

A photograph of an elderly couple sitting on a wooden porch, viewed from behind. The man, on the right, has grey hair and is wearing a light-colored, long-sleeved button-down shirt. The woman, on the left, has short, curly grey hair and is wearing a dark red dress. They are sitting close together, with the man's arm around the woman. To their right, on the porch, lies a black and gold masquerade mask. The background features a large, leafy tree on the left and a sunset with a bright orange sun low on the horizon over a field. A portion of a house is visible on the far right.

A NOVEL

THE MAN
behind the
MASK

A love story of family, faith, and the courage to be known

PETER SHEPPARD

THE MAN
behind the
MASK



A Novel

PETER SHEPPARD

MBP² Press

The Man Behind the Mask

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This is a work of fiction inspired by the author's family history. Dialogue, private thoughts, and
connecting scenes are imagined. Names of family members are used with love; other characters,
events, and workplace portrayals are fictionalized.

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Dedication



To My Daughters

Ciera, Kyra, and Aja

Before this love story found its pages, each of you already held a place in my heart.

You made me a father before I became the man I am today. Loving you gave me reasons to grow, to work harder, to listen more closely, and to think beyond myself.

Our family's story has unfolded through many seasons, but one truth has never changed: each of you belongs fully in my life and in my love. No new chapter could ever replace the one that began with you.

I hope these pages help you see the man behind the titles—the engineer, the provider, the husband—and recognize the father whose heart has always carried your names.

If this book leaves you with anything, let it be this: you deserve love that is faithful, gentle, and present. You deserve to be heard, respected, and cherished for who you are.

Of all the names and titles I have carried, Daddy will always be among the ones I treasure most.

With all my love,

Dad

A Special Dedication to My Sister

Dawn Sheppard James

You were the oldest, and you never let that be only a title. When Mama's strength ran short, yours stepped in. You became mother, sister, and provider long before anyone had the right to ask it of you, and you carried it without complaint.

You checked homework when Mama couldn't. You saw through my excuses before I finished making them. You asked the questions I wanted to avoid, because you cared more about who I would become than about whether I liked you that day.

We had our differences. Real ones. But not once did you let go of me. You stood ten toes down for your brothers, and you are standing there still.

In December 1989, you stood beside Mama when I crossed that stage at Southern. When she was gone, you were the voice on the other end of the line and the arm through mine at her grave. You kept her promise alive by living it.

You were my rock then. You are my rock now. Your loyalty lives on every page of this book, because it lives in every part of the man I became.

With all my love and gratitude,

Your little brother

Dedicated to My Uncle

James “Booman” Harris



*for the love, the respect, and the drive
that made me the man I am today.*

*You taught me to feel the wood, to look again,
and to do right even when no one is checking.*

Every A was ours.

We.

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The Families

THE HARRIS FAMILY · SLAUGHTER, LOUISIANA

James Harris Sr. (Granddaddy) & Lucinda “Mama Cinda” Harris

farmer and carpenter · their thirteen children:

Lucinda “Mama Sweet”, Terry’s mother

Uncle Frank · Uncle James “Booman” · Uncle David

Uncle Thomas · Uncle Carl · Uncle Joseph

Aunt Ella · Aunt Daisy · Aunt Tee

Aunt Pearl · Aunt Bernice · Aunt Chinal

THE SHEPPARD CHILDREN · BATON ROUGE

Dawn · Darryl · Terry · Donald

TERRY’S CHILDREN

Ciera (1989) · Kyra (1991) · Aja (1992)

with their mother, Meachie Burkbalter, who is always theirs

TJ, the seventh Terry, with Marie

and Alona, the woman TJ loves

THE CITIZEN FAMILY · CHURCH POINT, LOUISIANA

Roland Citizen & Mrs. Freda Citizen

nine children:

Paula · Marie · Carlisa · Edward · Nick

Scotty · ZaZa · Phats · Jeremy

THE PEOPLE WHO STAYED

Van Moore & Willard Sims, Terry’s friends since the first day at Southern Lab

Gill Walker and the Pierre twins, Stephen & Stephan

Andre Harris, Terry’s cousin at Grambling, who made the introduction

Sandra, Marie’s best friend, of Rayne

Leroy Batiste & Mrs. Okafor, who taught Terry the work in Texas

PROLOGUE

The Ribbon



THE BALLROOM GLOWED.

