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Voice of the city

Edward P. Jones has rendered the soul of black Washington in a way no writer ever has • BY NEELY TUCKER

The known world *of* Edward P. Jones

The Pulitzer-Prize-winning author may be the most celebrated writer Washington has ever produced. He also may be the most enigmatic.

STORY BY NEELY TUCKER | PHOTOGRAPHS BY SEAN McCORMICK

Edward Paul Jones is sitting at a table in Guapo's restaurant in Tenleytown early on a midsummer evening, looking down into a glass of red wine. Nobody in the place recognizes him, although he's arguably the greatest fiction writer the nation's capital has ever produced.

His three books, two of them collections of short stories set in black Washington, have been hailed as masterpieces. He's won the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Critic's Circle award, the PEN/Hemingway Award, a MacArthur "genius grant," the Lannan Literary Award, the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award, and a bunch of (by comparison) trifling stuff. He's won nearly $1 million in literary awards alone, never mind earning hundreds of thousands of dollars in royalties.

And yet he hasn't written a word of fiction in four years. There is not a draft in a drawer, not a scrap of paper with notes for a story or a novel. He's knocked off some nonfiction introductions to classic works and edited a couple of anthologies, but nothing of the sort that made him a name.

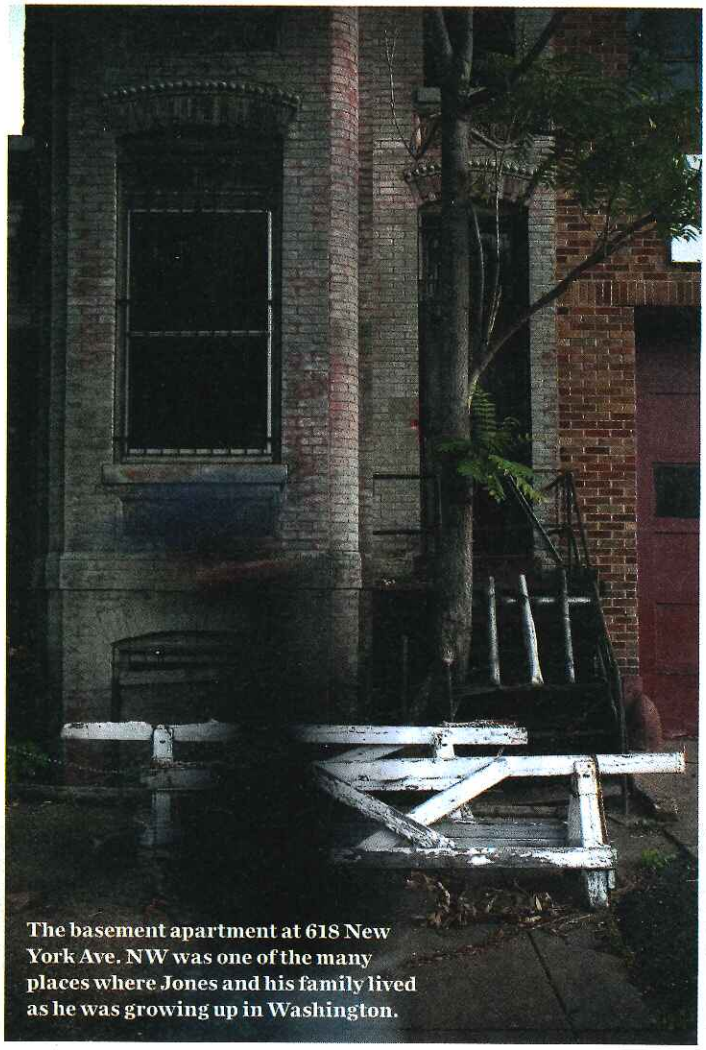
So when he swirled the wine around in his glass, looked up and asked if I'd like to hear the opening and closing lines of the first short story he's worked on in nearly half a decade, "The Waiting Room," a story that won't be published for who knows how long, I was startled.

Jones dictated the opener:

"In late May 1956 — a little more than a year after my mother bought the Fifth Street NW house that was the beginning of her small empire — she heard a rumor that my father was dying."

Here's how it ends:

"And it would have been a great church had it not been for the dead man and all his flowers way down in front."



The basement apartment at 618 New York Ave. NW was one of the many places where Jones and his family lived as he was growing up in Washington.

