

Connections

STORIES OF OUR LIVES

The Prodigal Daughter

At 14, *Mary Williams* moved from the poverty-scathed streets of East Oakland to Jane Fonda's hacienda in Santa Monica. Decades later, Williams returns home to find out if blood really is thicker than water.

I

AM ABOUT TO

attempt time travel.

Once I pass through airport security and board US Airways flight 2748 to Oakland, California, I will be transported to a place I fled nearly 30 years ago. Although I have taken on physical challenges, like a cross-country bicycle ride and a five-month stint on a research base in Antarctica, I have generally shied away from emotional ones.



MY MOTHER, MYSELF
Mary Williams (*left*) with Jane Fonda at Fonda's 60th birthday celebration in Atlanta, 1997. *Opposite page*: Neome Banks (*left*) with her 7-year-old son, Josae and Williams, Union City, California, 2009.

My years ago I quit my well-paying job, left my fiancé, and sold my three-bedroom home in Atlanta, abandoning a life of materialism and attachment to pursue one that included solitude, travel, and adventure. Now 43, I spend half the year working all over the country for federal parks and nonprofits, doing odd jobs like manning a

archers. So I often live in constrained quarters with an assorted lot of scientists, gamers, and vagabonds. The rest of the time I enjoy self-imposed exile in my tiny Arizona condo, happiest when left alone to hike, read, or watch YouTube: I'm especially drawn to makeup application and hairstyling videos, even though I seldom wear cosmetics and my hair is two inches long; I like the girl talk without the hassle of actual girlfriends. Although the Internet connects me to the outside world, I was hesitant to try Facebook. But after a colleague at an Alaskan wildlife refuge introduced me to the site, insisting that with my seclusive lifestyle it would be the ideal way to stay in touch, I decided to give it a shot.

That's how I found Neome Banks, someone I haven't seen since childhood. And that's why I'm headed back to Oakland. I want to see the place that formed me, find the people I left behind.

NEOME AND I

grew up in the heart of the violent and frenzied Black Power movement. As members of the Black Panther Party—an organization founded in Oakland during the mid-1960s to stop police brutality toward African-Americans—our parents tried to help those who lacked employment, education, and healthcare. Revolution was a day-to-day reality resulting in bloody shoot-outs between the police and, well, us.

Neome and I shared this reality, but at the same time we were just kids. Like me, Neome was the baby girl of her family, raised by a single mother. We became friends. At 5 years old, we spent most of our time at the Panther-run community school, starting each day

with calisthenics, classes, and after-school activities like art and music lessons (I played clarinet), sports, and readings from Chairman Mao's manifesto *The Little Red Book*. Although not formally members of the Communist Party, Panthers were socialists, and we were taught to sympathize with revolutionaries



A school administrator called me out of class and told me I WOULDN'T BE COMING BACK. EVER.

like Mao and Che Guevara. At night I often drifted to the homes of other Panther members, whom I thought of as family.

My mother was a cook. She also sold our official newspaper, *The Black Panther*. My father was a captain in the Panthers' militaristic hierarchy. He participated in one of the most controversial programs, the armed citizens' patrol, wherein he and other men with guns followed police cars, ready to defend any blacks threatened by police.

I was a toddler when my father was sent to San Quentin prison after he led the cops on a high-speed chase while hurling Molotov cocktails. At first, my mother took me and my five siblings on long bus rides to visit him. But after a few months the trips ended, as did our relationship with our father.

My mother quit the Panthers when I was 3. I learned about this at the community school when one of the administrators called me out of class and informed me I wouldn't be coming back. Ever. She handed me a sack lunch and sent me on my way.

Stunned and confused, I walked through the gate to the sidewalk. Then I turned

back toward my school, opened the brown paper sack, and threw the peanut butter and jelly sandwich over the gate, followed by a boiled egg, an apple, and carrot sticks. When I ran home.

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ur family shrank from a community of Panthers to my four older sisters, one younger brother, and our mother. Without the support of her husband, my mother struggled with paying bills and finding employment. She enrolled in trade school to become a welder.

We looked more like the other non-Panther families in our neighborhood: female-headed with lots of kids. I liked the closeness, especially the chance to spend more time with my mother: We often went to the drive-in theater, stopped at all-you-can-eat

restaurants, and then snuggled up in her king-size bed to watch *The Twilight Zone* or *The Benny Hill Show*.

