

UNDER THE MAGNOLIAS:
GROWING UP WHITE
IN THE SOUTH

SUZANNE GREENSLADE



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Under the Magnolias: Growing Up White in the South

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This book is dedicated to my father
who taught me about unconditional love

*With special thanks to Carme
who has always believed in me and encouraged my work*

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Presentation

Part One

I remember the day that Willie Mae Wade came to our house for an interview to become a domestic worker for my family. My mother and Willie sat in the living room chatting. My mother was looking for a “live in maid” with a good disposition and friendly manner. Willie was looking to work for a family with an only child. I was busy prancing around the room. Mom liked Willie instantly because as she always said, “she had such a kind face.” I was six at the time. Little did I know that Willie Mae Wade would become such a powerful force in my life and would even influence my life’s work long after her death.

Soon she moved into her room, which had its own entrance by the back door. In it was a small furnished bedroom, a bathroom and a walk-in-closet. I loved going out to Willie’s room at night. We would sit on her bed and chat for hours. The room had her smell and made me feel safe. After she died, her family let me have the bedside table that used to be in that room.

My father worked hard when I was small. He and his two brothers ran the company that my grandfather had set up. Dad would often bring paper work home at night. On the weekends he liked to go horseback riding down along the Chattahoochee River with his best friend, Richard. They would take their lunch and be gone all day. My dad always looked so handsome in his jodhpurs and riding boots. He would lift me up and cover me with kisses. I didn’t inherit his love of horses though. I was terrified of heights and would only ride with him if I could sit in front facing him with my arms around his neck.

My father was in the tobacco business and he and my Uncle Lewis used to sit out on the patio puffing on their cigars and chatting in their slow Southern drawls. I would sit on Dad’s lap and he would blow smoke bracelets for me to put my hand through. To this day I still love the smell of cigar smoke. Dad was almost twenty years older than my mother. His first wife had died and he had a grown son when

he met my mom. My mother was anxious to start a family, so they agreed to have one child. Mom was put in the role of disciplinarian, and Dad was always there to dote on me with affection, attention, and extra bits of money for the latest records.

My father didn't want my mother to work, so she got very involved with all kinds of volunteer work, especially in the area of mental health. At Christmas time we would collect lots of presents for children who were emotionally disturbed and were in hospitals. Sometimes Mom let me help sort and wrap the presents. My mother was a very generous person. Since I was an only child, she made sure that I was always surrounded by other children. I spent a lot of time with my half-brother's children who were very close in age to me, and we celebrated holidays together. Mom always encouraged me to have friends over to spend the night and she kept loads of "junk food" in the pantry for when we had visitors. I used to like going to my friend's houses because they would have three or four brothers and sisters and there would be so much going on. They, on the other hand, used to enjoy coming to my house where we could play undisturbed for hours.

Outside my window was a huge magnolia tree, and Carol Kuniansky, who lived across the street, and I would play underneath it for hours. We would usually play house or have tea parties with lots of pretend food. The old magnolia petals would be the bowls; then we'd have the stamen for food and the small daisies that we'd find in the grass would be fried eggs. It was so hot most of the time, that when we weren't playing under the shade of the large trees that lined our property, we were finding ways of keeping cool. Usually that entailed squirting each other with the hose, offering to wash our parents' car or running through the sprinkler that was always on to water the grass. Since we lived on a corner we had a very big yard, and after dinner lots of the children in the neighborhood would come to our house to play kickball, softball and steal the flag. We'd play until it got dark and the lightning bugs would come out.

At night the magnolia tree took on a very different persona. With the windows open, there was only a thin bit of wire mesh separating me from the outside world. I could hear every petal and leaf falling. I would lie in my bed rigid with fear wondering whether or not those were footsteps coming to get me. I was too petrified to call out or to go and check.

