were now free, but their former owners sought to curtail that freedom in every way possible through restrictive laws, discriminatory labor contracts, incarceration, and racial violence. These conditions made it extremely difficult, though not impossible, for black Mississippians to determine their own destiny.

Emily Burns and George Pearls represented the different paths southern blacks took in the twentieth century when they came of age. Born and raised in Natchez, Emily remained there, married, and worked as a laundress for white families in town. George was also born in Adams County, on one of its many plantations, under the name of Lawrence Williams. Yet around the time of the First World War, he left for Chicago seeking a better life. He joined the mass exodus of African Americans in the Great Migration, relocating to northern cities in search of jobs and the promise of personal freedom they were unable to experience in the world of the Jim Crow South.[1]

Emily was born around 1895, and like most black Natchezeans of her generation, her grandparents had been slaves. Her father, James Black, was born in Louisiana in 1865, just as the Civil War ended. Census records show that his father came from Mississippi and his mother from Maryland, though both ended up slaves in Louisiana. In the case of James's mother, her birth in Maryland meant that she was one of nearly one million men, women, and children who were transported to the Deep South as prime commodities in America's domestic slave trade in the decades before the Civil War.[2] It was a trade fed by the cotton boom that peaked in the 1830s and again in the 1850s, sending black

lives to Louisiana and Mississippi to cultivate the crop that made millionaires out of families like the Merrills and the Minors of Natchez.

To put it another way, the life of Emily's paternal grandmother followed the pattern of other slave women who were born in Maryland. She was bought by a slave trader from a Maryland planter, separated from her family, and taken from the only home she had probably ever known. She was shackled alongside other slave women and men and put on a ship docked in Baltimore that was bound for the Port of New Orleans. Once in the Crescent City, she was placed in one of its slave pens. Then, as had happened to other slave women, her hair was combed, she was dressed for sale, and she was made to stand on the auction block. There a planter purchased her for the purpose of laboring in the fields of a Louisiana cotton plantation. She may even have made the journey by steamboat to Natchez, where she would have been enclosed in a slave pen at the Forks of the Road, the second-largest slave trading post in the Deep South outside of New Orleans, before finally being auctioned to a local planter.[3]

Emily's family history was woven into the fabric of American slavery on her mother's side, too. Her mother, Nellie Smith, was born in 1877, twelve years after the end of the Civil War and just as white leaders in the state reassumed control over state government and went to work dismantling what little progress had been made by Reconstruction. And while she was not born into slavery, her mother, Agnes Smith, born in 1852, and her grandmother Abigail Bell, born around 1835, had most certainly been slaves.[4] In fact, is it very likely that Emily's grandmother Agnes may have been fathered by a slave owner, since she was listed as "mulatto" in U.S. Census records. After growing up on a farm her mother owned out on Liberty Road, Nellie married James Black in 1894, when he was twenty-nine and she was a young woman of seventeen. A year after they married, they welcomed their daughter, and only child, Emily, into the world. So Emily grew up in an extended family of her parents, her grandmother, aunts and uncles, and numerous cousins.[5]

To understand the world into which Emily Black was born, one must understand Natchez as a place. Large as its black community was, it was a community relegated to the outskirts of town—in and around the Forks of the Road at the intersection of Washington and Liberty Roads. Washington (now D'Evereux Drive) fed into St. Catherine Street, which later became the center

Smith family photo, ca. 1913. Emily Burns, eighteen, sits on the far left of the center row, wearing a shirtwaist and tie. Her mother, Nellie Black, stands behind her. Emily's uncle George "Doc" Smith stands in the center, and her grandmother, Agnes Smith, sits on the far right. (Courtesy of Birdia Green and Phyliss Morris, Natchez, Miss.)

of black life—the very same street down which newly imported slaves were once driven from steamships on the Mississippi River to be sold.

