

# catina bacote

UP NORTH

AT EIGHTY-THREE YEARS OLD, my grandmother is tucked away on the eighth floor of a massive elderly complex. We sit at her dining room table, which divides the kitchen from the living room and all around us are the things she cherishes. The copper bookends she received as a wedding gift hold up a handful of books, pictures of every one of her grandchildren and great grandchildren line the walls, her collection of rap, R&B, country, and gospel CDs take up the shelf under her television, and the slender secretary desk where she keeps her journals faces a wall. Mama's small apartment is dim and warm, mostly because she keeps her windows closed and curtains pulled shut.

Even though the darkness feels like a way to mask the past I lay the photos of Eastern Circle side by side for her and we watch it happen: a worker mixing plaster inside walls with no roof, men in hardhats on a scaffold stacking bricks, a front door fitted onto its frame. In the earliest, black-and-white pictures, there's nothing but heaps of stone and mounds of dirt, but the last grainy photo shows a bird's eye view of the projects — two-dozen apartment buildings spread out around the Circle.

In the topographical map, it's labeled "a circular driveway" but there was a time when it seemed like something more. When I was a child the wide street in the center of the neighborhood brought us together for Wiffle ball, block parties, and barbecues and the way I remember it, even from inside our houses all one hundred and twenty families could roll up our shades and see a bit of it. I think that's why we called the projects by the name attached to the driveway: Eastern Circle.

My grandparents were one of the first families to move in the neighborhood in 1960, and over time four generations of our family settled there. Mama, who's dressed as usual in a full-length skirt and a long-sleeved blouse, shares her memories of her first days in the projects. Her full cheeks rise and fall and I smile right along with her. I'm enjoying forming pictures that I hadn't seen before, like my grandparents, not as Mama and Dada but as Louise Whitaker Allen and James Allen

Jr.: a daring young couple carving out a decent life for their family. Even my idea of Eastern Circle starts to shift. I was born twelve years after my grandparents arrived and so much had already changed.

Mama touches the photos' edges. The two-story brick buildings, the concrete porches, the small dirt yards, the surrounding woods, and even the mountains in the distance are all at her fingertips. For twenty-nine years she called Eastern Circle home, and it still looms large in her life; first because it fulfilled her most deeply held wishes and later because it broke its promise.

No one in our family lives in the projects anymore but our time there feels never-ending. Even the elderly complex Mama lives in, Bella Vista, sits in Eastern Circle's backyard. Whenever I visit her, the projects and all the years we spent there feel both hidden and in plain view. If I drew back the curtains, we'd face Eastern Circle. It's not the exact same one she arrived at more than five decades ago, brand spanking new and full of cheer; it's closer to the troubled one that marked us for life. Mama leans over the early photographs, which are easier to look at than the actual place, and remembers when she set out in the direction of her dreams.



At twenty years old, my grandmother Louise began her trek toward Eastern Circle. She boarded a Greyhound bus in Nashville, Tennessee, with her sister-in-law behind her and her one-year-old daughter bundled in her arms. She only had a small duffel bag because her husband, whom she called Junior, had already taken the suitcase filled with most of their possessions: his work shirts and pants holding the faint smell of oil, her two long pleated skirts and three button-down blouses, and the best dress she had — moss-colored with a high waist.

There were no tablecloths or doilies, empire curtains or handmade quilts to pack. After four years of marriage, they still didn't have a place of their own and that's exactly why they were leaving. Living with Junior's family had limited all the ways she and her husband could show they cared for each other. She didn't have any pots and pans to grease and scour, and he didn't have any loose floorboards to fix. And all

the hours they spent trying to stay out of the way and be quiet had put boundaries around their love.

As she watched her hometown of Nashville pass by out the slanted bus window, her biggest regret was leaving her three sisters behind. But what choice did she have, even though it was 1952, the best things in Music City were still off limits to her. She wasn't even allowed to squeeze herself in between the throng of white teenagers stacked in the wooden benches at the Grand Ole Opry. Instead she listened to DeFord Bailey's crooning harmonica and Minnie Pearl's scratchy voice on WSM. Sometimes she'd press her face against the radio's dials and let the country and blues songs pass right through her.