Circumstances shifted again after my mother injured her knee at work and lost her job. Devastated by the loss of her hard-won independence, she went on welfare, and morphed into someone I did not recognize. Once funny, loving, and vibrant, she became a zombie. She sat alone on the couch in our living room for hours crying, drinking, and listening to blues albums by B.B. King and Bobby "Blue" Bland. Slip-ups that might have merited light chastising, like spilling a drink or forgetting to do a chore, became offenses worthy of a beating.

Often she left us unsupervised, and we got into mischief. My sister and I broke into neighbors' homes, stealing cookies and junk food from cupboards and refrigerators. We stole food from the local supermarket, too, usually candy. Once the store owner caught us and held us in a back room until our mother came. The whole neighborhood heard all the yelling we did as she chased us around the house brandishing an extension cord like a bullwhip.

My mother grew increasingly indifferent, neglecting to visit our schools or ask about our homework. If we were ill, she wouldn't take us to the doctor. When I got sick with the flu, my older sisters put cold compresses to my forehead and comforted me.

So when the opportunity came for me to get away from home one summer, I grabbed it.



T AGE 11,

I boarded a Greyhound bus bound for Santa Barbara to attend Jane Fonda's summer camp. She and her (then) husband, Tom Hayden, supported the Black Panthers, and had met my uncle through Party channels.

Until I attended Laurel Springs Children's Camp, nestled 2,800 feet above sea level, with spectacular views of Los Padres National Forest and the Pacific Ocean, I had not known



I was poor. I brought a light jacket, one pair of pants, two shirts, and a pair of shorts that doubled as a swimsuit when worn with a T-shirt. Toiletries? A bar of Irish Spring soap, a worn-out toothbrush, and an Afro pick.

I couldn't believe the stuff coming out of my bunkmates' suitcases! One girl brought four swimsuits and a fresh pair of undies for every day of the week. (I knew this because the days of the week were printed on the back of each pair.) The other children received care packages from home crammed with food, magazines, and books. When we talked at night around the campfire, I found out many of them had their own rooms and bathrooms at home—and they thought about the future, speculating about careers. Would they understand anything about my life? I doubted it. So I put on a happy-go-lucky front, said little about my background, and threw myself into theater arts, writing, and performing skits with the other kids.

I returned to Laurel Springs for several

summers, and I got to know Jane. Smiley and chatty, she often wore snug sweatpants and a T-shirt baring her toned midriff, her hair bouncing and behaving. She invited me to her cottage for lunch and coached me on monologues. She focused on me, taking in everything I said as if it were the most fascinating thing she had ever heard. She hugged me whenever we met, held my hand when we walked together, scratched my back when we sat next to one another. This touch, this healthy loving touch, was a revelation.

I was skeptical at first—*what was wrong with this lady?* But I felt safe with her, began to see myself differently, and started sharing what my home life was like. I started thinking about the future, too. Most of my female siblings and many older girls I knew were raising children while still in their teens. One

FAMILY ALBUM
Christmas at Ted Turner's Avalon Plantation near Tallahassee, 1992: Williams with Fonda, Turner (seated), and their children.

minute they were vibrant, sassy, and thriving. The next they were high school dropouts, hiding their swelling bellies under baggy clothes. I saw them at the grocery checkout counter barely clinging to their pride while paying for baby formula with food stamps.

gardens and avocado trees in Santa Monica. She sat me down soon after I arrived and said, "I see you as my daughter now. If you want, you can call me Mom." I also had new siblings, a little brother named Troy, and two sisters, Vanessa and Nathalie. I was worlds away from discussing Michael Jackson, neighborhood happenings, and boys back

five new step-siblings, and dogs. Lots of dogs—hunting and companion hounds pleading for table scraps with their big dark eyes. We spent Christmas at Ted's Avalon Plantation in Florida, and summer breaks at his Flying D Ranch in Montana. We flew in Ted's private plane, and fly-fished, shot skeet, rode horses and ATVs—and sat above home plate at Atlanta Braves games. We were rich before, but after my mom married Ted I learned the true meaning of stinking, funky, don't-make-no-goddamn-sense rich. I also came to understand that wealth can be a tool to do good in the world. Years later, I saw Ted's

As a child of the Black Power movement, I never imagined I'd be having Thanksgiving dinner on a FORMER SLAVE PLANTATION.

