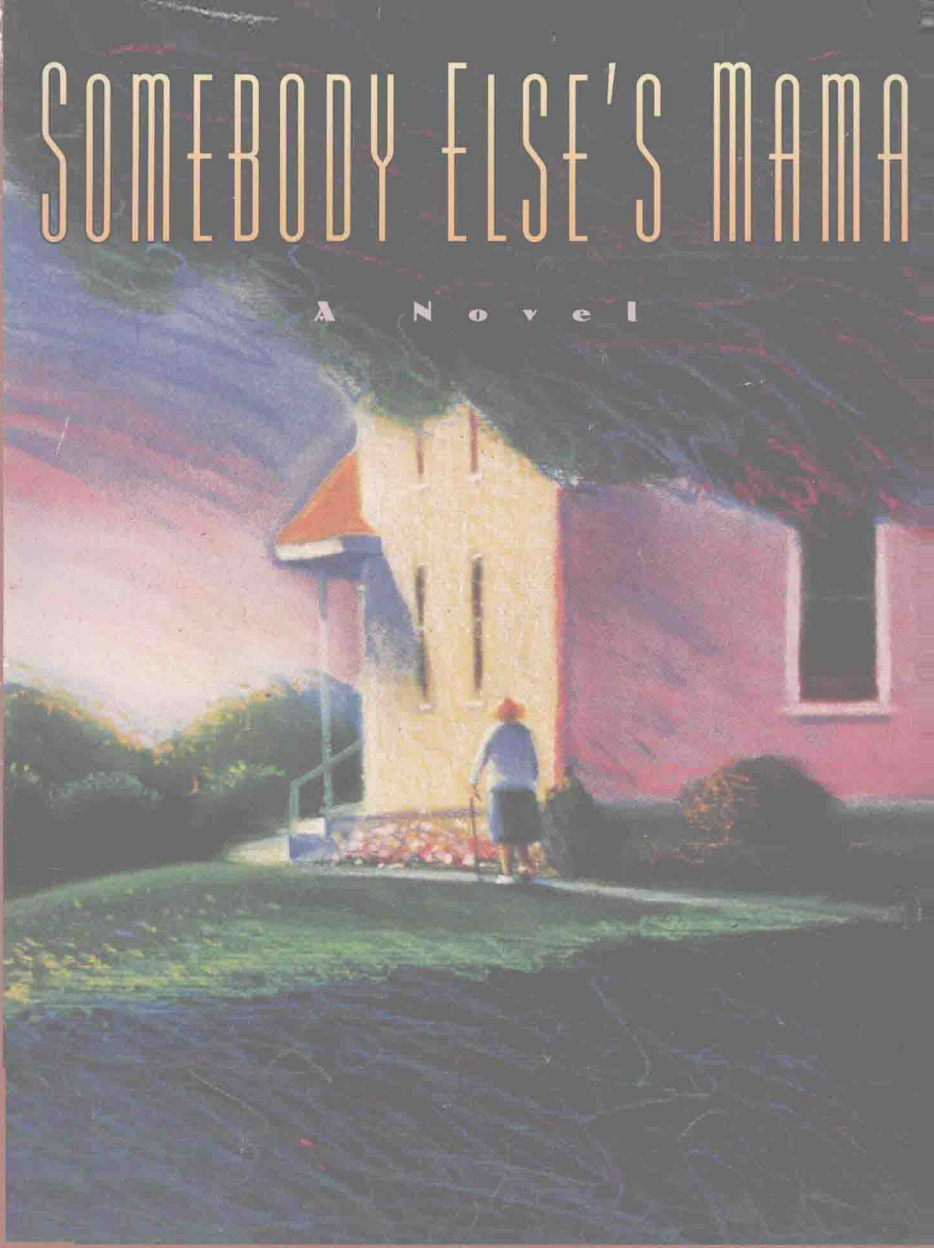
SOMEBODY ELSE'S MAMA

A Novel



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When she saw that she was steadfastly minded to go with her, then she left speaking unto her.

