

APPENDIX: MATISSE'S CHAPEL

Dear Aunt Melissa,

I had a dream last night that the dead members of our family had gathered in Henri Matisse's Chapel in Vence. All dressed in black and white, they made a striking contrast to Matisse's blue, green and white patterns. The old folks sat up front: Grandma and Grandpa on either side of Great-Grandma Betsy and Great-Great-Grandma Susie.

Behind them on their left sat my sister, Barbara and baby brother Ralph, like *l'enfant Jésus* in Mama's lap, and Daddy next to her, and brother Andrew, looking handsome-as-a-Greek-God next to Daddy. All my uncles and aunts and cousins were seated in the back of the chapel with Daddy's Mama and Papa standing off to themselves.

As I arrived at the Chapel Grandma Betsy was telling a story. Her voice filled the chapel like music bouncing off the windows and walls to our ears. "There was a story my Mama Susie told us young-uns 'bout slavery. I never will forget. She ain' never talk much 'bout slavery, so when this white man ask her how she feel 'bout being descendant from slaves? She come back at him.

"How you feel descendant from SLAVERS?" He turn beet red, tell her this story: "My grandma and grandpa was on a ocean liner come from Europe. They was slavers in South Carolina. A slave ship was having trouble and signal they vessel to help. As the ship approach they could smell the stink and see the shackled bodies of men, women and children packed together on the deck of the slave ship."

"The prissy white ladies on the ocean liner, with they white clothes and faces and they little children all scrubbed clean and perfect, stood on the deck glaring at the human cargo from Africa." Well, there is a God somewhere. "A sudden strong wind swept all that stink from the slave ship spraying the ocean liner like a madame sprays perfume, only the scent was pure shit."

"Them white folks was throwing up all over they fine clothes and stampeding each other to get away from the stench, and the sight of all them stinking slaves shackled together. And the slaves was waving and smiling, some of them was even singing and laughing."

"The ocean liner caught fire below and the trapped smoke and the stench was unbearable in the low parts of the ship and was even worse on the aft side. The only breath of air bearable was on the deck, facing the stinking, waving niggers bound for America to be free labor on white folks' plantations."

"Even the ocean liner's food was seasoned with the stench of human excrement." The white man was near tears telling this story. "I can actually see and smell those bodies just from the story my grandfather told me, and even now as I talk to you," the white man said, "I smell myself stinking."

"Whenever I think about the slave ship my grandfather saw, I start to see shit on my own hands and all over my body too. And I have to go change my clothes and wash myself. But I just never come clean. No matter how much I bathe, I still smell. That is what being the descendant of slave owners did to me."

"Well Mister," Mama Susie said, "My Ma and Pa was on that slave ship your grandpa told you that story 'bout. They survive that hellish voyage to work on your grandpa's plantation and to raise me up to hear that story 'bout your funky hands. I hopes you get them clean real soon. You is right. They do smell bad. And ain't just you smells them either."

Mama Susie knew just what she thought about everything and everybody. But what he expect her to say 'bout that story? No, they can't wash away the shit smell of slavery. They can scrub 'til they is raw cause it's they own shit they smell from they own stinkin' ass. Some folks thinks they can spread they shit so thin it don't stink or put it off on somebody else and say it's their shit.

"God don't love ugly. That white man got to live his own story and we got to live ours." Everyone applauded Grandma Betsy's story, and Great-grandma Susie, looking strong at 110, just sat there being real proud of Grandma Betsy, her storyteller daughter and her granddaughter Ida, and her great-granddaughter Willia which is me.