chapter 4

GINNY'S BOOKS
WE ARRIVED IN AN ALABAMA SIMMERING WITH RACIAL STRIFE.

OF WHICH I REMAINED COMPLETELY OBLIVIOUS.
All over the South, “our way of life” had come under siege.

Deep in the heart of Dixie, Jim Crow hadn’t yet surrendered to the inevitable, but his days were numbered.

It was the signs that helped me see.

I’ll never eat here again!

But, why?

Shh... Not here. I’ll explain later.
E. M. Forster’s
A Passage to India

I Sought approval, but she didn’t give a damn.

My sister Ginny, 11 years older, opened my eyes to many things.

She was hip and gave brains glamour, unlike any other smart girl I knew.

I molded, but Ginny refused to conform.

I trembled, but she dared to question authority.
How do you do? Very well, thank you.

What, then, did they make of Ginny and her iconoclastic ways?

Judson College, where Ginny studied, shaped young ladies into scholars and southern belles.

Exhibit A: Her LP collection

Exhibit B: Her books

Exhibit C: Her eyes.

She'd raised the drop-dead stare to an art form.

I idolized her.
I learned about things that teachers never mentioned.

And that even my big sisters passed off with an “I’ll tell you when you’re older.”

Things that cried out for explanation.

That my parents never fully addressed.
In the pages of *Black Like Me*, I read the account of a white writer, John Howard Griffin, who in 1959 went undercover as a black man.

*He darkened his skin with the aid of a drug.*

He went around the South fooling people of both races, subjecting himself to the indignities and perils faced by men of color every day.

He entered a world that most white people had only glimpsed from without: the black experience.

*Get your sorry black ass out of my way.*

I was transfixed.

Just beneath the veneer of my hometown was such a world.
BLACK PATIENTS USED THE HEALTH CLINIC’S ALLEY ENTRANCE.

I saw that black maids were supposed to sit in the back seat of their employers’ cars.

I saw that black people were supposed to...

...go around to the back door of white people’s houses.

INSIDE, A SEPARATE WAITING ROOM.

I saw this with my own eyes.
I saw that each side afforded the other a distinct interpretation of respect.

Good morning, mister Green.

Mornin', big Jim.

And I saw other inequities.

Say, is that your cousin Louise?

Ooh wee! She sure has grown up!

Yet, turning the tables:

You out of your mind? Don't you even look at white girls!

You want to end up like Emmett Till, for crying out loud?

No, sir.
I saw that these separations began in the hospital nursery.
AND RAN STRAIGHT TO THE GRAVEYARD.
I was a 2nd grader when the physical world grew hazy.

Sometimes people in the balcony stomped and whistled and jeered.

Sometimes they rained popcorn down on our heads.

Mama, everything’s blurry.

We were there to see Jerry Lewis in the Nutty Professor.

But even nearsighted, I saw that black people had no choice but to sit in the balcony.

Nobody else seemed horrified.

Sometimes people in the balcony stomped and whistled and jeered.

Sometimes they rained popcorn down on our heads.

No white person could’ve said, “Oh, I had no idea!”

Mama, everything’s blurry.
I knew only one black person in those days—Mrs. Jackson, the lady that helped out with ironing now and then. What a discovery. The visual world was a thing of wonder. I hadn’t suspected its breadth and richness. But now I saw.

Still, my eyeglasses didn’t correct a particular blindspot: the faces of black people looked interchangeable to me.

I knew only one black person in those days—Mrs. Jackson, the lady that helped out with ironing now and then.

She refused invitations to join the family at lunch, which left me asking, why?

I couldn’t bear to see her eating alone, so I sat with her. But neither of us spoke.