INTRODUCTION

"What's the guy, that sings 'Mom's Apple Pie'?" Mrs. Irene asked me, her voice like the morning, quiet and still and warmer than usual. "I like him. I looove him." We were sitting in her office, a front room in a funeral home on the backside[1] of Clarksdale, Mississippi.

"You're like mom's apple pie!" I sang, and as I clapped and carried on, Mrs. Irene smiled and rested back in her seat, a stiff chair behind a heavy desk. Her demeanor had been reserved and guarded for most of the morning—at seventy-one years old, she was like that most of the time—but our exchange about her favorite song had stirred something different: laughter, both hers and mine. A few moments later, something else stirred, a soft but unflinching glare from her to me, a moment of quiet, a thought that could not go unsaid. "I don't like the blues. It saddens me." Her voice was a whisper, somehow both tentative and absolute. "I guess I've never even been to a blues show."

I wondered. The guy who sings "Mom's Apple Pie," Tyrone Davis, is a blues singer. And, Clarksdale, where Mrs. Irene had lived since 1965, is a blues place. Muddy "Father of the Chicago Blues" Waters grew up on Stovall Plantation just west of Clarksdale. Bessie "Queen of the Blues" Smith died

at the G. T. Thomas Afro-American Hospital, east of the Sunflower River in Clarksdale. When Robert Johnson "sold his soul" to play the blues, he is said to have been at the "Crossroads"[2] in Clarksdale. Today, when people want to travel to hear the blues, they often go to Clarksdale. Each year, the town's circuit of blues festivals, blues performance and entertainment venues, and blues heritage markers attracts some 132,000 visitors, more than eight times the resident population.[3]

I wondered. How could Mrs. Irene love a blues singer for his blues song, and live for so long in the world's most famous blues place, and still not like the blues?

I asked her. "What about Moonies?"[4] I remembered all the times folks had asked me had I been to one of the most popular blues clubs in Clarksdale. "Have you been to Moonies?"

"I've been," Mrs. Irene said, as if it were the most unimpressive thing she had ever done. She shrugged. "I went last [year]. My cousin, they gave him his seventieth birthday party there; and I've eaten there." In an instant, her voice and face tightened, like she had just tasted a sour thing, or remembered one. "I don't understand it. The floor is crooked. The tablecloths are crooked. The tables are leaning." I laughed at what she said. She didn't.

I sat at the funeral home with Mrs. Irene Sandiford for a long time that morning, long enough for outside to go from kind-of-hot to "too hot to be outside," long enough for two women who had been there when I got there to leave and come back before I left. We all moved at Mrs. Irene's pace. The morning seemed to too.

I asked Mrs. Irene about her family, and she told me a long story—something about some encyclopedias, some blues records, and an uncle that made her husband and two sons feel like all she ever needed. I asked her how it felt to come back to Mississippi after living in Pennsylvania for much of her early life, and she told me a short story—"This was such a strange place to me . . . coming back to the Country South." I asked her whether Clarksdale had changed at all over the years, and she told me no story at all. She stayed quiet for a little while, looked and nodded toward the downtown square.

"It has gone down here, it has," she said eventually, her shoulders following her words. "People used to have jobs . . . there are no jobs. The schools are down. The crime is up. We used to have businesses, lots of businesses, but not now. It's a mess. . . . If [our elected officials] have a plan, I would like to see it . . . because they don't show it." I laughed unsure. Mrs. Irene looked, unmoved. Then, perhaps thinking that an example would help

me see what she saw, she said, "Look at Mound Bayou." She referenced a place—Mississippi's first independent all-Black town—about thirty miles south. "People have some beautiful homes there, but they don't have a store, they can't start a business, they can't get nothing going. They don't even have a decent restaurant."

Mrs. Irene's assessment of Mound Bayou was a matter of fact. The town was reaping what chattel slavery and 150 years of the Mississippi Delta's peculiar and exploitive regional development policies[5] had sown: it was a virtually all-Black town contending with a polarized and limited labor market and under-resourced social institutions, which had yielded poverty rates among the nation's highest and social outcomes among the nation's worst. "That's about to happen here." Mrs. Irene said, a prophesy.

It had already happened. In the years between the civil rights movement and 2014, Clarksdale had transitioned from an agricultural stronghold and formidable manufacturing outpost to a middling service economy. The transition made "good work" (i.e., jobs that offered worker benefits and paid above minimum wage) hard to find and, for the vast majority of residents, earning a living wage impossible. The town's public infrastructure underwent a similar decline. By the late aughts, the city and county school districts risked state takeover; the town's second-largest retailer closed; and the local hospital declared bankruptcy.

"It makes you tired," Mrs. Irene sighed. "You just keep asking, 'Okay, what is wrong, what has gone wrong?'" Her look demanded an answer. Her tone betrayed her look. "Look at the downtown. . . . It's just so much blues." She was alluding to the ever-growing network of blues places that filled Clarksdale's downtown square and colored most every other facet of public life in town.

Clarksdale's blues was not happenstance. It was the product of a new development vision in the state of Mississippi. Beginning in the late 1970s, as the Delta faced new and intensifying structural challenges (e.g., a mass of plant closures, the continued downsizing of the region's agricultural economy), state lawmakers and stakeholders looked to hospitality and tourism as promising solutions. For Delta towns like Clarksdale, that meant the blues: new blues festivals, new blues clubs and performance venues, new blues museums, new blues heritage markers; and a new state-sponsored Blues Commission to connect and oversee it all.

For some folks, the Delta's blues was cause for optimism. State lawmakers called it a "powerful" economic promise. Tourists called it a good thing. Folks like Mrs. Irene called it what it was: the blues. "The blues just