> In a small cabinet near the couch was a fifth of vodka, which she drank in less than an hour. Then, beginning in the basement, she went about the house undoing the locks on all the doors and windows, for Santiago had no key to her house. And outside that house there was a very cruel world and she did not like to think that her child was out there without a place to come to.
>
> From "His Mother's House," in **"Lost in the City"**

When I scribbled it in my notebook, Jones told me that this was the first time it had been written down anywhere. Jones spent 10 years creating nearly all of his Pulitzer-winning, antebellum-era novel, "The Known World," in his head, until he finally set it all down on paper in a three-month rush in 2001 after being laid off from his job at a tax publication. "The Waiting Room" is still locked up tight in his mind, though he dictates the opening and closing three times in a row, down to the dashes and commas, without so much as blinking.

"I write a lot in my head," he says. "I've never been driven to write things down."

Jones is 59. The bar he has set for

himself, to more or less to do for black Washington what James Joyce did for Dublin, is in the literary stratosphere. He has done this, so far, in 28 short stories, collected in "Lost in the City" (1992) and "All Aunt Hagar's Children" (2006). The Washington Post's Jonathan Yardley wrote after "Hagar's" that Jones was "in the first rank of American letters" and "one of the most important writers of his own generation." In the New York Times, novelist Dave Eggers said "The Known World" was widely considered to be one of the best American novels of the past 20 years, as "its sweep, its humanity, the unvarnished perfection of its prose" made it seem not so much written as "engraved in stone." "Hagar's" he noted, merely had the ability to "stun on every page; there are too many breathtaking lines to count."

This D.C. portraiture is extraordinarily personal, for Jones's turbulent early life has provided the setting for almost all of his stories. He is also, it must be said, a quixotic character who seems to arise from the fantastic world of his own fiction. He has never married and has no children. He never knew much about his father, a Jamaican immigrant, long ago deceased. His beloved mother, Jeanette, died nearly 35 years ago of lung cancer. His only sister, Eunice, was hit by a car in New York and killed two years ago after an angry standoff with the driver. His only brother, Joseph, was born with a severe mental handicap and has always lived in a group home in Southeast Washington.

The family's lone survivor is shy, quirky, sedentary, average height, bespectacled, balding with salt-and-pepper hair and a frazzled beard, endearing in his earnestness, living a semi-hermitic existence.

He makes his home near Washington National Cathedral in an apartment so disheveled that he allows only close friends inside. There is no bed (he sleeps on a pallet), no bookshelves, no couch, nor much to sit on other than a kitchen chair. He does not have a car, a driver's license or any mechanized means of transport, not even a bicycle. He has no cellphone, no DVD player, and his Internet connection is sporadic. Though he loves movies and trash daytime television — in particular, those judge shows — he has only a 10-year-old, 13-inch TV and has never had cable. He has never been to a sporting event. He has no deep romantic attachments. He says his closest friend has been Lil Coyne, an elderly woman who for 20 years lived down the hall from him in an apartment building in Alexandria. She died this summer at age 90.

He has a friend cut his hair instead of going to the barbershop. Cooking, he says, is plunking a chicken in the oven "until it doesn't bleed when I stick it." He has a fondness for soul food, most particularly chitlins. If he is to have dinner with friends on, say, Wednesday, "I start worrying about it on Sunday.

One of several abandoned buildings in the 400 block of New York Avenue NW. Jones and his family once lived on the block.

> I knocked at the front first-floor apartment in Miss Agatha's building. A woman opened the door, and as soon as she did a mynah bird in a giant cage behind her gave a wolf whistle, quite distinct and quite loud. It was about twelve o'clock; Sheila was stretching in her bed, wondering if today was the day she would get me.
>
> From "All Aunt Hagar's Children," in **"All Aunt Hagar's Children"**

It sort of eats the whole week up, and then I get there, and I have a wonderful time and wonder what I was so worried about."

"I compare him to Thelonius Monk," says Georgetown University history professor Maurice Jackson, referring to the brilliant, eccentric jazz pianist. "Monk never liked to travel; he liked his own apartment; he got up when he wanted to; he played his own music; but he was always listening, always paying attention. Ed is like that."

Jones says, "I'm not afraid of my own company." And, "I was made to be at home." Carleasa Coates has known Jones since they were both at the University of Virginia more than 30 years ago. Now an attorney in Washington, she cuts his hair and found his current apartment for him. She laughs that " 'quirky' is a term I would safely agree with," in describing Jones, but quickly says that relates only to trivial matters.

"On the things that count as being a man, he's extraordinary," she says. "He's got a big, compassionate heart to go with his big, expansive imagination. He loves his nieces and nephews. He'd be the last to say it, but he's wide open to the world and what happens in it. He cares in a profound kind of way."