The black population of Natchez grew in the aftermath of the Civil War as former slaves tested their newfound freedom through the simple act of moving from plantations to town. While most freedmen stayed on those lands as sharecroppers, many others chose to leave the places where they had been enslaved. They sought out more urban environments and new work arrangements, rejecting the grueling toil of cotton production. Among them were men and women who had labored on the plantations of Concordia Parish, Louisiana, just across the river from Natchez, or who had been slaves on plantations in Adams or nearby Jefferson Counties. They moved to the town of planter millionaires, where they saw for themselves the luxurious homes their former masters enjoyed, direct products of their slave labor.[6]

They built churches and schools, too, institutions that fed the spirit and the mind. On the outskirts of town along Liberty Road, they erected Antioch Baptist Church, the church Emily grew up in and where her extended family of aunts, uncles, and cousins worshipped. Organized on August 1, 1900, Antioch was initially a wooden structure that doubled as a school for local children. Emily herself may have learned to read and write there. And while the road on which Antioch was built was named for a town in Mississippi, there was a sweet irony in building a black institution on a thoroughfare named "Liberty," given that coffles of slaves were once marched in chains along this same route to be sold at the Forks.[7]

In the decades after the war, Natchez freedmen needed places to live. Few had the resources to build their own homes, so they relied on rental property —often no more than wooden shacks—erected by local whites. Most of them were located on the edges of town along St. Catherine Street and its alleyways and close to the old slave trading post where area planters had purchased their parents, or perhaps even them. By the early decades of the twentieth century, men like Charles Zerkowsky, a Polish Jew who ran a grocery store on St. Catherine, owned those properties and continued to rent them to African Americans, most of whom would never know the pride of home ownership in their lifetime. So they rented those little houses and duplexes that by the 1920s were already run-down shacks.[8]

Still, St. Catherine Street emerged as a vibrant corridor of activity and promise for the black community. It ran from the Forks to Zion Rest African Methodist Episcopal Church, founded and led by Hiram Revels. Revels, a free black man from North Carolina, had served as a chaplain to black troops during the Civil War and became the first African American U.S. senator in the history of the nation. Along St. Catherine, one could find O'Ferral's grocery, a gristmill, a filling station, churches, saloons, and mortuaries. African Americans made up the vast majority of inhabitants, yet there were also Italians, French, Irish, and Poles. Jews, Catholics, Baptists, and Methodists were all represented. Holy Family Catholic Church, the first African American Catholic church in the state, was among the houses of worship along St. Catherine. It was the most diverse area of the city.[9]

Whether with his parents or as a young man, Emily's father, James, was one of many African Americans who left behind the Louisiana plantation on which he was born for possibilities in Natchez. At least by 1912, and perhaps before, he worked as a laborer at the National Box Factory—a company that

built wooden crates for shipping goods. The factory employed a large black male workforce yet paid them poorly, which is why thirty of them went on strike for better wages at the factory in 1920. Whether James participated is unknown; however, his income was such that he never owned a home and his small family always lived in rental property in and around St. Catherine Street near the Forks.[10]

Southern black women like his wife, Nellie, had far fewer employment choices. The vast majority of black women worked as domestics—cooking, cleaning, washing, and ironing for white families. They often labored long hours for little pay, as little as four dollars for six days a week and ten- to twelve-hour days, only to go home to do the same tasks for their own families. Being a laundress was unique among domestic work in that it gave black women the most autonomy, even if it was arduous, because the work could be done from home and away from white supervision. Nellie Black was a laundress, and as soon as Emily was old enough, she became one, too.[11]

Emily, who went by the familiar "Sister," grew up moving between those shacks along St. Catherine Street before her family eventually settled in one located between Cedar and Junkin Alleys, literally a stone's throw from the Forks. She was a short woman, around five feet tall, and carried a little extra weight, though not much. She had a fifth-grade education, so she could read and write. Like most black girls, her childhood was cut short in order to support her family. Probably between the ages of twelve and fourteen, she went to work helping her mother. She had no choice. Then, sometime in 1911, at the tender age of sixteen, she married a farm laborer named Edward Burns, who was ten years her senior. The couple never had children and lived with her parents on St. Catherine Street during their entire marriage until Ed's untimely death sometime in the late 1920s. Her father, James, also died around the same time, very likely in 1929.[12]