FROM THE BOOK OF RUTH

Somebody Else's Mama

1

PAULA HATED THE RIVER. SHE HATED THE SMELL OF IT, the way it looked, all the old-timey, hocus-pocus, mystical nonsense about the Mississippi River. The river with secret ways. Old man river. The wise one. The river that got under your skin and into your soul. The river that did something to you. She hated that bull. These old black folks got on your nerves with all this mess—their "folk wisdom" and so-called life experiences.

This river was no more than the drainage ditch of North America. In summertime the Mississippi smelled of dead catfish and raw sewage. Old man river didn't flow by, it sort of boiled by, the color and consistency of weak chocolate milk. Drink some and you would probably die.

"You bout ready, Mother?" she shouted to her mother-in-law. At the very edge of the river, Miss Kezee stood, bent over, looking, Paula thought, like a shepherd's staff. Fifty feet away, through the paper-thin dress she saw the vertebrae on the old woman's back. Her bones looked razor sharp.

"Coach says we got to be to practice on time today. We're gonna be late." Tommy leaned out the window. His jaw was swollen out with a Tootsie Roll Pop, his baseball cap on backwards.

"Give her a minute," Paula said.

He threw himself back into the seat, roared with exasperation, and then crossed his arms. He whined to his brother Tim, but Tim was cool. That boy was always cool. He rolled his

brown eyes and went back to his comic book. She loved all that cool on Tim.

"Fuck this shit," Tommy said. He reached across the seat and blew the horn.

"Whatsamatterwithyouboy," she scolded. "You want that old woman to have a heart attack and die? And I've warned you for the last time about your filthy mouth."

Tim had already yanked his brother back to his seat. They started to tussle. God bless eleven-year-olds, she thought. And their parents. She massaged her temples.

"Come on, Mother. We've got a lot to do today." What on earth did that old woman want at the river anyway. These daily trips to worship at the Father of the Waters had gotten old, fast. Every morning for the two weeks since she'd regained enough strength to stand and demand "take me to the river," Miss Kezee had toddled to that same spot, tiny feet planted on the last dry ground where the water lapped the shore. Not yet a month since Paula found her bedridden and disoriented in the house in Saint Paul. She had been so frail. Still seemed so. She was much older than Paula's mother had been when she died, and everything about her seemed ancient: the yellow gray hair, the arthritic stoop, the chocolate brown skin as transparent as petroleum jelly.

Would you be this way Mother? Were you like this when you passed?

The old woman turned and stumbled forward as if she were a punch-drunk prize fighter. Paula walked across the cobblestones to hold her by the arm. Miss Kezee clung to her arm as limply as an infant would.

I am doing this for me, Paula thought. I'm the one afraid she will fall. I'm the one who pictures her pitched face-first into the river, floating away like a length of hunchbacked driftwood.

She had imagined it, wished it—willed it even. More than once. Fall in, you old crow. Fall in and float away. Drift out of our lives forever.

I'm starting to get hot now. I don't stand for a whole lot of foolishness. We'll get you home in a minute, Mother, girl says. Got some more errands to run. Who this girl and who do she think she is? This Paula. Al's woman. We going to Saint Paul? I ask her. She said we was going home. This is River Ridge, mother. This is the road to Hannibal. We have shopping to do for the party. Al's running-for-mayor party. I stare at the wench a good long time. I know all that, I tell her. Why you want to talk to a person like they crazy? Tell me that? Why'd he marry a triflin gal like this in the first place. Boy never has had a lick of sense. Turn on the air in this car. Like to burn up in here. Cheap little gal. Stingy and ornery. Wouldn't give a drowning man a glass of piss water. Drive like a fool. Hundred miles an hour cross all kinds of lines in every lane. Why she haven't hit something, I don't know. Just a minute ago you complained... girl says. Fine, I say. Do what you want, I tell her. Y'all gonna do what you want despite me anyhow. And then she got the nerve to let out a big sigh. But see if she didn't roll up the windows anyway. I ought to knock that sigh right out of her. And knock some of them braids off her head too. What you got your head all knotted up like that for? You like it? she asks. Heifer shakes her head all around. Beads rattle like a dime store toy. Looks like hell, I say, and she say, Well, Al thinks it's pretty. Fool thinks a dog's behind's pretty, I say. And what he want to marry a ugly yella gal like this for anyway. Oh Mother, she says. Mother, really. Mother, can you be a little more careful what you say around the boys. Al and I try to set a good example.

