

Paper bag records and sweet potato pie

[Life](#)



Sweet Potato Pie Eugenia Collier From up here on the fourteenth floor, my brother Charley looks like an insect scurrying among other insects. A deep feeling of love surges through me. Despite the distance, he seems to feel it, for he turns and scans the upper windows, but failing to find me, continues on his way. I watch him moving quickly” gingerly, it seems to me” down Fifth Avenue and around the corner to his shabby taxicab. In a moment he will be heading back uptown. I turn from the window and flop down on the bed, shoes and all.

Perhaps because of what happened this afternoon or maybe Just because I see Charley so seldom, my thoughts hover over him like hummingbirds. The cheerful, impersonal tidiness of this room is a world away from Charleys walk-up flat in Harlem and a hundred worlds from the bare, noisy shanty where he and the rest of us spent what there was of our childhood. I close my eyes and side by side I see the Charley of my boyhood and the Charley of this afternoon, as clearly as if I were looking at a split TV screen. Another surge of love, seasoned with gratitude, wells up in me.

As far as I know, Charley never had any childhood at all. The oldest children of sharecroppers never do. Mama and Pa were shadowy figures whose voices I heard aguely in the morning when sleep was shallow and whom I glimpsed as they left for the field before I was fully awake or as they trudged wearily into the house at night when my lids were irresistibly heavy. They came into sharp focus only on special occasions. One such occasion was the day when the crops were in and the sharecroppers were paid. In our cabin there was so much excitement in the air that even I, the " baby' responded to it.

For weeks we had been running out of things that we could neither grow nor get on credit. On the evening of that day we waited anxiously for our parents' return. Then we would cluster around the rough wooden table" I on Lil's lap or clinging to Charley's neck, little Alberta nervously tugging her plait, Jamie crouched at Mama's elbow, like a panther about to spring, and all seven of us silent for once, waiting. Pa would place the money on the table" gently, for it was made from the sweat of their bodies and from the children's tears.

Mama would count it out in little piles, her dark face stern and, I think now, beautiful. Not with the hollow beauty of well-modeled features but with the strong radiance of one who has suffered and never yielded. " This for the store bill," she would mutter, making a pile. " This for collection. T for a piece of gingham... " and so on, stretching the money as tight over our collective needs as Jamie's outgrown pants were stretched over my bottom. " Well, that's the crop. " She would look up at Pa at last. " It'll do. " Pa's face would relax, and a general grin flitted from child to child.

We would survive, at least for the present. The other time when my parents were solid entities was at church. On Sundays we would don our threadbare Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes and tramp, along with neighbors similarly attired, to the Tabernacle Baptist Church, the frail edifice of bare boards held together by God knows what, which was all that my parents ever knew of security and future promise. Being the youngest and therefore the most likely to err, I was plopped between my father and my mother on the long wooden bench.

They sat huge and eternal like twin mountains at my sides. I remember my father's still, black profile silhouetted against the sunny window, looking back into dark recesses of time, into some dim antiquity, like an ancient ceremonial mask. My mother's face, usually sternly set, changed with the varying nuances of her emotion, its planes shifting, shaped by the soft highlights of the sanctuary, as she progressed from the subdued "amen" to a loud "Help me, Jesus" wrung from the depths of her gaunt frame. My early memories of my parents are associated with special occasions.

The contours of my everyday were shaped by Lil and Charley, the oldest children, who rode herd on the rest of us while Pa and Mama toiled in fields not their own. Not until years later did I realize that Lil and Charley were little more than children themselves. Lil had the loudest, screechiest voice in the county. When she yelled, "Boy, you better git yourself in here!" you got yourself in there. It was Lil who caught and bathed us, Lil who fed us and sent us to school, Lil who punished us when we needed punishing and comforted us when we needed comforting. If her voice was loud, so was her laughter.

When she laughed, everybody laughed. And when Lil sang, everybody listened. Charley was taller than anybody in the world, including, I was certain, God. From his shoulders, where I spent considerable time in the earliest years, the world had a different perspective: I looked down on the heads rather than at the undersides of chins. As I grew older, Charley became more father than brother. Those days return in fragments of splintered memory: Charley's slender dark hands whittling a toy from a chunk

of wood, his face thin and intense, brown as the loaves Lil baked when there was flour.

Charleys quick fingers guiding a stick of charred kindling over a bit of scrap paper, making a wondrous picture take shape” Jamie's face or Alberta's rag doll or the spare figure of our bony brown dog. Charleys voice low and terrible in the dark, telling ghost stories so delightfully dreadful that later in the night the moan of the wind through the chinks in the wall sent us scurrying to the security of Charleys pallet, Charleys sleeping form. Some memories are more than fragmentary. I can still feel the whap of the wet dish rag across my mouth. Somehow I developed a stutter, which Charley was determined to cure.

Someone had told him that an effective cure was to slap the stuttered across the mouth with a sopping wet dish rag. Thereafter whenever I began, " Let's g -g-g- -," whap! From nowhere would come the ubiquitous rag. Charley would always insist, " I don't want to hurt you none, Buddy"" and whap again. I don't know when or why I stopped stuttering. But I stopped. Already laid waste by poverty, we were easy prey for ignorance and superstition, hich hunted us like hawks. We sought education feverishly” and, for most of us, futilely, for the sum total of our combined energies was required for mere brute survival.