When the 1930s began, Emily Burns was thirty-five, widowed, and living with her mother, Nellie Black, now fifty-three and also a widow. They did what most black women with insufficient income in Natchez did: they took in boarders. In 1930, twenty-six-year-old Ed Newell became a lodger in the home Emily shared with her mother. He worked as an embalmer for the Bluff City Undertaking Company, one of several local black-owned businesses in town. His full name was Edgar Allan Poe Newell, a name appropriate to his occupation and one that foreshadowed what was to come from his association with Sister, even though he generally went by "Poe."[13]

So when summer came in 1932, Sister, now thirty-seven, was barely eking out an existence as a laundress. By then the country was in the depths of the Depression, and she and her mother were hanging on by a thread. In late July, her life took a turn for the better, at least so she thought, when a nice-looking man from Chicago came to town and showed her some attention. Not long after, he moved to the home she shared with her mother on St. Catherine Street. He introduced himself to her as Pinkney Williams. She called him "Pink."[14]

Pink was twenty years older than Sister when they met in the summer of 1932. A handsome man, he stood just five-feet-seven, and at 140 pounds he had a slim build.[15] He had dark brown skin, kept his hair cut short—typical of the time—and sported a mustache. While she knew him as Pink, she would later discover that he also went by Lawrence Williams and, in Chicago, was known as George Pearls. Nicknames and aliases were not unusual in the black community, since naming one another became a way of rejecting the history of having names given to them by slave masters. Sometimes they were needed to outwit the law, especially at a time when black men could be arrested and sent to jail—or worse, lynched—for the slightest affront to a member of white society. They may have also needed one for wooing women who weren't their wives. For Pink, it appears to have been a little of both.[16]

Pink was born in 1875 in Mississippi, and both of his parents were Louisiana natives, where they most assuredly had been slaves. Like Emily's parents, Pink grew up in Mississippi during a time of rapid social, economic, and political change. When the Civil War ended, the state's black population stood at 55 percent of the entire whole—in Adams County it was closer to 70 percent—and white Mississippians were hardly willing to accept the idea of former slaves circulating among them freely. For two years following the war, the period known as Presidential Reconstruction essentially left former Confederates in control of Mississippi. And only seven months after the war's conclusion, in November 1865, the state legislature enacted Black Codes with the intent of replicating the control whites had over blacks under slavery. These codes restricted freedmen's newly won rights of citizenship as they were unable to own guns, needed a license to preach the gospel, and had to prove they were employed by producing a written contract to authorities or else be arrested for vagrancy. The vagrancy laws were especially pernicious. If found guilty, a person could be fined as much as one hundred dollars, a sum most

George Pearls, also known as Lawrence Williams and Pinkney Williams, or "Pink." This photo, printed in the *Natchez Democrat* on August 23, 1932, likely came from the trunk of his belongings taken as evidence by sheriff's deputies.

freedmen simply didn't have. Those unable to pay were punished at the discretion of the local sheriff, who could "hire out said freedman, free Negro, or mulatto to any person who [would] . . . pay said fine." This was simply another form of slavery, since white men who paid the fines found ways of ensuring that freedmen would never be able to work off the debt.[17]

Black men and women who remained on plantations after the war, and for decades after, were afraid of their white employers, whom they still referred to as "master." Planters continued to hire "riding bosses," men on horseback whose job was to ensure productivity even if it meant flogging black tenants. Their fear of "white folks" was very real. "We had to mind them as our children mind us," one woman recalled. "It was just like slavery time."[18]

Federal officer Colonel Samuel Thomas saw this firsthand. The U.S. government sent Thomas to Vicksburg, about seventy miles north of Natchez, to open an office of the Freedmen's Bureau to assist former slaves in their transition to freedom. When he testified before Congress in late 1865, he explained how whites in Mississippi not only defied attempts at Reconstruction but also willfully used violence to maintain control over freedmen. "The whites esteem the blacks their property by natural right," Thomas explained, "and however much they may admit that the individual relations of masters and slaves have been destroyed by the war and the President's emancipation proclamation, they still have an ingrained feeling that the blacks at large belong to the whites at large."[19]