There were candles on every table, hundreds of them, and the light moved over gold-rimmed chairs and deep red roses and a hundred painted masks. A saxophone was playing something slow. Somewhere near the bar, a woman in an absurd quantity of green feathers was laughing louder than anyone else in the room.

In the middle of the dance floor, a man in a rented tuxedo had stopped dancing.

He was twenty-eight years old. He was an engineer. He had a hard hat in the back seat of his car and a daughter in Baton Rouge and two more little girls who were not yet old enough to say his name right, and he had buried his mother the year before. He wore a plain black mask with a thin gold edge, and behind it his face was doing something it had not done in front of another human being since he was a boy.

The woman in his arms was wearing burgundy velvet and a mask of gold filigree. She was looking up at him. She had just asked him a question, and he had answered it honestly, and now neither of them knew what came next.

Then she reached up with both hands.

He felt her fingers find the ribbon at the back of his head. He felt the knot loosen—slowly, carefully, the way a craftsman eases a joint together so that it fits without forcing. He could have stopped her. He had spent his whole life stopping people right at this point. Fine. I'm fine. Everything's fine.

He did not stop her.

The candles burned. The saxophone played. The woman in the green feathers, for the first time in recorded history, stopped talking in the middle of a sentence.

And the mask came away from his face.



But that is not where this story begins.

It begins years earlier, at a kitchen table in Baton Rouge, under a yellow light on a chain, with a woman who loved her children so hard she made them ready for everything.

Everything except, perhaps, this.

PART ONE

A Mother's Love



“You hear me? Don’t you hide from the people who love you.”

— Lucinda

CHAPTER ONE

The House Lucinda Held Together

BEFORE TERRY UNDERSTOOD what an engineer did, he understood what his mother expected.

The expectation lived at the kitchen table in Baton Rouge, under the yellow light that hung from a chain over the oilcloth. It lived in the stack of schoolbooks that had to be open before the television could be turned on, and in the pencil Lucinda kept behind her ear when she checked homework, the way other women kept a hairpin. It lived in the way she said a child's full name when she already knew the answer to the question she was about to ask.

"Terry."

He was nine years old, and he had been trying to slide a spelling list under his arithmetic book so that it would look finished from across the room.

"Ma'am?"

"Bring it here."

He brought it there. Lucinda put on her reading glasses, which she did not need for the spelling list and wore anyway, because the glasses meant business. She ran her finger down the page. Eight words had been written neatly. Four had been written in a hurry. Two had not been written at all.

She did not raise her voice. She rarely had to.

"You want to go outside."

"Yes, ma'am."

“The outside will be there when you finish.” She slid the paper back to him. “This is the part that won’t wait.”

He sat back down across from Dawn, who had a stack of papers of her own and the particular expression of an older sister who had seen this exact scene play out before and expected to see it again. She did not look up. She did not need to. Terry could feel her not looking up.

Everybody called her Mama Sweet.

The church called her that, and the neighbors, and the ladies at the corner store, and later her grandchildren, who never called her anything else. Nobody could say for certain who had started it. But anyone who had ever been corrected by Lucinda at that kitchen table understood it, because she could straighten a child out and comfort him in the same breath, and he would walk away from the table feeling both.

She had been named for her own mother. Terry’s grandmother was a Lucinda too—Mama Cinda, the family called her, so that nobody at a reunion would ever have to wonder which Lucinda was being hollered for. It was Mama Cinda who had first set the rules at a kitchen table of her own: the Bible open before daylight, the homework before the television, God’s part in the plate before anything else. Mama Sweet had carried every one of those rules into this house and kept them.

Education every night. That was the first law of the house.

Church on Sunday. Bible study on Wednesday. Choir practice on Saturday. And if Strangers Home Baptist Church in Slaughter, Louisiana, had something else going on—a revival, a pastor’s anniversary, a fish fry for the building fund, a homegoing for somebody’s great-aunt whom Terry had met exactly once—Lucinda’s children could expect to be there too, in pressed clothes, with their hands folded and their shoes wiped.