I used to love Tuesday mornings. The rest of the week we'd have cereal for breakfast, but on Tuesdays Willie would cook bacon and I'd always have a bacon sandwich before going to school. Willie was a great cook. She cooked Southern style and could make the best fried chicken and biscuits of anyone I've known. Willie was used to cooking vegetables for hours in salt pork, which is the Southern method. My mother, on the other hand, liked her vegetables steamed and slightly crunchy. She and Willie would have a running debate about how vegetables should be cooked. The only exception was when we had turnip or collard greens, they were always cooked Southern style. We had a very interesting diet in our house, a combination of Southern cooking, middle class white food such as steak and prime rib and lots of German Jewish delicacies, especially at holidays. My mother used to pickle cucumbers and okra. The taste and smell were amazing and the storeroom would be full of her jars of pickles. I don't ever remember us buying pickles when I was small. Grilling was always a big thing in my family. We had a built-in barbecue grill in our living room and every Sunday my dad would cook a huge sirloin steak. Mom would bake potatoes and make one of her wonderful tossed salads. My brother and his family would come over and spend the afternoon and evening with us. Steak, baked potatoes and salad is still one of my favorite meals.

I never questioned the relationship between Willie and my family. As a child, she was like a third parent that I loved equally as much as my natural parents. It was only after her death that I really began to understand Willie as a whole human being, much the same I suppose, as we do with our own parents. When I went away to university, Willie stopped living with us and came once a week to clean for my mom. During my college years I began visiting Willie at her home and got to know her family quite well. We all knew "about" each other, but it was nice to actually spend time together. Willie liked me to visit her on a Saturday, as Sunday was for church and Monday was laundry day. Usually her son, Darryl and his wife and their children would be visiting her from Macon, Georgia where they were living at the time. Melvin, her youngest child, who was a year younger than me, was living at home studying to be a mortician. Hayward, Willie's brother, and "Ma Fannie," Willie's stepmother, were also living in the house. It was Ma Fannie who raised Willie's three children while she was working for us. Willie and Hayward had a huge vegetable garden. That was the first time for me to actually see okra

growing. There were always peas and beans to shell while we sat on the porch talking. In addition to the garden there were fig trees, a peach tree, pear tree, pecan trees and a muscadine vine. Muscadines are a kind of thick-skinned grape that grows wild in the South. My dad loved figs and Willie always took him some when they were ripe.

The first thing you saw when you walked into Willie's house was an enormous freezer that was full of vegetables from her garden or from her friends and neighbors. There was no living room per se, so we were always either gathered on the front porch or around the kitchen table. Until she got much older, Willie cooked for her family, my family and anyone else who would drop in. Whenever I got there she would have baked my two favorite pies, one cherry and one peach. She always made fried chicken, biscuits, cornbread and barbecued ribs. The vegetables would vary, but there would always be either collard or turnip greens. In the South, we like to put pepper sauce on our greens. This is vinegar in a bottle of hot peppers; you can see it on the tables of most country restaurants. In Willie's house I saw the biggest bottle of pepper sauce I had ever seen. She sent me into the pantry to fetch it, but I couldn't find it. When she produced a large sized vodka bottle packed to the brim with peppers from her garden we both laughed! After we had eaten our fill and washed up, we'd sit out on the porch and relax. I was usually so full and sleepy after all that food, that Willie started keeping a small jar of coffee in the house for me, so that I could make the 50 mile drive back to Atlanta without falling asleep.

As Willie got older, I liked to spoil her more and more. One summer I bought her a barbecue grill and I cooked her steaks whenever I came to visit. I'd always take her to the grocery store and let her look as long as she wanted. After "browsing" for over an hour, we'd stock up her freezer till the next time I came. The worst was when she wanted me to take her to Diane's, the dress shop in Griffin. There she would spend several hours trying on everything in sight before making a decision. I loved treating her and we always had fun. After shopping we'd often have lunch at a Chinese restaurant.