Thomas's testimony, and that of other Freedmen's Bureau officials, convinced Congress it needed to take more definitive steps to institute real Reconstruction. Republicans ushered in the era of Radical Reconstruction, which lasted for eleven years, 1867–1876, in Mississippi, as it sought to fulfill the promise of citizenship for freedmen. More than two hundred black Mississippians held public office during those years, and the state sent the first two black senators to Congress—Hiram Revels, as mentioned above, and Blanche Bruce.[20]

White Mississippians, shocked by their reversal of fortune and control, were having none of it. They brought Reconstruction to an end through violence and intimidation. Ku Klux Klansmen hid beneath costumes, pretending to be the ghosts of Confederate soldiers. They beat or murdered Republicans and terrorized black men and women. And they did so with impunity as officials looked away, intimidated by the punishment inflicted on others.[21]

Pink, and Sister's parents, were born into this world of intimidation and violence and had to navigate it if they were to survive. And while James and Nellie stayed in Natchez, whites in the state gave black Mississippians justifiable reasons to join the migration of blacks from across the South to cities throughout the North in the early twentieth century. Pink chose Chicago.

There was a saying in the black community that "it's better to be a lamppost in Chicago than a big deal in Natchez."[22] Simply put, Natchez was small potatoes compared to the Windy City. Chicago was a vibrant metropolis, and there someone like Pink, who took on the name of George Pearls, could be part of a larger black community made up of thousands of like-minded folks from all over the South. The music that blared from local bars had a familiar ring, too—jazz and blues from New Orleans and Mississippi adapted to the rapid pace of city living.

He eventually settled in the village of Summit, a Chicago suburb located about twelve miles from the city. There he lived with his second wife, Meadie, a Texas native who was sixteen years his junior. His daughter from a previous marriage, Amelia Garner, lived nearby. By 1930, George and Meadie rented a house at 7727 Sixty-Second Street, just down the block from the Corn Products Refining Company, where he worked. At the time, the plant was the largest corn refinery in the world and manufactured products like cornstarch under the brand name Argo. In fact, the area where the couple lived was known as Argo before it was annexed by Summit.[23]

If there ever was a melting pot, Summit was it. One of the largest of Chicago's suburbs, the area had grown from fewer than six hundred residents in 1900 to more than sixty-five hundred in 1930. African Americans made up only 7.5 percent of residents in 1930, which stood in stark contrast to Natchez, where more than half of the population was black. The majority who lived there were natives with foreign parentage or who were themselves foreign-born: Poles, Croats, Slovaks, Russians, and even a few Mexicans. George and Meadie's neighbors reflected that diversity, as they included Polish, Lithuanian, and Mexican households in addition to families of black southern migrants from Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, and South Carolina.[24]

George worked with many of those same people, black and white, at the refinery. But in 1932, the effects of the Great Depression meant that many of these men lost their jobs. This likely happened to George Pearls, which is why he left his Chicago suburb in the summer of 1932. Desperate, he returned to his native Mississippi, to familiar land and familiar work. He packed up a large steamer trunk of his belongings and set south, eventually landing not in Greenville, not in Jackson or McComb, but in Natchez. He made a conscious decision in choosing the Bluff City, not a random one, because it was his hometown and he knew the whites he had once worked for, including, for a brief time, Duncan Minor.[25]

As was common given the conditions of roads at the time, he traveled to Natchez by train, on the Illinois Central, which ran between Chicago and New Orleans. When he got to town he hitched a ride to 33 Beaumont Street, where Zula Curtis, a forty-six-year-old widow, ran a boardinghouse. He did not stay there long, maybe a week, when he moved his belongings to 230 St. Catherine Street in the duplex shared by Emily Burns, her mother, and their boarder Poe. Maybe room and board was cheaper, but it appears that George

may have taken a personal interest in Sister and she in him. Nonetheless, he took the time to write his wife, Meadie, a letter:

> Dear Wife Just a few lines as to let you hear from me this leaves me well and I made my arivel [*sic*] to Natchez safe and dear I do hope this will fine [*sic*] you feeling better so I am in Natchez for awhile so I just wants to let you know where I am at so you be sweet and let me hear from you real soon. I will write you a long letter next time so this is all from your husband G. Pearls
>
> Address to 230 St. Catherine Street,
> Natchez, Miss.[26]