The drive up to Slaughter took them out of the city and into the country, past pastures and pine stands and tin-roofed houses set back from the highway behind ditches full of clover. Terry used to count the cows on the right side of the car while Donald counted the cows on the left, and the argument about whose count was higher usually lasted until the gravel of the church lot crunched under the tires and Lucinda turned in her seat and gave

all four of them the look that meant the argument was over.

Strangers Home sat white and plain under live oaks, with a cemetery behind it where some of the headstones were older than anybody's memory of who lay beneath them. Inside, the floor creaked in the same three places every Sunday. The ceiling fans turned slowly enough that you could watch a single blade go around. The choir loft rose behind the pulpit like a set of bleachers for the saints.

Terry did not always want to be there. He would admit that later, when he was old enough to admit things. He wanted to be outside more Saturdays than he could count. Choir practice, in particular, struck him as an unreasonable interruption of being young. He could carry a tune well enough, but he did not see why carrying it had to happen at ten o'clock on a Saturday morning when the neighborhood boys were already choosing teams.

Lucinda was unmoved.

"The Lord gets your Saturday morning," she told him once, when he made the mistake of saying so out loud. "The boys can have your afternoon."

"What if the Lord don't need my Saturday morning?"

"Doesn't."

"Doesn't."

She looked at him over the top of the glasses she was not wearing at the time, which was somehow worse. "Then He'll tell me. Until then, you'll be in the loft."

He was in the loft.

And something happened there, though he would not recognize it for years. Standing between grown men who sang bass from somewhere down near their belts, Terry learned what it felt like to be one voice inside a larger sound. He learned that you could not hurry a hymn. You could not skip the verse you didn't like. You came in when it was your time and held your note until the director closed her hand, and if you came in early, everyone heard it. Sister Mabel, who directed the choir with her whole body and a white handkerchief, would stop the piano and turn around.

"Somebody's in a hurry."

Nobody would look at Terry. Everybody would know.

Later, when people asked him what made him patient with work that took time—a pump alignment, a set of drawings, a child learning to ride a bicycle—he would sometimes think of that choir loft. Of holding a note. Of waiting for the hand to close.



Dawn was the oldest. Then came Darryl, Terry, and Donald.

They were four children with four different temperaments, and Lucinda raised them as though each one were the only child she had and also as though none of them would be allowed to be an exception.

Darryl was serious early. He took things apart to see how they worked and, unlike Terry, usually put them back together correctly. He did his homework without being reminded, which Terry considered a form of betrayal against the brotherhood of younger children everywhere.

Darryl also could not keep his hands still. He drummed on everything. Pencils on the kitchen table. Spoons on the bottom of Lucinda's pots. His palms on the dashboard, his knuckles on the church pew until Sister Mabel turned around, his fingertips on his own knees during the sermon. Lucinda bought him a pair of real drumsticks one Christmas, mostly in self-defense. By New Year's he could make them chop on the edge of the kitchen table so sharp and fast that Donald swore the table was going to split in half.

"Darryl," she would say from the stove, without turning around, "that table did nothing to you."

But even she had to admit—though she never said it in front of him—that he never once missed the beat. Whatever he drummed on, he drummed in time.

On Saturday nights before church, the boys got their haircuts in the kitchen.

Lucinda set a chair in the middle of the linoleum and spread newspaper underneath it, and one by one Darryl, Terry, and Donald sat down with a towel around their necks while the clippers buzzed. She cut them low. Church low. Low enough that, when she was finished, she would run her palm back over the top of each head to check her work—and every time, the

hair underneath her hand stood up short and stiff and bristly, like the edge of something sharp.

“Lord,” she would say, rubbing. “Feel that. Like running my hand over a razor blade.”

Donald, who was the last one in the chair and had been waiting all evening to say it, pointed at his brothers. “Blade heads,” he said. “Y’all got blade heads.”

“You got one too,” said Darryl.

“Mine’s softer.”

Lucinda rubbed Donald’s head. She rubbed it again. “Baby,” she said, “yours is the worst one.”

