FROM WE ARE WHAT WE ATE, J. WILDE GARDNER.
HARCOURT BRACE & CO 1995

JESSICA B. HARRIS

In a Leaf of Collard, Green

With apologies to Langston Hughes

Many years ago, when I was teaching one of my first English courses, I came across *Ask Your Mama*, a collection of poems by Langston Hughes. In one, the recurring image, "in a leaf of collard, green," came back to haunt me. I, too, have been marked by the large, purplish-tinged leaves that are, along with okra and watermelon, the African Americans' culinary mark of Cain. Collard greens have followed me all of my life and remain something I don't want to live without. They have punctuated my life, perfuming each phase with their pungent aroma.

One of my earliest memories is of my paternal grandmother. I see her in my mind's eye, tall and African-regal.

Her hair is parted neatly into the four braids she always wore. Her faded housedress with its lacy collar is neatly pressed and her large feet are shod in old-lady shoes with the toes cut out on either side. We're outside in the small garden plot she cultivated behind the projects in Jamaica, Queens. She is bent almost double weeding and arranging, tending each plant as though it were one of the many neighborhood children who called her Mama Harris and flocked around her. The garden plot is small but she somehow manages to keep her southern roots alive, growing black-eyed peas, peanuts, and the largest rosettes of leafy green that are collards in the shade of the Long Island Railroad tracks. I must have been very small indeed as I remember looking up at the trains as they went by and wondering where they went and what kind of people rode them, surprisingly rural thoughts for an urban child of the 1950s.

I liked all of the foods Grandma Harris cooked; she wasn't a great cook, but she excelled at southern classics like beaten biscuits. Her southern tastes were different from the more European dishes that my Pratt-educated mother placed on our dinner table at home. While my mother's food marked my universe, everyone in the family acknowledged that Grandma Harris could "put a hurtin' on some greens."

After the first frost hit them, Grandma and I would gather the greens and take them upstairs to her third floor

apartment. There, she'd fill the deep porcelain sink in her tiny kitchen with cold water and soak the leaves. Then with deft movements of her gnarled brown hands, it was strip and tear, discarding ones that were blemished or not up to her standards. Finally she'd place them in a large pot with a piece of "streak of lean/streak of fat" and onto the four-burner stove on which she also made lye soap. Grandma's tastes of her southern home marked me for life.

My taste for the leafy greens followed me when I left my parents' house and headed off to college. Bryn Mawr, if you please. There's no place in the world where you were less likely to find collard greens than in the Bryn Mawr of the mid 1960s. I don't know how the six other black coeds in my class coped, but Grandma took care of my greens jones. I could count on the care packages I would receive. Neatly wrapped brown-paper parcels arrived regularly, addressed in the carefully rounded hand of one who had learned how to write late in life and still delighted in the formation of the letters. Inside were jars of greens I could open and enjoy. Little did I know that Grandma's care packages were doing double duty—feeding not only my stomach, but gently and quietly reminding me of my blackness amidst the groves of ivy and keeping me grounded in my heritage and myself.

Grandma's reach didn't extend to Paris, where I spent my junior year; I was on my own. My care packages couldn't survive the rigors of transatlantic travel. I slowly

forgot about them and their importance in my life. When Grandma Harris died, the Easter of that year, I was too saddened by the loss and too involved with the wonders of the continent to realize that the torch had been passed. I was not so involved that I didn't discover other leaves in the tiny shops of the rue Mouffetard: African greens with mysterious names, leaves from the Caribbean that looked like large elephant ears, and more. Over the years I would sample these other greens in the sauces and soups, stews and salads.

It was only after years of sampling, that one day in an open market in Abidjan, as I watched a woman prepare a sauce *feuilles*, I made the connection with Grandma Harris and her greens. There was something about the way the woman stripped the greens, her hands working automatically from years of experience, moving with a rhythm they had learned from some unknown ancestor: picking, sorting, stripping, tearing. The penny dropped. Our greens were the same as their greens. Not only were Grandma Harris's greens southern; their manner of preparation extended back over time and across an ocean.

Since that culinary epiphany in the Cocody market under the hot sun, I've cooked greens on four continents and am always looking for new ways to prepare the collards and other leaves that have become one of my culinary hallmarks. There's a Zenlike meditative quality to preparing greens. As you stand facing the sink or the

basin, the mind floats off to other thoughts and the hands take over: washing, picking, rinsing, stripping, rinsing, and tearing.

Although I've had lots of experience with the process, I'm still not the mistress of greens in my home. Each year when I give my New Year's open house and prepare a traditional Black American menu with greens as one of the centerpiece dishes, I make the southern succotash of okra, corn, tomatoes, and hot chili; I roast the huge fresh pork with cracklings; I cook the black-eyed peas and rice. My mother makes the greens. I wouldn't have it any other way.