As the nation headed deeper into economic collapse, jobs nationally dried up, and if there was any work for black men in Adams County in 1932, it was most likely farm labor or piecemeal work doing odd jobs for local whites. That summer in Natchez, Pink struggled to find the most basic employment. Testimony collected after Jennie Merrill's death suggests that he had sought work from both her and Duncan Minor and was rebuffed. Minor later recalled that a Negro, who had given his name as Lawrence Williams, had been "insolent" when Minor turned him away. In truth, any black man who did not show deference to white authority was likely to be regarded as disrespectful. Perhaps Williams suggested to both Jennie Merrill and Duncan Minor that he knew they had the money to hire him, which is why they considered him "insolent." To whites like Jennie and Duncan, whose family wealth had been built on cotton and slaves, he was just another black face whom they did not know by name. Yet Pink remembered his treatment, and he was right to believe that they had money. Because they did. Even during the Great Depression, rich people were still rich.[27]

So, as July turned into August, Pink was desperate for income, though how he came to strike up a conversation with Dick Dana and Octavia Dockery remains a mystery. Perhaps, after being rejected for work by Jennie Merrill, he simply walked next door to Glenwood to see if he might be hired. The decaying old mansion and the poorly maintained land on which it sat should have instantly signaled to him that he would find no paid work there. And yet on Thursday afternoon, August 4, Pink found himself talking with Dick and Octavia.

CHAPTER FOUR

MURDER AT GLENBURNIE

Dick Dana and Octavia Dockery had struggled to make ends meet for years. It was bad enough that goats roamed their house; they were also reduced to killing and eating them, too. Octavia regularly waged court battles with the various owners of Glenwood who had purchased it for unpaid taxes, managing to keep the property in litigation and herself and her ward in a home. As the pair spoke with the black man who called himself Lawrence Williams, the three of them swiftly realized that they shared more in common than poverty. They all had a disdain for the "haves," especially for the owner of Glenburnie. In Octavia Dockery's case, her contempt for Jennie Merrill went back for more than a decade. Merrill had money but had gone after what little Octavia and Dick had because of some trespassing hogs and goats. Williams's anger stemmed from being dismissed by wealthy whites he believed should have hired him. He had worked in the corn refinery and lived in a Chicago suburb for so long, he had nearly forgotten what it was like to deal with white planters like Merrill and Duncan Minor. Both refreshed his memory.[1]

No one will ever know the actual content of their conversation, but together the three spoke about Jennie Merrill. Octavia assumed her old foe kept money in the house, since the Depression led people to safeguard their cash at home rather than risk keeping it in the bank. She also knew that Duncan Minor's nightly visits to Glenburnie were so regular, between 8:30 and 9:00 P.M., she could set her watch by him. So, she and Williams made the plan to rob Merrill that evening, just after sunset but before Minor arrived. All stood to benefit from any money found, but Octavia no doubt relished the idea of getting revenge on Jennie. And wild-eyed Dick found it all very exciting. Pink could return to his life in Chicago with money in his pocket and tell his wife that the trip to Natchez to find work had been a success. And Jennie Merrill would get her just deserts.

30. Thomas Bulger to Octavia Dockery, June 23, 1896, and November 11, 1896, ibid.
31. Dockery, "Held by the Enemy."
32. Dmitri, "So Red the Rose," 19.
33. U.S. Census 1900 and 1910, Adams County.
34. U.S. Census 1910.
35. "Mrs. Richard H. Forman Buried," *ND*, February 21, 1911, 6.
36. Sadie Foreman is shown as a renter at a house on Rankin Street in the Natchez, Mississippi, City Directory, 1912.
37. Diary, 1906–1907, Dana and Family Papers, LLMVC.
38. Octavia Dockery is listed as a boarder at a home on Pine Street in the Natchez, Mississippi, City Directory, 1912, 109.
39. Descriptions are drawn from Gwen Bristow's reporting with the *Times-Picayune* in August 1932.
40. Re: Guardianship of R. H. C. Dana to the Chancery Court of Adams County, Mississippi, January term, 1919, Adams County Chancery Court Records, HNF. Chancellor R. W. Cutrer approved Mulvihill's request to lease Glenwood to Dockery on March 29, 1919.
41. Ibid.
42. Dana's beating of Octavia is discussed in "Inquiry in Natchez Shifted to Skunk's Nest Area," *TP*, August 14, 1932.
43. There were several accounts of Dana spending time outside on the estate. See, for example, "New Fingerprints of Dick Dana Are Being Compared," *ND*, August 9, 1932.
44. Details of the history of the "Skunk's Nest" are from "Will of Murdered Natchez Eccentric Gives All to Minor," *TP*, August 12, 1932.

