1

The first decade of the twentieth century was not a great time to be born black and poor and female in St. Louis, Missouri, but Vivian Baxter was born black and poor, to black and poor parents. Later she would grow up and be called beautiful. As a grown woman she would be known as the butter-colored lady with the blowback hair.

Her father, a Trinidadian with a heavy Caribbean accent, had jumped from a banana boat in Tampa, Florida, and evaded immigration agents successfully all his life. He spoke often and loudly with pride at being an American citizen. No one explained to him that simply wanting to be a citizen was not enough to make him one.

Contrasting with her father's dark chocolate complexion, her mother was light-colored enough to pass for white. She was called an octoroon, meaning that she had one-eighth Negro blood. Her hair was

long and straight. At the kitchen table, she amused her children by whirling her braids like ropes and then later sitting on them.

Although Vivian's mother's people were Irish, she had been raised by German adoptive parents, and she spoke with a decided German accent.

Vivian was the firstborn of the Baxter children. Her sister Leah was next, followed by brothers Tootie, Cladwell, Tommy, and Billy.

As they grew, their father made violence a part of their inheritance. He said often, "If you get in jail for theft or burglary, I will let you rot. But if you are charged with fighting, I will sell your mother to get your bail."

The family became known as the "Bad Baxters." If someone angered any of them, they would track the offender to his street or to his saloon. The brothers (armed) would enter the bar. They would station themselves at the door, at the ends of the bar, and at the toilets. Uncle Cladwell would grab a wooden chair and break it, handing Vivian a piece of the chair.

He would say, "Vivian, go kick that bastard's ass."

Vivian would ask, "Which one?"

Then she would take the wooden weapon and use it to beat the offender.

When her brothers said, "That's enough," the Baxter gang would gather their violence and quit the

scene, leaving their mean reputation in the air. At home they told their fighting stories often and with great relish.

Grandmother Baxter played piano in the Baptist church and she liked to hear her children sing spiritual gospel songs. She would fill a cooler with Budweiser and stack bricks of ice cream in the refrigerator.

The same rough Baxter men led by their fierce older sister would harmonize in the kitchen on "Jesus Keep Me Near the Cross":

There a precious fountain
Free to all, a healing stream,
Flows from Calvary's mountain.

The Baxters were proud of their ability to sing. Uncle Tommy and Uncle Tootie had bass voices; Uncle Cladwell, Uncle Ira, and Uncle Billy were tenors; Vivian sang alto; and Aunt Leah sang a high soprano (the family said she also had a sweet tremolo). Many years later, I heard them often, when my father, Bailey Johnson Sr., took me and my brother, called Junior, to stay with the Baxters in St. Louis. They were proud to be loud and on key. Neighbors often dropped in and joined the songfest, each trying to sing loudest.

Vivian's father always wanted to hear about the rough games his sons played. He would listen eagerly,

but if their games ended without a fight or at least a scuffle, he would blow air through his teeth and say, "That's little boys' play. Don't waste my time with silly tales."

Then he would tell Vivian, "Bibbi, these boys are too big to play little girls' games. Don't let them grow up to be women."

Vivian took his instruction seriously. She promised her father she would make sure they were tough. She led her brothers to the local park and made them watch as she climbed the highest tree. She picked fights with the toughest boys in her neighborhood, never asking her brothers to help, counting on them to wade into the fight without being asked.

Her father chastised her when she called her sister a sissy.

He said, "She's just a girl, but you are more than that. Bibbi, you are Papa's little girl-boy. You won't have to be so tough forever. When Cladwell gets up some size, he will take over."

Vivian said, "If I let him."

Everyone laughed, and recounted the escapades about when Vivian taught them how to be tough.

2

My mother, who was to remain a startling beauty, met my father, a handsome soldier, in 1924. Bailey Johnson had returned from World War I with officer's honors and a fake French accent. They were unable to restrain themselves. They fell in love while Vivian's brothers walked around him threateningly. He had been to war, and he was from the South, where a black man learned early that he had to stand up to threats, or else he wasn't a man.