From then on, they were the Blade Heads—all three of them, every Saturday night, rubbing each other’s fresh cuts in the hallway and yelling “Ow!” as if they had been cut, until Lucinda told them to hush before she gave them something real to yell about. Darryl, of course, drummed on his own new haircut the whole way to bed.

Donald was the baby and acted like it when it served him. He was quick to laugh and slow to sit still. He could make Lucinda smile in the middle of a scolding, which was a gift none of the rest of them possessed.

He also had a mouth on him.

Nobody could ever figure out where it came from. Donald was six the first time he said a word at the supper table that made Darryl choke on his milk and Dawn put down her fork and stare at the ceiling as if she were asking God for strength. He said it the way other children said “please”—casually, cheerfully, in the middle of asking for the cornbread.

Lucinda set down her glass.

“Donald,” she said. “Where did you hear that word?”

Donald thought about it honestly. “Around,” he said.

That was all anybody ever got out of him. Around. Lucinda went through a great many bars of Ivory soap in the years that followed, and none of them did a bit of good. She blamed the boys down the street. She blamed the television. She blamed Uncle Frank, loudly and often, and Uncle Frank put his hand on his heart and swore—with a few words of his own, which did

not help his case—that he had never said any such thing in front of that child. Booman, when asked, only looked out the window and whistled.

And once—only once—when Lucinda dropped a cast-iron skillet on her own bare foot on a Sunday afternoon, the children heard a word come out of their mother’s mouth, clear as a church bell, that sounded mighty familiar.

The kitchen went silent.

Donald looked at Terry. Terry looked at Dawn. Dawn looked at Darryl. Lucinda stood on one foot, holding the counter, with her eyes closed and her lips pressed together, and said, with enormous dignity, “Nobody in this house heard that.”

Nobody in that house ever brought it up again. But for the rest of his life, any time somebody asked Donald where he got that mouth, he would grin and say, “Around,” and look straight at Terry, and Terry would have to leave the room.

And Terry was somewhere in the middle—curious, stubborn, observant, prone to long silences and sudden questions. He liked to watch how things were done before he was willing to try them. Teachers sometimes mistook his quiet for slowness until he handed in a paper that showed he had been listening to everything.

Lucinda did not adjust the importance of learning according to which child was listening.

“I’m not raising you to be what people expect,” she told them one night when Donald complained that the boy down the street didn’t have to do homework on Fridays. “I’m raising you to be ready.”

“Ready for what?” Donald said.

“For whatever door opens.” She closed the cabinet she had been wiping. “Doors don’t stay open long for people who look like us. When one opens, you have to already be standing in front of it with your shoes on.”

Terry did not fully understand that sentence at the time. He remembered it anyway. He remembered the way she said it—not angry, not bitter, just plain, the way she might tell them the stove was hot.

He would understand it much later, standing in rooms where he was the only face like his, holding a degree he had worked very hard to be ready for.



Lucinda's health could be uncertain. Her standards were not.

Terry could not remember the first time he understood that his mother was sick. It was less a single moment than a slow gathering of signs. The days she stayed in bed past breakfast, which she never did on purpose. The prescription bottles lined up on the windowsill above the sink, their orange plastic glowing when the afternoon sun came through. The visits to doctors that were described to the children in words that did not explain very much. The way grown-ups at church lowered their voices when they asked how she was doing, and the way she always answered, "I'm blessed," whether she was or not.

Some weeks she was herself entirely, standing at the stove with a dish towel over her shoulder, humming "Blessed Assurance" off-key and threatening to wear out anyone who tracked mud across her floor. Other weeks the house went quiet in a way that made the children quiet too.

It was during those quiet weeks that Dawn stepped forward.

She was a young woman then, already a Southern University student and soon a teacher, already carrying a full load of her own. But when Lucinda's health demanded more of the family, Dawn absorbed it without announcement. She became the one who checked homework when Mama couldn't. The one who made sure there was something on the stove. The one who reminded Donald to take a bath and reminded Terry that she could see him trying to slide his spelling list under his arithmetic book, the same as their mother could.

