

Meet Me in the Garden - Family Parallels

Photography Studio/Novel's Opening

As a young woman in NOLA, my grandmother admired the portraits in a photograph studio window. The shop had a Whites Only sign so she didn't dream of entering. But the photographer offered to take her portrait for free. He hung her portrait in the window next to the Whites Only sign, which is a detail my grandmother told me and many others over and over again without elaborating on what exactly that meant to her. I took this story and ran with it as the inciting incident of the novel. We're 99% sure that this photograph of her is from that session:



Great Migration and Compton

My grandparents and their siblings left New Orleans for Los Angeles in the 40s. They were a small part of the Great Migration, leaving the American South for opportunities that weren't afforded to them as mixed-race Creole people. They first lived in project housing in South Central LA. They then bought houses in Compton, which was going through a rapid transition from an almost all-white town to one of many races. There was a lot of resistance to this integration from white residents, and also a subsequent white flight movement to neighboring cities. Additionally, there were housing covenants as well as less official restrictions in attempts to keep Black and immigrant populations out. However, by the late 50s when my dad was a kid, the northern parts of the city were very diverse and friendly and he had a great childhood there. The houses on Paulsen Avenue in Compton are based on the real houses that my dad and his cousins were raised in.

My dad lived in Compton during the Watts uprising. After the uprising, racial tensions were high, and as people of ambiguous race my grandparents made the decision to move to Carson and then Long Beach.



My grandparents and aunt in front of the project housing in LA.



My grandmother and my dad in front of the Compton house.

Columbia Records

My grandmother, her sisters, and their cousins worked at Columbia Records' Hollywood Pressing Plant. My grandmother especially loved her time working in the listening booths.

Her cousin Robby became the plant's first Black superintendent. His brother, who also worked at the plant, was a union organizer. The effort to unionize failed and the plant closed, opening a new one in Santa Maria. Some of our family members followed the plant there.



My grandmother at Columbia's pressing plant.

Pigeons

My dad's cousin, [Cornell Norwood](#), made a [name for himself](#) breeding and flying Birmingham Roller Pigeons in South Central.

NOLA history

The "blue house" in the novel is based on my grandmother's childhood home on Louisiana Ave, a side-by-side shotgun house that is still standing.

Several of our family members were institutionalized at what was then the East Louisiana Hospital for the Insane. At least one died there.

The list of arrests that Lionel recites near the end of the novel in the Watts uprising chapter is taken from real arrest records of a family member, Louis McGinty, who was ultimately killed by police in 1936.