Well, I'll be. She don't know who she messed with. Let me tell this little wench something. Look, wasn't my idea to come down here in the first place. You don't like my mouth then put me out with the garbage. I'll walk home. I'll open the door of this cheap ass car right here and I'll walk home. I'll leave now. You're getting tired, Mother, girl says. You got no right, I say. No right at all. I don't know who you think you are. We'll take care of you, Mother. Till you're better. It's a jail here, Charlie. I'll go home when I'm good and ready. Today if I want, and there ain't a thing you can do to stop me.

Paula turned her ears to the drone of the air-conditioning, let her breathing shallow until it smoothed with the rhythm of the road. I can handle this, she thinks.

"Them damn rowdy boys of yours left a mess in the back seat."

"They're boys, Mother. Eleven-year-old boys. Boys are noisy and messy." She sighed at that truth. She was trapped in a world of pre-adolescents. Twenty-eight sixth-graders at the Riverbluff Elementary School, two more at home.

And an old lady.

Somebody else's mother.

"My Al was never that way. Never. Never. Never."

Those clipped-off nevers sounded like barks, grated at her ears the same way the heavy metal music her students played did. A highway sign said "Hannibal—8 miles."

"You heard me. I said never. Never."

She pictured the Al she knew: rowdy with his boys, rowdy as his boys. A man stumbling through life, his mind on another planet, enormous elbows that knocked lamps off tables at a turn, that had demolished every vase they ever had owned, none of which ever registered in his brain.

"I'm sure Al was a perfect child."

"Don't you patronize me, girl. Let me tell you something. I have cussed many a little heifer out in my time, and I will cuss you out too. Just cause you married to my son don't give you the right to talk to me any way you please. Just cause all I was saying to you was that them little heathens of yours put mess all over the back seat of my son's car..."

"My van, Mother. My van. My job. My money. My van. Mine."

The pressure pounded at her temples. She was exhilarated and sorry. Patting her mother-in-law's arm, she felt the withered tube snatched from her reach.

"Miss Kezee to you. Kuh-*zee*. That was Charlie's name. Use it. And let me tell you something else: I *will* get me a court order, I *will* be sent back to my own house, and you *will* be sorry."

"Fine."

She gripped the steering wheel tight to stop the tremor in her arm. She bit her lip and concentrated on the road. There was nothing to be said when Miss Kezee was this way. There she was, swallowed up in the bucket seat, her arms crossed through the leather straps of her large black purse, her jawline set. She snorted her anger and her owl head bobbed back and forth. What could Paula possibly tell this old woman?

She could tell her she didn't deserve this, that no one did. She could tell her to take her old ornery self back home and die alone. She'd tell her she's sorry. Sorry she's sick. Sorry she has to be this way. Sorry her own mother did.

Were you this way, Mother? Sorry, Mother. Sorry.

"Miss Kezee? I..."

"Where we going?"

A voice as thin as tissue.

"How you doing, Mother?"

"Cold in here. So cold."

"Here. Just a minute." She rolled down the windows of the van.

Paula wheeled the cart down the aisle of the National with Miss Kezee hung off her right arm. She remembered when the twins were little and shopping was a chore because there were never enough arms for all the babies and carts and purses and groceries. Hanging off her arm, the old woman walked with an almost military step: one foot forward, then bring up the other foot just far enough to meet the first. Then again. A slight warm smile parted her cracked and dusty lips. She could be so sweet sometimes and then immediately so hateful. Dehydration, the doctor had said. It's all chemistry, she said, and it's common. You throw it off and everything goes off. The brain. Everything. She made it sound simple, but here on her arm Paula had ninety-five pounds of the real thing, and there was nothing that doctor could have said to prepare her for the reality of this. She had talked about symptoms and treatments and timelines and prognoses. What she didn't talk about was that being sick was a life—a whole life. She hadn't talked about the eating and the drinking and the sleeping and the bathroom and the clothes and the hair and the everything else a person has to do to survive. She hadn't talked about the funky attitudes or the bad moods or the bad breath or the hurt feelings. She hadn't talked about it because she probably didn't know about it. Come over to my house and find out before you run your big mouth, Paula thought.