He is also an atheist who is committed to writing about the black Southerners who migrated to Washington in the middle years of the 20th century, the friends and neighbors of his youth, people who seemed to believe that God sat on a streetlight up the block. Say, at the intersection of Florida and North Capitol.

"The people I grew up around, almost all of them had been born and raised in the South," he says, during one rainy day when I was driving him through the city. "And, you know, they didn't always go to church, but they lived their lives as if God were watching everything they did."

Ed Jones grew up in an unhappy line of low-rent shacks and tenements in Washington, in astonishing poverty, mostly several blocks north and west of the Capitol.

There are writers whose beginnings have little to do with their body of work, and those writers are not Jones. The world of his youth is everything. His mother, whose stern but loving presence influences almost every page of his work, was a dishwasher at Chez Francois restaurant in downtown Washington. She also worked as maid at the Claridge Hotel, in which the restaurant was set. She was a Baptist and had come up from a speck on the map called News Ferry, Va. She was completely illiterate. She worked hard, desperate hours to keep her children one step out of foster care. Once, when she was ill, Jones was indeed taken to a city institution for children in need. The rest of the time, they lived on the hustle, shuffling from one shabby place to the next, a half-step

Homes at 1138 5th St. NW; Jones's family lived on this block for a time.

> Laverne had been born and raised in Anacostia. After Anacostia High, after her first job at Woodward & Lothrop, she had wanted to move across the river where she believed the real Washington had been waiting all those years for her to grow up and come over and be a woman people could not stop talking about.
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> From "The Devil Swims Across the Anacostia River," in **"All Aunt Hagar's Children"**

ahead of bill collectors.

"The only thing she did was sign with an X" he said. "Maybe I heard her recite the alphabet, maybe not all the way to Z. She couldn't read at all, so far as I knew. I don't think she could recognize her name."

As a child, he moved so much that it cut off almost all friendships, and this left a lasting mark on the adult. "I have only a vague address and a heart that is breaking," he once wrote in an essay of a bicycle trip at 13, when he tried to find boys who had been his closest friends at an earlier residence. He never found them.

The family moved 18 times in 18 years, another of those Old Testament-like qualities of Jones's youth. They lived at 1004 Fourth St. NW, 1525 Sixth St. NW, 90 Myrtle St. NE, 459 Ridge St. NW, 1708 10th St. NW, 7 K St. NW, 1132 Eighth St. NW, 1217 N St. NW, 1221 Mass Ave. NW, and on and on. Almost all of these addresses can be found in his stories, a world teeming with characters. There was Roscoe L. Jones (no relation), the landlord so mean he'd come take the windows out of your place if you were late with the rent. There was Bishop C.M. "Sweet Daddy" Grace, who ran the United House of Prayer for All People. Grace was such a revered figure that Jones watched Grace's funeral from a front porch across the street, because the word among kids was that Grace would rise from the dead during the middle of the thing.

The bookish, never-popular Jones went to Walker-Jones Elementary School, Shaw Junior High and then Cardozo High, by which time he was recognized to have gifts in math and literature. He earned a scholarship to College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Mass., for an undergraduate degree (where he was a classmate of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas), and then one to the University of Virginia for a master's in fine arts.

He didn't see a doctor, he says, until he was 17. His first dental visit was at 22. He labored for years as a proofreader or columnist for an obscure journal called Tax Notes. He wrote "Lost in the City" while working there in the late 1980s and early '90s. For most of the next decade, he wrote nothing but was thinking deeply about "The Known World," the tale of a black slave owner in Virginia. When he was laid off after 19 years, they gave him two weeks' severance. He lived on unemployment benefits while he hammered out the book in a dozen weeks. (It wasn't that hard, he said in interviews after its publication; he had almost the entire book mapped out in his head before he sat down to write.) It won the Pulitzer Prize.

Jones, who taught a fiction-writing class at George Washington University, celebrates the end of the term with his students at a pub near the campus. "In fiction, you have to build your case," he says. "It has to be made, step by step."

There's an old chestnut about how when you ask a Southerner a question, you don't get an answer — you get a story. By this standard, Jones is a card-carrying Southerner, an heir to an oral, stream-of-consciousness tradition that leaves people outside the region slack-jawed (in terror or in awe) that people actually speak the English language this way.

On a rainy April morning earlier this year, I was driving Jones around as he gave me a guided tour of his old haunts. We pulled in front of an apartment at 927 P St. NW. With the windshield wipers slapping away the rain, I asked:

"So, how long did you live here?"