Only two things brought the entire family around the radio. Big news stories, like the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and anything that had to do with their own kind. Broadcasts about people like them were few, swinging wildly between what the stations deemed Negro achievement (the Tuskegee Airman fly to Italy to beat back fascism) and the disgrace of an unruly race (hundreds in Detroit and Harlem smash windows and burn down buildings). More frequently they heard blasts about actors, singers, and dancers, and of course there were the sporting events.

When she was eleven years old, Hurricane Henry, who was black, duked it out in a boxing ring with The Clutch, who was white. Louise's grandparents settled into kitchen chairs set on both sides of the radio and her mother perched herself on a stool. She and her sisters plopped down on the floor right in front of the radio, crossed their legs, and looked up as if all the action was playing out in front of them. Grandma Edna, with her spit cup in hand, had the volume turned up just enough to hear the announcer.

The Clutch, the lightweight world champion, ruled the ring for the first three rounds but soon the fight took a turn. Hurricane Henry relied on his devastating upper cuts and fast feet to make a comeback. After seven more rounds, his opponent squinted instead of glared, staggered instead of danced. The decision was unanimous — the winner of the fight was Hurricane Henry!

The crowd in Madison Square Garden erupted in applause and boos. Louise covered her mouth. She looked around to make sure her younger sisters did the same.

With their hands pressed against their lips, they ran out of the house and into

the woods out back. Under the moonlight, in the same forest that the family chopped logs and hauled water from the spring, the girls screeched and yelped and jumped up and down. They knew such sounds shouldn't be heard coming from the house since their white neighbors had been listening to the boxing match, too. Louise, taller than her sisters, grabbed their hands and they skipped in a circle. The soft ground met their feet. The dim reflection of yellow pines and scarlet oaks surrounded them. When she let go of her sisters' hands, her loose braids and slender arms shot through the night air. She pushed out short, sharp breaths. Her heart raced.

Nine years later, with her forehead pressed up against the Greyhound window, the same kind of joy rose up in her because to be on that bus headed out of Nashville felt like a victory.

The landscape changed from yellow flatlands to rolling green hills and back, but Louise didn't notice because her hands were full. Her baby, Little Millie, wouldn't stop crying. This was even after the white soldiers in the front of the bus had made their way to the back to shower the baby with soft candy drops and kind words. Louise pressed her daughter to her chest and managed to hold back her own tears. As much as she felt for her daughter, she was mostly thinking about her first child Larry. He had died of dysentery before his first birthday. She had worked hard to convince herself it wasn't her fault and that she could be a *good* mother. And already she had made a mistake. There wasn't any milk left to give Little Millie.

When the driver pulled over in some no-nothing town filled with dust and a scattering of white folks, the last thing she wanted to do was get off the bus. But she handed her daughter to her sister-in-law. The baby's namesake, Millie, had been stomach sick the entire ride and had no intention of getting off. But honestly, none of the black riders were making their way toward the door.

When Louise stepped off the bus, the men and women standing around the depot stopped chatting and turned to stare at her. When she got closer to the depot, she spotted a handwritten sign: *Colored*, with an arrow beneath it. In Nashville she rode in the back of the bus but she entered every store through its front door. Regardless, she knew what the sign meant. She thought about how the bus driver and the other passengers wouldn't be able to see her when she rounded the corner.

Her worst memories of growing up in Pulaski, Tennessee, came to her in

snatches. Klan robes. Spattered blood. Another boy gone. The bus trip that she had conjured as a great beginning felt more like an ending. Walking lightly, she listened out. Feet shuffled. Voices hissed. And even the humid air whistled a sinister tune.

The depot's dingy back door didn't quite match the height of a full-grown man. It reminded her of her days when her family were sharecroppers. Even at eight years old, she hated the white man's plantation and the way she had to spend months at a time hunching over cotton bolls and bowing her head. But Grandma Edna would be right there with her, and, in the evenings, she'd tell the family her stories, like the one about the dipper. When she was a slave she was supposed to use it only for the white folks, filling their tin cups and glasses up to the brim. But when she found herself alone or with her friends, she'd dip the long metal spoon into the well, bring the cold water up to her chapped lips, and sip. Facing the depot, Louise grabbed the small wooden handle and swung the door back.

Despite her best efforts to look calm, her hands shook. She balanced the milk carefully between them as she climbed the bus stairs. After facing so much hate in the depot, nothing looked the same. The aisle had narrowed. The seats had shrunk. The overhead bins were crammed with rags. And even the cold food people had packed and eaten — chicken and biscuits — stunk. She knew she'd run out of milk in a few hours but she swore she wouldn't get off the bus again. Junior had made it north in one piece, and she would too.