Uhn-uhn. Not me. I guarded my innocence like a much-contested border; I would hold off any invasion as long as I could. Yet like a farmer tending her fields, I accepted the fact that I would lose bits and pieces to pests and vermin: the schoolteacher who pressed my hand to his crotch, and the father of a friend who groped me through my training bra.

Our family had shriveled like rancid fruit under summer heat. One of my older sisters developed an addiction to crack and turned to prostitution; another just drove off with her young daughter and a boyfriend. My mother was occupied with her own demons.

When Jane Fonda offered to let me live with her in 1982, I left East Oakland for good. Although she was not technically my legal guardian, we ran into zero trouble; when you're with Jane Fonda, red tape tends to fall away.

in Neome's bedroom. Landing on the moon would have been less disorienting. Everything was new.

Even something as seemingly simple as dinnertime was fraught. I had to prepare myself each night for my confrontation with "white people food"—some of it good (baked Alaska), some not so good (artichokes). And I was shocked to learn that people could disagree or dislike one another and still be civil. In January 1989, Jane and I traveled to Atlanta to attend the Martin Luther King Jr. Day services at Ebenezer Baptist Church—she made it clear from the beginning that although I was now part of a white family, she would keep me connected to my African-American heritage (once she even called up Diahann Carroll to get a recommendation for a good hairstylist). I was surprised to learn, after the fact, that Tom's failure to join us in Atlanta signaled the end of their marriage—nothing about the way they behaved had prepared me for that.

A year later, a magnetic force pulled us all from the sun-drenched streets of Los Angeles to the wide-open spaces of Montana, the Spanish moss-laden forests of northern Florida, and the humid city center of Atlanta. After a whirlwind courtship with Jane, Ted Turner became my dad.

As a child of the Black Power movement, I never imagined I'd be having Thanksgiving dinner in an antebellum mansion on a former slave plantation with two celebrity icons,

face on the cover of *Newsweek* after he donated a third of his wealth to the United Nations. When I gave up most of my material possessions six years ago to embrace simplicity and environmental stewardship, it was partly because of his example.



IN HER FACEBOOK

photo, Neome Banks still closely resembles the young girl I knew. I click on "Add as friend," and, across space and time, she accepts my friendship. Again.

Through our correspondence I learn that Neome is still in touch with one of my birth sisters, Teresa, who is also on Facebook. And so, after typing in Teresa's name and seeing her picture pop up, I friend my sister, too. Just like that, we close the void.

After high school, Teresa went on to college and graduate school to become a teacher. When our family suffered a crisis in 1993, Teresa really stepped up: Our older sister, Deborah, who struggled with crack addiction and homelessness, was doing drugs in the hallway of an apartment building when a tenant, wielding a kitchen knife, chased her out onto the street (continued on page 195)

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FROM OUR SMALL

down-home in turbulent East Oakland, moved to Jane's hacienda surrounded by

THE PRODIGAL DAUGHTER

(continued from page 143)

and stabbed her repeatedly while 15 bystanders looked on. Deborah died curled over a storm drain. Afterward, Teresa, while working and raising a daughter of her own, shared custody, along with our mother, of two of Deborah's children.

At the time of Deborah's death, I had been in Morocco interning with the United Nations. I was home with Jane for a short break when I learned the news. I went to the funeral and spoke briefly with my birth mother but left soon after. I saw Teresa there but didn't talk to her, and I hadn't seen her since the funeral.

Teresa and I begin sending each other Facebook messages and e-mails: She tells me she's recently divorced but happy, and lives alone in a modest apartment by the sea; her daughter is now a tall young woman with long black hair and severe bangs. Then we reminisce about our family—a great-aunt who covered her sofas in thick plastic and displayed a candy dish full of mock sweets, another aunt whose house always smelled of chitterlings, and our mother's father, "China," who resembled the Buddha. She tells me our mother has stopped drinking, and that they take cruises together. She e-mails a photo of them on the deck of a cruise ship. Our mother is plump, dressed in a purple pantsuit paired with a loose pink blouse, sitting on a red mobility scooter. Her close-cropped hair is now gray, but her face is unlined. Though she doesn't smile, she looks fiercely happy sitting there in the sun on the deck of a ship headed for Mexico. My sister kneels next to her smiling a smile not unlike my own. Her hand rests on our mother's arm.