This is his reply:

"It was in ... we were in Brooklyn visiting my aunt, and let's see, that place is gone. But before we went, went that summer of '65 to visit my aunt, we lived in this one room, 1132 Eighth St. And there was a hole about this size in the ceiling that went up to the bathroom. And once some guy up there, caught some guy looking down the hole to see what he could see in our place. And they condemned the place while we were gone. And my mother, I guess, was in a hurry, and she moved around the corner to a room, but she didn't get in touch with us. I think probably one of the big problems was she couldn't read or write, and I don't think my aunt had a phone, she didn't have a phone, and so we contacted her by going up to visit. It was a neighbor of hers, somehow we got in touch, my aunt didn't have a phone. So we came back down and get off the bus, in August, from the vacation, because my aunt and my cousin came down with me and my sister. And the place was boarded up [laughs].

"Well, my sister went down to where the landlord lived, and she told us where my mother was, and my mother was in this tiny room with all our stuff. And what happened apparently, each day she went off to work, people broke into her room. So my mother was still working at Chez Francois, and my aunt was down here for a few days. So my aunt took it upon herself to try to find us a place — to live. So it was 1132, it was few blocks from here, she found that place. Problem is that, and my aunt had no way of knowing this, at 922 N St., my father was living with this woman he had been living with for decades [across the street from their new house].

"We lived here for two or so years."

The first time I met Jones was at an independent bookstore owners convention at a hotel on one of Georgia's sea islands in the summer of 2003. I was reading the just-released "The Known World," the tale of a black man who owned slaves, in my room upstairs. I came down to the room of authors — we were all penned up before we were to go out to talk — and there was Jones, sitting by himself in a corner. We sat together at dinner. I liked him immensely. He was utterly without pretense, kind, sincere and almost painfully shy.

It was an odd sensation. Jones was the titan of the room, on the cusp of literary fame and international renown, but no one seemed to know who he was, nor did he have any interest in making himself recognized. The rest of us, with our earnest but modest efforts, were only too happy to talk to any bookseller who would listen to us. Jones did not want to talk to anybody at all. He just wanted to go home.

A couple of months later, he turned down an all-expenses-paid trip to Jamaica to discuss his books because he was told the event would be at a hillside resort.

"I don't know that I like cliffs," he explained to me, without irony, "and I thought if I was up there, I might just get blown off the side."

Six years later, he's still the same man: quiet, kind and sincere. He almost always dresses in jeans and loafers, an untucked knit shirt over a slight paunch. He answers his phone, "Yeah?"

He was teaching a fiction-writing course at George Washington University this past spring when I dropped in on him one brisk afternoon in his sixth-floor office. He had a window. Out of the blue, he noted that he could see the spot where the old university hospital stood, the one in which his mother passed away.

"Any day I'm there, I can look across to this big hole, and that's where she died," he said, pointing. He paused, considering. "Here I am, this visiting professor and all the rest of it, and right across there is where my mother died. And she never knew whatever happened to me."

He laughs, a dry, unhappy thing.

(Such a momentous place is in his stories. In "A Rich Man," a story in "Hagar's," the fictional Loneese Perkins dies in the same hospital; she longs to be buried in Harmony Cemetery, as did Jones's mother.)

We walked across campus to his class. There were 11 students with their desks arrayed in a circle. Jones eschewed the podium for a desk among them. He sat down, clasped his hands behind his head, his left leg crossing his right at the knee. Before the class, the students had circulated their short stories to each other. They were now critiquing them as a group.

Jones let them chatter for a second, then coughed. It got quiet.

"Why don't we start with 'Sunday Best,' " he said. This was a student story about an 18-year-old girl with her mother at church. At the very beginning of the story, the girl uses an obscenity to tell her mother, between hymns, that she had sex with her boyfriend the night before.

"Comments, please?" Jones said.

There was a pause beneath the fluorescent lights.

"A Baptist church like that, it's hard to see her doing that," Jones said. The students looked down at their papers or looked at him. He explained the very short episode was a vignette, not a story, because it was just a scene. The girl, he said, "comes off as rather despicable," without a reason for her talking so baldly in church. This could work, he said, if there was more of a motivation for what happened the night before.

"The work is there," he said softly. "There just needs to be more of it."

It was a kind assessment.

The talk moved to another story, "Different Air," about a conversation in a cloistered room. The students talked it up, and Jones cut in; he didn't think the piece was realistic.