She rubbed her arm against the supermarket's cold. The aisles were full of the usual Saturday crowd: farm folks and people like herself up from small northeast Missouri towns to do their weekly errands. At Miss Kezee's pace she cruised slowly

between the shelving, crammed to the lip with goods. She plucked from the counters like a robot would, filling her cart with the items on her list.

"What am I supposed to do with you?" she asked Miss Kezee. The old lady sniffed or snorted or made some other disgusting noise. Her face during her quiet times was oddly blank and a little frightened-looking. Her cloudy yellowish eyes wandered and searched. Paula dropped a package of black-eyed peas into the basket.

"What, indeed? Your son—my husband—that's the only reason on earth two people like us would be together. Isn't that right?"

No response from the old woman, a woman who bore so little resemblance to the man she claimed as a son that Paula strained to see any connection between them at all—this tiny person and her tall, solid man, this country-talking old thing and her college-refined gentleman. How could they be from the same planet, let alone the same family. She dragged whomever this was through another aisle.

For whatever reason the National was especially awful today. The farmers and their plain, thick wives carried the loud scents of tobacco and Ivory soap on their cotton work clothes. Their children, one or two of them Paula's students, clambered up and down the aisles and shrieked at their parents, demanding barbecue potato chips and sugar-coated cereals, hair, matted and greasy, that begged combing, fingernails clotted with dirt. A big-breasted mean-looking black woman in a purple tank top grabbed up a toddler and swatted his bottom.

"Boy, I told you to stay with me," she hollered. The baby squealed and threw himself on the floor. "All right, mister," the sister said. She picked the boy up and tossed him into the cart with the beer and soda and crackers. Food stamps fanned from a pouch on the side of her purse.

"I hate coming to the store when they act like this."

"I know what you mean," Paula agreed. Up closer she could see the woman was much younger than she first suspected: twenty-five, maybe.

"You having a little party, too, I see." The woman scanned Paula's basket. The toddler screamed again and received another swat on the bottom.

Paula looked at her groceries and felt embarrassed. You could read a person's whole life in a shopping cart. Bran cereal, tacky magazines, cases of beer, bags of junk food. She rolled her eyes and nodded "Yes."

"You take care now," she said and pushed on down the aisle, anxious to get away. One never knew: it might be contagious. Here, after all, was just the kind of woman her mother warned her she might turn out to be. Loud, fat, and common, swatting her kid's behind in the supermarket, wearing her food stamps as if they were marks of distinction. Paula would never even have a food stamp in her wallet, let alone consider using one. Her family would starve first. One saw these women all the time, these "Gerties" as her mother had called them. Back in Saint Louis her mother would pick them out by the dozens—along Delmar and sitting in Fairground's park. "Look at Gertie over there," she'd say. She'd point to some poor obese woman with uncombed hair, dangling a cigarette and trailing a bunch of kids. She never knew why her mother called them that name. Gertie must have been someone she knew. Paula got the message, though. Here was one of the ways your life could turn out: If you weren't careful, if you messed up, if you didn't do what Mama said.

Mama said be good. Mama said eat healthy foods. Mama said marry a sensible man and raise strong kids. Mama said be responsible, practical, and above all else, Mama said, whatever you do, don't end up like Gertie.

Here she was now, a mama herself, two boys—two half-grown men—that she often didn't have a clue what she was supposed to do with, and a husband who seemed sometimes overwhelmed by the simplest of things—finding a bowl for the leftovers, wringing out a washcloth. And this old woman—somebody else's damn mama, for God's sake. And she has followed every one of Mama's rules, consciously or not—she knows she has. And still, here, she has wound up with all this. And as she looks around the store she imagines many a one of these other women is in some place similar or worse. How could that be? And what was this family stuff supposed to be all about anyway?

She stopped in front of the frozen food case, shook her head, and giggled.

"Some days you just have to throw up your hands," she said. "Chocolate or vanilla ice cream, Mother?"