Seeing this picture makes me weep. My mother looks vulnerable, but regal, so different from the woman I remember. I fantasize about forging a new relationship with her and Teresa. We could travel together. We could recapture the good times before our family fell apart.

I want to visit, I tell my sister. Considering the lives they have now, and how they appear so unlike the childhood snapshots in my head, I open my mind to a new possibility: What if my mother's decision to let me go was a gift? I was 14 years old and a minor when I went to live with Jane. She could have revoked and legally challenged the situation at any time. But she didn't. As a child,

I both feared the day she'd drag me back and resented her for not staking a claim on me. I had grown up thinking she didn't care. But now I wonder: What if, seeing her other daughters struggle with drugs, teen pregnancy, and abusive relationships, my mother was relieved that her youngest had happened upon a way out? What if the woman who had given me life had also given me a shot at a better life?

After I accepted Teresa's offer of a place to stay, we had a heated e-mail exchange. Defiantly, she withdrew her invitation. She wrote that she was angry with me for turning my back on our family. The night I left, I sent her one last e-mail, letting her know the dates of my trip and giving her my cell phone number in case she changed her mind.

THE CLEAR, WARM BEAUTY of the Oakland weather belies the storm brewing in me. I'm waiting to meet Neome at the train station when I see her approaching on foot with a small boy. She recognizes me instantly and we embrace. She is tiny, thin, and not much taller than she was as a young teen. She still possesses flawless ebony skin and a radiant smile.

Her 7-year-old son, Josael, is biracial, with caramel skin and thick, curly black hair. He stares at me with his mother's almond-shaped eyes, shyly hiding behind her.

Neome and I have so much in common. Yet Neome still lives near her mother. They spend holidays together, visit often, and are fiercely loyal to each other. Neome even leaves her children with their grandmother so we can spend a few hours alone. How did two girls so alike end up so different?

I want to ask Neome if she would have accepted the opportunity of a better life, if one had come along, even if it meant leaving her family behind. But I'm afraid of how she might answer.

TERESA WAITED UNTIL the last day of my trip to call, which pisses me off.

"Hello?" I say.

"You sound like me," she says.

"Who is this?"

"Funny how our voices sound alike."

"No, they don't."

"So, how are you?"

"Fine."

"Well, I was just checking in."

"Great. I'm kind of busy. So..."

"Okay."

"Okay."

Click.

A FEW WEEKS AFTER my Oakland trip, I am heading out to spend Christmas with my Fonda family. After Ted and my mom divorced in 2001, we started spending the holidays at a ranch she bought in New Mexico. But this year we are celebrating in Los Angeles, because my mother has a new boyfriend—Richard, a record producer who lives in the Hollywood Hills. His home was originally built for Ronald Reagan and his first wife, Jane Wyman. I can't help chuckling at the thought of the Gipper spinning in his grave at the fact that Jane Fonda is now the lady of the house.

Al Pacino is there, and so are Kevin Spacey, Warren Beatty, Hugh Grant, and Sean Penn, who tells me about a rap song called "Jane Fonda" by a white rapper named Mickey Avalon. Then, to my surprise, Penn whips out his cell phone and calls Avalon, who lives nearby, and invites him to the party. Soon after, Avalon arrives looking shell-shocked at having been summoned in the middle of the night. But then he begins, riding a slow groove and rolling out his lyrics for the glittering crowd: *I had a baby named Jane / She could shake that thang / Said her daddy used to hang with Johnny Coltrane...more junk in her trunk than a Honda / I know you wanna do the Jane Fonda.*

As I'm watching my 72-year-old mother bumping and grinding on the dance floor with her new boyfriend, I can't help but marvel at the strangeness of it all—and the simple rightness of it, too: I'm just here with my loved ones, celebrating Christmas.

Time travel is tricky. You can't return without bringing something back or leaving part of yourself behind. I still feel the presence of my birth family like a ghost. No matter where I end up, I'll always have my families. And while I might reach out to Teresa again, right now knowing she's out there is enough. In the meantime, I do what anyone in my position would do—I take to the dance floor and do the Jane Fonda. **Q**

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Author of the children's book Brothers in Hope, Mary Williams has contributed to The Believer and McSweeney's. She's currently writing a memoir and developing a television show about her work on a research base in Antarctica.