

THE COLOR OF POWER

MELVINA

HOW A MULATTO MADAME CONTROLLED
FARGO NORTH DAKOTA



JAMES LEE NATHAN III

Melvina

The Color of Power

James lee Nathan III and Sharon Downing

This book is for sale at <http://leanpub.com/melvina>

This version was published on 2017-08-09



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*Special thanks to the Massey family which has bestowed
upon me the great honor of bringing Melvina's story to life.*

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Chapter One

SPRING 1881 FARGO

Her mind begins to flashback to her first train ride to Fargo twenty years earlier. On that trip, she meets Mrs. Anika Marlowe and her husband Torsten. She met the husband earlier in an adjourning car. He introduced himself as a bachelor and made advances. Now she sees him for what he is, a lecherous married man seeking sexual liberties not more than 40 feet from his wife and children.

Melvina despises men of Torsten's ilk, but their peccadillos provide her with a lavish lifestyle, so she tolerates them.

The wife, Mrs. Anika Marlowe, is more than courteous to Melvina, whom she mistakes as another well to do white woman. This is not strange for Melvina Massey, who has often taken as white.

"So Miss Massey what brings you to Fargo?" she asks, Melvina pauses for just a moment before responding.

"I have real estate to assess and maybe purchase in Fargo," Melvina says removing a small fan from her bag.

"Oh, where is Mr. Massey to handle these affairs? I always defer property matters to my husband Torsten." Marlowe says and looks away to see if the aforementioned Torsten is in the train car.

"No, there is no Mr. Massey and I enjoy it that way. What is your business in Fargo, or do you live here?" Melvina says with an inquisitive grin.

She studies the wife now, "What a couple, she is from money but him not. She wears virginal black from head to toe so a religious person championing a cause is appropriate. They have children, yet there is a lack of intimacies be-

tween them, otherwise why is he soliciting female strangers on a train, complex, delightful, and intriguing.”

Melvina's assessment is dead on except Anika Marlowe is her biggest adversary in Fargo. The husband, that is later. However, the struggle between alpha women concerns Fargo morality, North Dakota statehood, and the power to influence both.

Melvina discovers the couple's business in Fargo and dodges her own. She finds out that Mrs. Marlowe is busy here organizing a women's meeting to close the brothels and saloons. Marlowe gives Melvina a handbill which she looks over and then thanks the woman. “Will you be attending with us, Miss Massey?” she asks. Melvina responds with a polite “No dear I'm afraid not.” Confused Mrs. Marlowe responds, “Why may I ask?”

“I have no reason to partake in any endeavor whose sole purpose is to infringe upon my business efforts.” Melvina responds and grins. A tremendous cloud of contempt now hovers between the two, and Melvina will always remember this moment as the day she made her first enemy in Fargo.

Anika Marlowe's face flushes red with embarrassment and then her eyes close ever so slight as if she has her target in sight. “Well Miss Massey, very well,” she says with disdain in her voice.

The two continue their conversation along with the occasional insult sprinkled across the top. Torsten arrives and his eyes beg to Melvina ‘Please do not reveal me’ as if Melvina is in the practice of exposing clients. Torsten is a client she intends to use for information and maybe personal satisfaction. ‘He is handsome, in a tall Viking kind of way,’ she thinks and then glances out of her window as her eyes narrow and widen at the town coming into view.

She exits the train. Three men meet her within the depot and escort her to the grand hotel. Melvina turns

her head back towards the depot to witness the Marlowe clan altogether. She smiles their way with the intended recipient fully aware of her intentions.

“That is a unique woman,” Torsten says and his wife is quick to respond.

“She is an uppity whore, and you are a whoremonger. Are we going to revisit your sinful ways in our new town Torsten?” her accusation stings but the truth is painful.

“Well we are in the divorce capitol of the world, I am sure we can end this arrangement if you are no longer satisfied,” he says.

“Torsten Marlowe you did not marry me for my pretty eyes, bright red hair, charming wit, and ample bosom. You married me for father’s money. I don’t see you going anywhere soon,” she says. Torsten gathers up the children and the baggage acknowledging nothing his wife has just uttered. Such is their relationship.

The Assumptions Begin

As Melvina and her men walk to the carriage, she receives a report on the town and possible prospects for ‘boarding houses’. During this time, the term female boarding houses are the polite society phrase for brothel or whorehouse.

The carriage stops in front of the grand hotel and only one man escorts Madame Massey inside, the other two (a Negro and an Indian) are not welcome. Neither is Melvina, access is no issue today. Members of the board of commerce, fall into a sycophantic stupor of salutations. Why respond to a white female investor any different?

Between the years of 1850-1905, over 8 million northern Europeans (from Ireland, Scotland, Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Germany) stream into the United States and

make their way west to land and opportunity. Few if any of these folk have ever seen Negroes let alone the occasional mulatto. The likelihood they know a mulatto is in their midst is small.

This includes the one in front of them named Melvina, who comes from a long line of mulattoes and quadroons. She looks white in but her blood is black. Here is an example of Melvina's manipulation in play.

Chapter 2

Checking in

BISMARCK DEPOT 1901

The train pulls into the Bismarck depot where the Sheriff escorts Melvina to an awaiting carriage. Melvina is ready for this next leg of the trip. No fear or trepidations she is arrogant, courageous, and Sheriff Twitchell is disinclined to acknowledge her demeanor.