The bus driver got lost somewhere in New York, so the Greyhound pulled into Connecticut, one day late, a Monday instead of a Sunday. It hurried through one small town after another until it arrived in New Haven. The city stretched out along a harbor and the waterfront bloomed with slender blue fag irises, wild geraniums, carpenter bees speckled with pollen, hatching meadowlarks and American robins. Out the window, Louise watched the seagulls. She hadn't caught a whiff of the wharf yet — salt water mingled with the spoils of industry — but she was headed its way.

The water was at the heart of why people — first hunters and gathers, then colonists, and finally city dwellers — came. The Quiripi and Renapi had lowered their bark canoes into the clear water to fish for salmon and herring; the English had shipped out carriages and corsets to other colonies; and in the second half of the twentieth century, boats and freighters carried away firearms, locks, boilers,

matches, paper, wheels, cigars, and rubber boots.

By the time she arrived in the low coastal city, it gorged on manufacturing. Warehouses big and small, refineries topped with smoke stacks, barges, gas tanks, cranes, and freight rail lines crowded the dock. Junior found work on an assembly line at the Winchester Repeating Arms gun factory, and his pay was triple what he made in the oil refinery in Nashville. Louise saved every dollar he sent her until she had enough for her ticket North.

In the parking lot outside of Union Street Train Station stood Junior and his brother-in-law, William. All morning they had patiently watched the traffic, mostly men in suits headed to work in New York City and college students coming back into town. As soon as my grandfather saw my grandmother through the bus window, he took his hands out of his pockets, raised them high, and waved them back and forth. She waved quickly and watched him trot alongside the bus as it pulled to a stop. From the start, their relationship had been that way — his exuberance alongside her reserve.

She squeezed into the aisle with her bag over her shoulder and the baby in her arms, and managed to flatten her bangs with the tips of her fingers. To her, Junior looked handsome as ever. Slim. Broad-shouldered. A face where everything from his prominent forehead to his sharp cheekbones knew its place. The beauty of her round face and large eyes matched his, but she couldn't quite see it.

When they hugged she felt his pack of Winston's in his front pocket and smelled their new hometown all over him. It wasn't a smell that she could describe but she knew it was different. She figured that the South, with all its humiliations and grief, was finally behind them.

William started his old Buick with his wife Millie beside him, and my grandparents in the back. When they pulled out of the station and onto the city streets, Junior kissed the baby all over her face and pressed Louise's hand into his own. She liked how their wedding rings — plain gold bands — bumped against each other. Once they reached downtown, he pointed out Malley's Department Store. She laughed when he told her how many floors it had. Eight! She took in the rest of downtown — the Yale buildings covered in ivy, the huge churches, the stately courthouse. Back home, one of her sisters had called her dull so many times, that she

had started to believe it. But here she was about to make a life for herself in a city that wasn't just bigger than what she was used to, but better.

The tall buildings and broad streets downtown all seemed to be pointing to one place — the New Haven Green — a sixteen acre public park. From the car she marveled at the one hundred and fifty elm and buttonwood trees that lined its walkways. She could even see the flagpole at the Green's center. Of course, she couldn't make out any details on the state flag but it would have pleased her. All her life her family had turned everyday objects into talismans for their protection and prosperity, like silver coins fixed over the front door and a pot of black-eyed peas simmering on the stove on New Year's Day. On the flags field of azure blue stood three grapevines symbolizing good luck and peace. Underneath it was the state motto: "Qui Transtulit Sustinet." *He who transplanted still sustains.* How fitting, a nod to the possibilities awaiting her and her family. She stared at the breathtaking arches the trees formed and figured if big city living ever got to be too much for her, here was a place of splendor and stillness she could tuck herself inside.

My grandparents didn't stay newcomers for long. Soon they could see what others saw — an aged city bobbing alongside the harbor like a battered relic. Most of the downtown storefronts had never been hosed down and in the worst of them grime coated the windows. It wasn't just the dirt that gave away how long they had been around. Brick facades crumbled. Stairs tilted. Doors buckled. The streets that arched out from the main thoroughfare had been built for horses and carriages, and now Chryslers and Chevys congested their lanes. The tenements that filled the innermost part of the city didn't fare any better.