"In journalism," he said, "a fact is just a fact. But in fiction, you have to build your case. It has to be made, step by step. In real life, you could just start with Obama elected president. But in a story, you have to build how that happens."

A few weeks later, the students invited him for a beer at the Froggy Bottom, a basement pub nearby. There was a pool table, blaring televisions, pitchers of beer, college kids yelling at the top of their lungs. Jones sat at the edge of the booth, straining to make conversation, soldiering on, uncomfortable but doggedly hanging in there, The Good Professor Who Will Have a Cold One With the Kids.

I had the same feeling I had at the convention in Georgia: Somebody, let this man go home.

Far left: Jones visits the 400 block of M Street NW, another childhood home. "When you move 18 times in 18 years, you learn that the world is forever shifting; you can't be certain of anything," he says. Left: the grave of his mother, Jeanette Jones, who died nearly 35 years ago.

You can read all about Jones's youth without ever asking him a question. In the story "Common Law," in "Hagar's," a woman is hit by her boyfriend on the second floor of an apartment building at 459 Ridge St. NW. She tumbles down the stairs as a group of wide-eyed children watch. As a child, Jones lived in the first-floor apartment at that address. Had such a fictional woman tumbled down the steps, she would have fallen into his non-fictional lap. He liked that address so much, in fact, that he set the title story of "Lost in the City," next door at 457 Ridge St. NW. The corner shop in "The Store," at Fifth and O St. NW, is the very shop he went into for treats as a child.

"The characters are fictional, but it's important to place them in real houses," he says. "I don't know what it is, but it's much better for me to say so and so lived there, it's a real place."

This grounded-in-reality approach makes sense right up until one considers "The Known World," with its fictional Manchester County, Va., which doesn't exist at all. He just made the whole thing up, in all its stunning reality.

Here's an example:

"Fern and her husband had 12 slaves to their names. In 1855 in Manchester County, Virginia, there were thirty-four free black families, with a mother and father and one child or more, and eight of those free families owned slaves, and all eight knew one another's business. When the War between the States came, the number of slave-owning blacks in Manchester would be down to five, and one of those included an extremely morose man who, according to the U.S. Census of 1860, legally owned his own wife and five children and three grandchildren. The census of 1860 said there were 2,670 slaves in Manchester County, but the census taker, a U.S. marshal who feared God, had argued with his wife the day he sent his report to Washington, D.C., and all his arithmetic was wrong because he failed to carry a one."

There is no single defining event to explaining Jones's personality and its related offshoot, his fiction, how one works with the other, which wire is connected to what. There's no schematic blueprint. He says the gestalt, the worldview of his work, stems from the rootlessness of his youth:

"When you move 18 times in 18 years, you learn that the world is forever shifting; you can't be certain of anything. But if you're in your home, your apartment, and the rent is paid up, and there's reason for the landlord to knock on your door, then you're okay. But once you leave your apartment, once you leave your home, then you can't predict anything. It's not your world; you can't control it."

The decisive influence on his life, though, might be the fate of his mother, rather than their constant migrations. It's impossible to overstate how deeply he has been moved by her travails.

"My mother was a good and kind woman, and she never bothered anybody," he told me at dinner once.

Underneath the carefully modulated tone of the remark, there was a humming sort of rage that such a quiet, church-going woman could come to Washington and be run over by over by callous men, by a city that didn't particularly worry about the fate of black women. Even at the very end of his mother's life, when Jones rushed into her hospital room where she lay dying, he found that the staff had not bothered to "hook her up to anything."

He was beside her when she passed.

One of his favorite memories of her is when he was a child and told her he was going to grow up to be a doctor and that he'd bring her "five dollars a week!" Recounting that episode more than 50 years later, he was laughing hard, leaning forward onto the table. "Five dollars! It was a lot of money back then!"

And there was the day when a neighbor saw him, as a teenager, shoplifting some beer, and told his mother. She didn't get off work that night until 11 p.m., and was so mad she was pulling switches off trees on the way home.

"You got pulled out of bed in a nice deep sleep, saying 'What did I *do*?' " he remembered. "Man, the switches still had *leaves* on them. Sometimes she was too upset and mad and would leave them on there, and you'd get the beating and the leaves would be all over the floor, for the testimony."

She lived long enough to see him

graduate from college. He is still thrilled she was there.

When she died, he asked for the best cemetery around and was told that was Fort Lincoln. That's where he buried her.

These are stories about love, of course. And honor and pity and sacrifice.