A couple of years after I graduated from college I started spending more and more time traveling abroad. Willie and I wrote to each other regularly and would catch up when I came home to visit. Eventually I got married in Japan and spent a

few years in Atlanta working and studying to become a professional photographer. While doing my photography course, Willie and I were able to spend a lot of time together, and she became the main subject of many of my projects. She was so patient with me as we rode around the countryside looking for things to photograph. I think she was glad to get out of the house, and after we'd eat she'd always say, "C'mon Sue, let's go riding!" Just as I was finishing my course I got pregnant. I had decided to emigrate to Wales where my husband was from. Naturally Willie and my parents were disappointed, but they all wished me well. My dad was almost 85 at the time and was already making plans to take Mom to Wales to see their new grandchild. During my daughter's first year we traveled back to Atlanta several times before I began working full-time teaching photography.

Before I emigrated there was one thing that I made sure of—that Willie had a passport. This turned out to be no simple matter. Willie took the bus to Atlanta and I foolishly imagined us having her photo taken, filling out forms at the post office and then having lunch. It turned out that Willie had no identification. She had no credit cards, she didn't drive and moreover, she had no birth certificate. To further complicate matters, she was married briefly, separated from her husband, but never bothered to divorce, so half of what documentation she did possess bore the name Stillwell and the rest had her maiden name of Wade. I rose to the challenge and we took the bus downtown to try and locate her birth certificate. Willie had a bad hip and bowel problem, and I was five months pregnant, so between us we hit every restroom in every government building in downtown Atlanta. We walked for miles, but by the end of the day things were in hand enough for her to finish off by herself. The other thing that I did when I came back to Atlanta for one of my visits was to pack her a suitcase ready to go. Willie finally made it to Wales the following year. She loved Llandaff Cathedral in Cardiff, but the things she commented on most were the number of sheep and the lack of ice in the drinks! At that time it was impossible to get hold of an ice cube in Wales!

I continued teaching photography in a college for the next ten years. During the summer holidays we always spent as much time as we could in Atlanta so that my daughters could get to know my family and not feel as strangers in the US. Both

girls loved going to Willie's. They were not used to the heat though, so they spent most of their time there in large metal wash basins of cold water on the porch.

When Willie retired from cleaning for my parents, her niece, Rosa, who was ten years younger, took over. Rosa was and still is a character. She loves to gamble and to chew tobacco. Rosa loved my dad and she took great care of him in his later years. When Dad fell and broke his hip, it was Rosa who got him up off the floor and back into his chair. Dad was 91 when he died on Halloween. Uncle Lewis used to joke that he died at the end of a fiscal year since Dad was so methodical with all his paper work. His death certainly changed Halloween for me. Even as an adult I had enjoyed dressing up, but now I just light a special jack-o-lantern for him. I wanted Willie and Rosa at the funeral more than anyone else, but they had no means of getting to Atlanta. After several phone calls, Willie's brother, Sherman, agreed to bring them. He was a kind quiet man much like Hayward and I was so grateful to him.

Soon after, more deaths followed. Melvin, Willie's son and Cheryl her daughter both died over the following years from diabetes related illnesses. They were soon followed by Hayward and eventually Ma Fannie, who lived to 95. When I used to visit Willie in the empty house I asked her how she kept from getting depressed. At the time I was feeling very low myself and couldn't imagine a world without Willie in it. She answered that she just kept repeating the 23rd Psalm (The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want...) over and over until she felt better. I was always struck by the intensity of Willie's faith and how it gave her such insight and wisdom. She didn't just read her Bible, she lived it. One day when we hadn't seen each other for a long time and were just sitting down on the porch to catch up after one of our feats, a carload of Jehovah's Witnesses drove up. Half went next door to Mrs. Lemon's and two came and plonked themselves down on Willie's front porch. Willie and I looked at each other in despair. I needn't have worried though because Willie soon had the situation in hand. I have never before or since seen someone argue with Jehovah's Witnesses and win. They would quote the Bible and Willie would quote back a different verse that would project a broader and deeper meaning to the text. After about ten minutes they had had enough and were gone. Mrs. Lemon smiled and gave us a grateful wave.