Mother. Sister. Provider. Dawn wore all three, often in the same afternoon.

Terry grew accustomed to her being dependable before he understood what dependability cost her.

He did not see the evenings she gave up. He did not count the friendships she put on hold, or the plans she quietly canceled, or the nights she graded her own papers after midnight because the hours before midnight belonged to everybody else. Children rarely see those things. They only notice that dinner appeared, that someone signed the permission slip, that the house

kept running.

What he noticed was that Dawn asked questions he did not want to answer.

“Where were you?”

“Outside.”

“Outside where?”

“Just outside.”

“Terry.”

She had their mother’s way of saying his name. He found it profoundly unfair.

She challenged explanations he thought should have been accepted. She saw through excuses before he had finished building them. When he came home with a grade lower than he had promised, she did not yell. She sat across from him and asked him to walk her through what happened, step by step, until he arrived on his own at the place where he had stopped trying. Then she waited for him to say it.

They had differences—real ones. As he got older, there were arguments that ended with doors closing harder than necessary and days when they spoke to each other only through Donald. He thought she was bossy. She thought he was hardheaded. They were both right.

Still, she stood ten toes down for her brothers.

He learned that the year he was twelve, when a man at the corner store accused him of stealing a pack of gum he had paid for and kept a grip on his collar until Terry thought he might cry in front of everyone. Somebody ran and got Dawn. She came through the door of that store in her school clothes with her book bag still on her shoulder, and Terry had never seen her move so fast or speak so calmly.

“Take your hand off my brother.”

The man took his hand off her brother.

“He paid for that. I’m sure your register will tell you so. And if it doesn’t, you can call our mother, and you can explain to her why you put your hands on her child over twenty-five cents.”

There was a long moment. The man looked at the register. The register agreed with Terry.

Dawn did not wait for an apology. She took Terry by the shoulder—not roughly, but firmly enough that he understood it was time to walk—and they walked home together without speaking. Halfway there, she let go.

“You all right?”

“Yeah.”

“You sure?”

He nodded. His throat was tight. He did not want her to see.

She saw anyway. She always did. But she let him keep his face, and that was a kindness he would not recognize until he was a grown man trying to show the same kindness to children of his own.

“Don’t tell Mama,” he said.

Dawn looked at him. “I’m going to tell Mama.”

“Dawn—”

“I’m going to tell her you handled yourself fine, and that I handled the rest.” She shifted her book bag. “That’s what I’m going to tell her.”

That was Dawn. That would always be Dawn.



Darryl would eventually become a mechanical engineer after graduating from Southern. When Terry was young, that path seemed far away and slightly mysterious, the kind of thing grown-ups talked about with respect. Darryl’s steady progress gave Terry something to measure himself against, sometimes favorably, often not. But it also gave him something else: proof that a boy from their house could walk that road.

Donald would choose another road. He would join the Army and serve his country, and later he would drive trucks across more highways than any of them could name, seeing the country from a cab high above the traffic. When he called home from some truck stop in Arizona or Ohio, his voice still carried the laugh that had always gotten him out of trouble.

Terry would eventually understand that achievement did not have to look identical in every member of a family. That one brother’s diploma and another brother’s discharge papers and a sister’s teaching certificate could

hang on the same wall without competing. That Lucinda had not been raising four copies of the same child. She had been raising four people who would know how to show up.

As a boy, he knew something simpler.

His mother expected effort. His sister would notice if he tried to slip past it. And whatever happened beyond their door—at the corner store, at school, in the wider world that did not always want boys like him to succeed—he had people behind him.

At night, after the homework was finished and checked and finished again, Terry would lie in the bed he shared with Donald and listen to the house settle. He could hear the refrigerator humming. He could hear the television low in the front room, where Dawn was grading papers. Sometimes, if it had been a good day, he could hear his mother humming in the kitchen, washing the last dish, the water running and stopping and running again.

He did not have a word for what that sound gave him.

Later he would call it safety. Later still, he would call it love.

But at nine years old, falling asleep with a spelling list finally finished and the outside world still waiting where his mother had promised it would be, Terry only knew that the house was held together.

And he knew who was holding it.

End of the free sample

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