His first book was devoted entirely to "the memory of my mother." His second was dedicated to his brother, and also to his mother, "who could have done so much more in a better world." His third and most recent book was partially dedicated to the "millions who came up out of the South," and to his mother, "who came as well and found far less than even the little she dared hope for."

Reading the three dedications consecutively, realizing they were written over a 13-year period, makes it difficult not to feel the anger beneath the surface. And the heartbreak.

The D.C. characters in Jones's stories seem to believe that B.B. King line that goes, "Nobody loves me but my mother... and she could be jiving, too." They are earthy, hard and calculating, if not flat-out mean. They live completely within the world of black Washington and the Southern towns in which they were born. Whites are rarely seen.

The stories are told from God's point of view, or at least that of someone with a pitiless knowledge of everything that has happened and is going to happen to the characters. They are also almost impossibly dense, somewhere between Faulkner and Joyce and Toni Morrison and John Edgar Wideman. There are dozens of foreshadowings and flashbacks and references to things that haven't happened yet. "Years later," is a favorite device he'll drop into the middle of a sentence, showing what happened decades after the daily events he's describing.

Consider "Tapestry," the final story in "Hagar's." He calls it a "kind of summing up" of all his work. It's about a couple in Mississippi, Anne and Lucas, who wind up migrating to Washington. The story is half complete before readers are even told the year in which it's set (1932). A large part of the story is devoted to what would have happened to the couple's descendants had they stayed in Mississippi, which, of course, they did not.

There are endless flashes into the future. "Years and years later, she would describe for her grandson, talking into the cassette recorder, the dress Clarice was wearing." "It would be nine years before the work was completed." "They had, of course, never kissed and they would not kiss for the first time until three weeks before they married more than a year later." "None of her descendants were ever to become tapestry women." And, just a few sentences before the end of the story, we see all of Anne's life unfold: "... [T]he train entered Washington, where she was to come to her end more than sixty-eight years later, a mother to seven living and two dead, a grandmother to twenty-one living and three dead, and great-grandmother to twelve, a great-great-grandmother to twins."

One can't help but be moved by the generous attention Jones gives his characters and his stories. It's gone almost completely unnoticed, but the two

collections are a matched set: There are 14 stories in "Lost," ordered from the youngest to the oldest character, and there are 14 stories in "Hagar's," also ordered from youngest to oldest character. The first story in the first book is connected to the first story in the second book, and so on. To get the full history of the characters, one must read the first story in each book, then go to the second story in each, and so on.

"The Sunday Following Mother's Day," the seventh story in the first collection, is about a man who kills his wife for no apparent reason. In the seventh story in the second collection, "Root Worker," we meet the killer's sister years later, working as a "day companion" for a wealthy woman who has gone insane.

This is vintage Jones — the legacy of the black South, an older, church-going black Washington generation confronting its age, its losses, its godless offspring, the ways of a world that neither makes sense nor has any explanation. It's that hazy time after the Great Migration north and before the modern era of the post civil rights movement. It's hard to imagine any of these stories in full-blown color. It's a world etched in sepia.

As summer hit its high point, I told Jones I'd like to visit his mother's grave with him. He agreed. We drove out to Fort Lincoln Cemetery off Bladensburg Road early on a sweltering Saturday in mid-July.

We made our way from the street to a circular drive that wound uphill. Jones narrated. "I use to walk up through here. Every weekend, after she died. I lived in Philadelphia. I'd come down on the bus. One would take me to Bladensburg and South Carolina [Avenue], and I'd walk from there."

It is perhaps a mile, each way.

We parked at the top of a hill, in the shade of an overhanging tree. Jones stepped out of the car and surveyed the land spreading out below. It was all markers down in the grass, no headstones. He paused.

"I used to have a map," he said.

We started downhill, tentatively. The last time he was here, some years ago, with his now-dead sister. "I remember holding my niece — she was a baby — and watching her walk down to the water spigot. I don't see it now." And there had a been a tree nearby, he recalled from the funeral. "I remember the pastor saying it was nice to have a tree nearby."

But, for whatever reason — passing time or shifting landmarks or fading memory — we could not find it, not in nearly an hour of pacing back and forth. At one point, I wandered far out of our original search area, head down, looking at one marker and then the next, hoping to find a marker reading "Jeanette S. Jones." I stopped to look back, for we were now almost out of earshot of one another.

Jones was all alone, mopping sweat from his forehead, from his throat. He was looking in the near distance, standing still, looking in the sunlight, looking for her.

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