A prime example: the two-family house at 219 Wallace Street. It stood, or more accurately, leaned at the end of the block, bracing itself against the changing New England weather. At any given time, you could find up on the second floor, in just two rooms, my grandparents and their growing family — a baby boy and three little girls.

At six years old, Little Millie had gotten a new brother or sister almost every year and she liked what that meant: new charges for her to direct. She'd circle the tiny apartment with a blanket wrapped around her waist like an imperial sash as her two sisters, Rita and Regina, followed her around. Of all the little ones, only the baby boy, thin and colicky, still needed to be carried from the dresser drawer where

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Larry, grew sick Junior  
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he slept, to the couch where his diapers  
were changed, to the shallow kitchen  
sink where he had his baths.

Louise did this all day long and  
when Junior got home from work  
he pitched in, cradling his son in his  
arms and wrapping his hand around  
a warm bottle. He'd almost cover the  
baby completely once he dropped his  
shoulders and lowered his head.

Since first laying eyes on the baby  
in the hospital, Junior hovered over  
the boy. Even though the baby was his  
second son, he decided then and there

that he should be a junior and carry the name, James Allen. He hoped the name  
passed down from his grandfather, to his father, to him could be used like a lifeline.

When their first son, Larry, grew sick Junior tried everything he could, from  
praying, to doctors, to a laying on of hands. When the baby died the loss convinced  
him that his love needed to be bigger but it turned Louise more inward. Maybe that's  
why he didn't mind their family living in such small quarters where, for her, it meant  
little space to sort out her feelings.

She spent most of her days inside, where the thin walls let in the cold, the  
floorboards creaked and worst of all, an invisible film of filth floated through the two  
rooms. Day after day she dragged a bucket of hot water and suds along with her as she  
hit the floors, baseboards, the top of cabinets, and even the bulbs hanging overhead.  
Her eyes would tear up from the smell of bleach and her hands and wrists would  
tingle. She had watched her mother and grandmother wash down walls and shine  
wood floors; they had made keeping house look easy. As a Whitaker woman she had  
a solid build and the curves on her body that could have been flab were firm. But no  
matter how much she scrubbed, it didn't matter. The brown floorboards had fewer  
scuffmarks and the walls less handprints and food stains, but nothing had changed.  
All of the families who had lived there before them had left a bit of their struggles  
behind, and no amount of bleach could scrub that away.



They had left traces of their family in other places too. When they first got to New Haven, Junior's father, whose family had only come a few months before them, fixed up a backroom in his home for his son, daughter-in-law, and granddaughter. By the time they left, two years later, they had two little girls and very little to pack.

When they moved onto the second floor of a tenement William and Millie had bought, Louise rejoiced. The place needed a paint job and plenty of repairs, but they had a living room, kitchen, and even a bedroom for the girls. She slid the letter she had written her uncle telling him she wanted to go home into one of her notebooks and forgot about it. Yes, she still missed her sisters and the smell of trees all around her but things were getting better. She decorated the living room with two knotted throw rugs and hung blue curtains that matched the color of the sky on a clear, sunny day.

But, soon, Millie and William had too many bills coming in and not enough money going out, and they lost the house. My grandparents, with another baby on the way, ended up in at 219 Wallace Street, a house more pitiful than any other they had ever lived in. Before that each place had seemed like a step to somewhere else. But now, Louise looked around at the disaster of a home that no amount of cleaning could fix and wondered — *Is this it?*

She knew the expanse of the city. In the evenings she watched ABC News, and it would often broadcast Mayor Dick Lee standing in front of blueprints or a 3D model of New Haven. Sometimes he had his hands wrapped around a shovel full of dirt, his eyes dead set on the future. He ran the city like the horizon had no end, and its only limits were of the imagination. Rebuilding New Haven wasn't an idea that he invented, but he planned to do it bigger and better than his predecessors had ever dreamed.

The young mayor, with his thick head of dark hair and deep dimples, claimed that a slew of brand new housing, a shopping center, a ten-million-dollar office tower, an 18-story hotel, and even a coliseum would be good for everyone. Louise wanted to believe him. She especially liked when he made it known that the worst parts of New Haven, the busted up tenements and raggedy storefronts, had to come down. Some evenings she fantasized about the mayor leaning toward a map and pointing a finger, not at their neighborhood or street, but at their very house and announcing that the