

## MARTHA

When the wind blows in from the sea, just ahead of the dawn sun coming up over the black water's horizon, its shimmer off the flat bay making me squint into the distant glare of space and time, I can almost make out the image of Great Aunt Martha walking along the white sand beach. Although she died when I was young I know much about my Aunt Martha. I have her journal, filled with everyday ramblings of events great and small. I have the accounts of the farm, the county records of recorded transactions, and the journals of her father and her uncles, holding the details of life on Scots Grove Plantation, before and after the Civil War. I have Aunt Martha's sister's personal diaries, her art, and many letters she wrote during her near century of life. Her nephew, Francis Stewart, got to know her, staying with her a while, learning from her, loving her. He shared with me much of those visits. In her later years, I also spent idyllic summers with her in the cottage on the bay. Enriched by her spirit and wisdom gained during the years with her, I faced my own life buoyed by her example of persistent determination to live life with purpose instead of waiting for life to happen.

Banished to the island cottage during stretches of my youth, I thought it a rather harsh punishment for penance due. Dutifully, those first few years, I reluctantly packed two bags for the term on the island although towards the end of my stint there, I would realize that along with the troubled heart I toted up to the bay, most of the clothes I thought I needed never left

their fold. I seemed more than content to run along the beach from sun up to sun set in a tattered ill-fitting dress and floppy hat.

Forgive me my poor research, my bias, my embellishments, for I rely on old recollections and hazy memories to tell her story. I also rely on Francis Stewart, his life remarkable in itself, as the narrator in much of this remembrance. Many times over summers, over the years, as we sat at breakfasts of shrimp and grits, waiting for the first light of day to burst over us, he shared with me bits and pieces of Aunt Martha's tale. We've spoken of the lady, as we huddled at night against the breeze, sitting around camp fires on the beach, while walking into fading suns as evenings fell over the bay. Although the details of her life have varied, depending on the narrator, her life remains poignant as told to me, as remembered in his eyes, as held in the hearts of the people, who after they slaved for her, befriended her. I've quilted a picture of the woman in my mind, images taken from her sisters' saved letters and faded postcards that crisscrossed the country, her life divided into the decades of her youth, war, adulthood, haunting, forgiveness, her passing and finally her legacy.

Of course, if not for the cottage on the wind swept sound of Brunswick Bay, the life of Great Aunt Martha would have already passed beyond memory; like the sand that ekes out of the deep cove there to disappear forever in the great sea of life beyond. In her journal Aunt Martha described watching ships, Dutch Schooners, one coming and one going, passing each other in the inlet, one to anchor in the deep little cove and the other off to Charleston markets. The bales of cotton and the bags of rice and sugar were loaded there at the sturdy dock that the Stewart brothers built in 1850, the year of Martha's birth.

She painted a pretty oil painting of the scene that hangs in the dining room of Scots Island cottage. It depicts a late summer loading on the dock. The plantation men are hauling bags and bales from wagons full with the farm harvest. The Stewart land back then stretched

from the island over through the dense cypress swamp and pine forest and up along the old road, which is now the highway.

I'm curious of the time, the plantation, the island sound. Did it smell the same as today when I walk there, and are the animals the same, the forest as thick, and the land as inhospitable? The men in the painting cross a narrow wooden plank that bends under their weight, their loads balanced confidently atop their heads. The sleek schooner settles low in the water, gorged on the crops of the land. The sweat pours from the men's brows and backs and most are shirtless, their black bodies glistening in the hot sun. Their heads are raised with smiles, or perhaps in song. The summer cottage is sitting nearby on a knoll; great tree trunk stilts hold the house up. The cottage, built so the plantation family could escape the oppressive heat of the inland summer months, stands open to catch the steady cool ocean breeze. Aunt Martha painted the picture one bright day when light and talent met in one great moment to record time.

Another painting of the farm hangs above the cottage fireplace mantel, some six feet of stretched canvas. It is signed but I'd have known the artist anyway. Her hand light and lively and this work, though heavy with the darkest shades of burnt sienna and forest green, still shimmers under the fuse of brilliant white morning glory captured entwined in the forest depth. It is a late summer scene; the full foliage and thick forest lean into the white mansion from above and on either-side, the farm children and grownups are captured gathered at an outdoor picnic. There is a large table covered in red checkered linen and laden with the fruits of the harvest: yellow squash, brown pumpkin, green melon, and golden corn. Before she died, Aunt Martha, put down in her diary all the names of the relatives in the painting.

The first time I read the notations, I carried the thick book out to the parlor and using the descriptions there, I found the various family members in the painting. Martha's Sister

Caroline, red hair aglow, is there as is Sister Katherine, stout as a man. So is Elizabeth, round as a melon, with wicked smile, and pretty Laura, taller than all and younger still. Great, great uncles Peter, Michael, and William are there as well. Peter, the oldest next to John, wears a ragged beard and hair in a mane. William, the next in line, is attired in black leather boots and spurs, gallant in slick black hair and a pistol strapped to his thigh. Michael, the youngest of them, is depicted on his horse, a fine white stallion. The eldest brother John is resting in a straight back chair in the shade of the old magnolia which still grows there. The children of the plantation family are all about him, their faces turned up, their gaze directed his way, and their faces different shades of chocolate. John Stewart is speaking; his arms are in motion. In one hand he holds a white straw hat which he uses as a fan and in the other a crooked walking stick which he jabs in the air for emphasis. I imagine he's telling the children of the farm the story of how the Stewart Brothers tamed the wilderness and how their lives prospered because of brave men such as they.

Aunt Martha is in her twenties at the time of the painting, the oldest child and heir to the plantation. She painted herself with only her back visible, but it is unmistakably her, with long braided golden hair dangling between her shoulders. Her fair haired husband, Harold, is there in full uniform of the proud gray although her only child, Randall, the love of her life, has not yet been born, so is understandably missing from the scene.

I have read her letters from the dark lonely years of the war when Captain Harold Thorpe commanded the North Carolina Light Artillery Company at Fort Fisher. Poor Captain Thorpe, captured at the fall of Fort Fisher on January 15, 1865, and then shipped by sea and rail to Almira Union Prison in New York, where he waited out the remainder of the war in unspeakable conditions.

Then there are the letters from the dark lonely nights of her haunting. Letters she wrote to her far off sisters, bohemian actor and writer poet, Aunt Laura, in San Francisco, and Aunt Caroline and widowed Aunt Elizabeth in Philadelphia. I have Laura's diary and Elizabeth's journal and letters to all three sisters. Martha's letters are of despair and longing and finally letters of hope and prayer. I have them all. Most given to me and others gathered over the years. They came to me, one at a time, from family attics and long forgotten trunks, in bundles found locked away, on faded folded paper scavenged from ancient bedroom bureaus; the musings of a lonely teenage bride and later a sick and dark widow. The early ones are love letters between Martha and Harold Thorpe, worn but neatly bundled and tied with a pretty lace blue ribbon. They are from the War years. The last of these is dated New Year's day, 1865, the last time Martha heard from him until later, another life time later, when much of her story begins.