CHAPTER THREE

1. U.S. Federal Census, 1930, Summit Township, Chicago, records George Pearls's birthplace as Mississippi and both parents as from Louisiana. On the Great Migration, see Wilkerson, *Warmth of Other Suns*.
2. On the domestic slave trade, see Deyle, *Carry Me Back*; Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*; and Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told*.
3. Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*, 40–41; Scarborough, *Masters of the Big House*, 3–9.
4. The names of Nellie's mother and grandmother were revealed in a conversation with Emily Burns's second cousins, specifically with Linda Griffin, Natchez, Miss., October 9, 2015.
5. U.S. Federal Census, 1900, 1910, 1920, 1930; Natchez, Mississippi, City Directories, 1912, 1922, 1925, 1928. The names of Emily's grandmother and great-grandmother are contained in the Smith family Bible.
6. On the movement of former slaves to urban areas, see Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South*, 4–30.

7. Members of Emily's family continue to worship at Antioch Baptist Church.
8. Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps tell the story of St. Catherine Street, as do details from Natchez City Directories and U.S. Federal Census records.
9. Ibid.
10. Dolensky, "Natchez in 1920," 24.
11. Sharpless, *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens*, 65–88.
12. Emily's marriage and address were culled from U.S. Federal Census data for 1920 and 1930, as well as from Natchez City Directories. Edward Burns is listed as her husband in the 1925 Natchez City Directory, 59.
13. The U.S. Federal Census of 1930 shows Newell as a boarder and an embalmer. The Natchez City Directory for 1928 lists him as employed by Bluff City Undertaking.
14. Emily's name for Williams is confirmed in her signed confession, in which she refers to him as "Pink," short for Pinkney. Burns Signed Confession, August 23,1932, East Papers, LLMVC.
15. Williams/Pearls's height and weight are based on Maurice O'Neill's notes on the case, which were transcribed by Charles East during his visit with O'Neill's daughter, Marion Prevost. East Papers, LLMVC.
16. While Wells's *Master Detective* series on the crime embellished some details about George Pearls, including that he was a "big burly Negro," it accurately described many known details of the crime. According to the September 1933 issue, some of the items found in his trunk of belongings were letters from several women with whom there was romantic familiarity. H. Wells, "Crimson Crime at Glenburney Manor," September 1933, 57.
17. Phillips, "Reconstruction in Mississippi," accessed June 8, 2015; Blackmon, *Slavery By Another Name*, 27.
18. As quoted in McMillen, *Dark Journey*, 125.
19. "Samuel Thomas, Testimony before Congress, 1865," https://chnm.gmu.edu/courses/122/recon/thomas.htm, accessed July 8, 2015.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Quote from Duncan Morgan, interview with author, Natchez, Mississippi, July 21, 2013.
23. Schroeder, "Summit, IL"; and M. Wilson, "Food Processing," accessed August 11, 2015.
24. U.S. Federal Census of 1930 lists "George Pearls," Summit Township, Cook County, Illinois. See also Schroeder, "Summit, IL."
25. "Coroner Abandons Attempt to Reopen Inquest in Murder," *TP*, August 11, 1932, reveals Pearls used to work for Minor.
26. Pearls's letter to his wife transcribed by Charles East from Maurice O'Neill's investigative notes, East Papers, LLMVC.
27. Minor quote from "Coroner Abandons Attempt to Reopen Inquest in Murder," *TP*, August 11, 1932.