The Baxter boys could not intimidate Bailey Johnson, especially after Vivian told them to lay off, to straighten up, and fly right. Vivian's parents were not happy that she was marrying a man from the South who was neither a doctor nor lawyer. He said he was a dietitian. The Baxters said that meant he was just a Negro cook.

Vivian and Bailey left the contentious Baxter atmosphere and moved to California, where little Bai-

ley was born. I came along two years later. My parents soon proved to each other that they couldn't stay together. They were matches and gasoline. They even argued about how they were to break up. Neither wanted the responsibility of taking care of two toddlers. They separated and sent me and Bailey to my father's mother in Arkansas.

I was three and Bailey was five when we arrived in Stamps, Arkansas. We had identification tags on our arms and no adult supervision. I learned later that Pullman car porters and dining car waiters were known to take children off trains in the North and put them on other trains heading south.

Save for one horrific visit to St. Louis, we lived with my father's mother, Grandmother Annie Henderson, and her other son, Uncle Willie, in Stamps until I was thirteen. The visit to St. Louis lasted only a short time but I was raped there and the rapist had been killed. I thought I had caused his death because I told his name to the family. Out of guilt, I stopped talking to everyone except Bailey. I decided that my voice was so powerful that it could kill people, but it could not harm my brother because we loved each other so much.

My mother and her family tried to woo me away

from mutism but they didn't know what I knew: that my voice was a killing machine. They soon wearied of the sullen, silent child and sent us back to Grandmother Henderson in Arkansas, where we lived quietly and smoothly within my grandmother's care and under my uncle's watchful eye.

When my brilliant brother Bailey was fourteen he had reached a dangerous age for a black boy in the segregated South. It was a time when if a white person walked down the one paved block in town, any Negro on the street had to step aside and walk in the gutter.

Bailey would obey the unspoken order but sometimes he would sweep his arm theatrically and loudly say, "Yes, sir, you are the boss, boss."

Some neighbors saw how Bailey acted in front of white folks downtown and reported to Grandmother.

She called us both over and said to Bailey, "Junior"—her nickname for him—"you been downtown showing out? Don't you know these white folks will kill you for poking fun of them?"

"Momma"—my brother and I often called her that—"all I do is get off the street they are walking on. That's what they want, isn't it?"

"Junior, don't play smart with me. I knew the time would come when you would grow too old for the South. I just didn't expect it so soon. I will write

to your mother and daddy. You and Maya, and especially you, Bailey, will have to go back to California, and soon."

Bailey jumped up and kissed Grandmother. He said, "I'm Brer Rabbit in the briar patch."

Even Grandmother had to laugh. The folktale told how a farmer whose carrots the rabbit had been stealing caught Brer Rabbit. The farmer threatened to kill the rabbit and turn him into a stew. The rabbit said, "I deserve that, please kill me, just don't throw me in that briar patch, please sir, anything but that, anything."

The farmer asked, "You're afraid of the briar patch?"

Rabbit, shaking and trembling, said, "Yes, sir, please kill me and eat me, just don't throw me . . . "

The farmer grabbed the rabbit by its long ears and threw him into a stand of weeds.

Rabbit jumped up and down. "That's where I wanted to be all along!"

I knew Bailey wanted to be reunited with his mother, but I was very comfortable with Grandmother Henderson. I loved her and I liked her and I felt safe under the umbrella of her love. I knew that for Bailey's sake we had to go back to California. Black boys his age who even noticed white girls risked being beaten, bruised, or lynched by the Ku

Klux Klan. He had not yet mentioned a white girl, but as he was growing into his manhood, seeing a pretty white girl and being moved by her beauty was inevitable.

I said, "Yes, I'm ready to go."

"I am Lady, and still your mother."

(Stockton, California, 1976)