A few years later Willie herself was in the hospital with stomach problems. She was in over Christmas and although I was told it wasn't that serious, I decided to fly over and visit her for her 80th birthday on February 3rd. I thought we could at least have lunch together in the hospital and chat and laugh about things. I had found the perfect present for her, a silver pendant with the 23rd Psalm inscribed on it. My plane touched down on Saturday night and Darryl and I arranged to meet at the hospital the following morning. Darryl said she was looking forward to seeing me and had told everyone how I would get her out of there.

Part Two

The next morning while I was having a cup of tea and getting ready to go, the phone rang. It was Rosa telling me that Willie had died during the night. I was numb. I got dressed quickly not allowing myself to cry or I would never be able to make the drive to her house. I decided to have breakfast out to try and distract myself from the reality of the situation. The scene was surreal. While I was mourning Willie, at the table next to me were two men having a power breakfast discussing how to finance a new venture. I realized how my life embraced so many worlds; my parents' world, Willie's world and now my life in the UK. Here I was in posh Buckhead where I grew up, feeling as if I had been beamed in from Mars. Willie and I always had a joke between us. She would say, "Sue, you were born with a silver spoon in your mouth," and I would reply "Yeah, but I traded it in for a plastic fork!" I clenched the box with the silver pendant in it in my pocket. It was the only thing that felt real at the moment.

At Willie's house Darryl came out to meet me. We hugged and he called me his sister. The tears came, but somehow, in the house with Darryl's wife Dorothy and Rosa there, things almost seemed normal. They suggested that Willie be buried wearing the pendant, and gave me permission to take as many photos as I wanted. A couple of months before I had been thinking about creating a photographic tribute to Willie and now I knew that these were going to be the last photos that I would be taking. Exhausted with jet lag and grief reluctantly drove back to Mom's.

On Monday I ordered a big bouquet of white lilies. Tuesday was Willie's birthday and we spent it with her at the funeral parlor. Mrs. Lemon from next door ran the funeral parlor and they were so sweet to me. Practically everyone in McDonough knew me as Willie's "white daughter." Darryl had arranged for Mom, my daughter Catrin and me along with him and Dorothy and Rosa to have time with Willie without being disturbed by other visitors. It was very peaceful in the

room. Catrin sat on the floor coloring while I walked around Willie taking photographs and saying my good-byes. Her skin was ice cold when I kissed her forehead, but her presence was warm and comforting. After a while my mom started fidgeting uncomfortably so we walked back to the house for some fried chicken. This time though it was bought. Willie's grandson, Darryl Jr., was there and Catrin played with his daughter, LaDarrica, Willie's first greatchild. The moon lifted when Theresa arrived. Theresa, Darryl and Dorothy's daughter flew in from Houston where she works as an engineer. I've known Theresa since she was about six. She was always fascinated with my hair because it was such a different texture and she used to brush it and plait it for hours.

I drove to Willie's again on Thursday for the funeral. The house was packed with friends and family. I stayed close to Darryl and Dorothy. When the limousines arrived I was touched to know that they had included me in the first limousine with them and that I was listed on the funeral program as Willie's goddaughter. Time seemed to stand still as we drove to the church. In front of us was a sheriff's car with flashing lights so that we never had to stop once. It was dead quiet in our big black space bubble. I looked out at the country roads that Willie and I had traveled so many times on our adventures. The day was bitter cold and there was an icy wind. We huddled together outside the church for ten minutes before they let us in. I always remember Willie saying that no one would come to her funeral, but the church was full. I was the only white person there, and everyone knew who I was. It began to dawn on me that it wasn't just my life and her close family's that Willie had so profoundly influenced. At that point I realized what a difference even one life could make. Although Willie's life was very humble, she lived it with integrity and great insight into people and situations.

Darryl broke his heart at that funeral, even though there were some light-hearted moments when Willie's friends recounted tales about her. One woman told how Willie had come back from Wales talking about the Quaker meeting we had taken her to. She couldn't get over people going to worship and not saying anything; no choir, no sermon and no one "getting happy" as she called it.

While we were inside, the gravediggers had dug up a huge mound of red Georgia clay to make space for her coffin. Close family was invited out to the graveside to say their last good-byes. As I took the rose I was handed, I laid it on