Wench standing there looking in that glass, laughing like she heard some kind of joke. I got a joke for her. And I'll be the only one laughing. Chocolate, I say. And if you don't like the way things are, you can always leave. I know I plan to. Walking around here sighing and carrying on like she's the only woman ever had the blues. And with all she got and had and gonna get, she better consider herself lucky. Many folks be happy with what she throw out. Oh Mother. Oh I beg your pardon, Mother. I didn't think, girl says. I know you wasn't thinking. Start thinking, get finished up and get me out of this sonnabitch fore I freeze to death. And then the gal take both ice creams anyway in which case why she ask me what I want in the first place? That's what I mean by triflin. I tell her, Wheel this cart on down to that last aisle away from some of these honkies. All the poor white folks in Marion county must be out today. Look at em. Buying all that nasty broccoli and rye bread and mess like

that. I get sick of em anymore. That's the truth. Oh Mother, keep your voice down please, girl say. She better watch her step before I show out on her good. Always worried about what folks think. Treating me like I'm ignorant. What she don't know. Watch me. I'll say a word and look at her. Watch her flinch. Free show for me. That's the trouble with these young gals, all of them. They know too much. Been to school for thirty years and still ain't got sense to come in out of the rain. Can't do nothing right. I give her a whole list of things I need. Got my salve I ask her. I need my salve keep some motion in my elbow. Girl don't never get none. Yes Mother, I got some ointment. And I told her to get some Tabasco sauce because everything the girl fix taste like wheat paste. Yes Mother. A honeydew. Yes Mother. A couple of other things, too, but before I can check, girl goes off on me. Mother, I got everything on your list and my list and Al's list and the twin's list. If you need anything, we'll come back Monday night. See. Have the nerve to get short with you. Don't get short with me, girl, I tell her. A person is just trying to be helpful. Any decent person would. I strain myself reaching down in the cart to help out a little bit. Grab a few things and set them up on the belt. Don't you know everything I take out the basket she got to touch too, pretend to be sliding it along the belt, and I think to myself, store could save all that electricity her standing around sliding things along, don't need no conveyor belt. The real reason she got to touch everything is cause I don't do it right. This goes with those, Mother. Put all the Jell-O together, Mother. These are on special, Mother. Me, I drop it all back in the basket. Forget her. Next thing she throwing stuff out as fast as she can like this is some kind of a race. Or so she can get stuff before I do. Hell'll freeze over before I help her again. Me, I keep my eye on the white check-out girl. You can't be too careful with your money. I try and tell my girl

something, I say Keep a real close eye on these white folks. They'll cheat you every which way to Sunday. I whisper, but girl says Mother—that Mother mess again, as if I said something nasty, and here I am having borne only one child and it wasn't even her. Shshsh, she says. But she don't fool me. I can see she's watching real good, too. Excuse me, miss, she says. These mixes are on sale. Four for three dollars. The white girl calls over a boy to go check for her. Of course she wasn't gonna trust no Negroes. And then when she's shamed cause my girl is right, she don't say she's sorry or nothing even though she's just about cheated my baby out of a dollar. I'll go over there and beat her ass if you want, I say. Oh Mother, shshsh Mother, and then she try not to laugh. How about these? These on special too. I hold up a can of cocktail nuts. No, ma'am, they are not, the white check-out girl says. I keep on holding up more stuff and asking. Paula, she grabs me round the waist and takes me to sit down. You can't be too careful, I say. I talk loud as I want. Then I hear her apologize to the white girl. Now I'm really hot. I'll turn this joint out if I want to.

And finally, of course, it comes down to public humiliation. On the bright side: everyone thought the old thing was funny and cute. Funny and cute: the way people thought Mammy was funny and cute in "Gone with the Wind." Paula remembered sitting in a repertory movie house in Saint Louis when she was little with her own mother watching Clark Gable and Vivian Leigh. She remembered Hattie McDaniel's gruff shouting. Her bellowing. She remembered that her spine felt as if it had a separate life, as if every nerve in her body were extra receptive to shame, or whatever she felt. She remembered a white man at the popcorn stand hectoring his girlfriend with the Mammy voice. "Do you be or don't you be wantin some