“What makes you so content Melvina, considering your circumstances,” he says.

“And what might those circumstances be Sheriff? That after operating a brothel that sold alcohol for 12 years Cass County makes an arrest. Or I was arrested period?” she says mocking him.

“The latter,” he says, “given what I know of you and your business pursuits. But have you ever given any thought to why you have landed in prison dear?” he asks and holds her hand. A show of compassion or measuring her fear?

“I have given it much thought and will continue to do so, as long as promises are kept, I can manage my brief stay here,” she says now cupping his hand in hers and looking him deep in the eye. “But make no mistake; I will handle the treachery, my way.” She assures the Sheriff. They arrive at the penitentiary at 2pm.

Sheriff Twitchell hands her over to the care of the deputy Warden since the Warden N.F. Boucher is busy preparing his annual report. The penitentiary’s matron escorts Melvina to a holding cage where she is booked.

Something is amiss in the proceedings. The sounds of chatter fill the room and smirks from the guards greet her. Melvina had assurances of a short stay and accommoda-

tions befitting of a woman of her station. However, the early indications are that something has changed.

She changes from her fine clothes into the more dank prison garb. Melvina is thankful that the wool smock and cotton undergarments appear clean from a recent washing. She puts on the proper prison attire, and the questions begin anew. The clerk annotates her responses and starts with a date of birth. "1839," she answers and then says, "I am 49." the admissions clerk judges her height and weight and then sputters out "Stand up tall against that wall. Hmm, you are 5'9 more or less. Husband's name and whereabouts?" he asks. Melvina takes a moment as if she was swallowing a bitter pill before answering. "Henry Rae is my husband, and his whereabouts are unknown, he could be in Chicago, don't know, or care." The clerk captures every word for posterity and then motions to another officer to his left.

A clerk takes a photo of her, which will become an item of great curiosity 110 years later when it vanishes and no other image of the 'Mulatto Madame' exists.

The questions continue as do the snide and condescending remarks from one guard. "They made a promise. Where is the Warden?" She thinks. Her eyes search the room looking. The clerk sees her and asks if she has misplaced an item. "My dignity and social status apparently, but to what purpose do questions serve now?" she ponders before responding. "Where is the Warden I wish to speak to him," she says then remembers her new status and says "Please?"

Her question amuses the clerk who chuckles aloud.

"No Warden for you, a nigger whore. Be quiet and wait. Fetch the Warden my ass," he says and on cue, the matron arrives.

The Use of a Word

“Is this badgering and demoralization of the inmates part of their incarceration mystique? These malcontents are not capable of the tasks assigned. Anyone can see this, and I been here five minutes. But, that word is used without inhibition, tread slow Melvina” she thinks and then follows the escorts to new accommodations.

The cells for women are next to the kitchen. Three narrow spaces needing ventilation and a cleaning. “Don’t turn your nose up to these accommodations’ missy. They’re more than adequate for any nigger,” says the matron. She knows that Melvina is neither a missy nor a nigger. But, in her mind one is correct.

“Pardon me, Miss, whatever your name is,” the matron turns with a menacing scowl but Melvina does not blink. “Do you think that word is magical? Does it conjure or evoke a mystical spell to make me less than who and what I am?” Melvina asks looking the woman square in the eye.

“In your cell nigger whore,” she says and Melvina moves but wants to say one last thing,

“Which word disgusts you more, since you use them both with equal affection? I think they are interchangeable in your mind,” she says and then obliges.

It is hard to say when the town of Fargo realizes that their most celebrated Madam is a mulatto and not a white woman of means from Virginia. At the turn of the century, news and rumors spread across Cass County and disgusts their polite society.

Others in Moorhead and St. Paul Minnesota knows of her ethnicity and assume everyone else does too. She marries Henry Rae (a mulatto man who was passing and everyone knew). To reinforce her position based on their biases Melvina never refuses courtesies and privileges afforded white women of the day.

She accepts the hand that their bias and racist views offer and plays it (and them) to perfection. Perceptions, or views of non-whites and Jews, are very harsh in the latter part of the 19th century. It infects every part of life and bureaucracy in the United States, a great example is those prudent and diligent civil servants the census investigators.

Contrary to popular belief, census investigators for over 150 years used the same method of determining a person's race/ethnicity. They relied on the visual inspection and take into account how an individual is 'perceived' in their community. The last tools used are rules based on an individual's share of 'black blood'.

So, if a racially ambiguous person is well 'received' in the town where they live, the chances are the Census record will list them as white, as opposed to Italian, Greek, or black. This explains why many individuals identified as 'white' in one census can be found as mulatto or black in later ones. Race during the 1800s, absent of definitive physical attributes (skin color, hair texture), is perception and always a means to an end.

Madame Melvina is one who learns to parlay other people's perceptions from a very early age. It is something that her father, Edward Massey, a free mulatto man, teaches her one Sunday afternoon.

Chapter 3

Perceptions are everything and nothing

1844 VIRGINIA

The year is 1844, Gloucester Virginia, and she is six. The two are fishing at a favorite spot when her father sees three men approaching from a mile away. He recognizes one man by the carriage he is driving as Maynard McGivney. Ole 'McGee' owns a plantation bordering the Massey tobacco farm (his former master) and is a notorious 'slave poacher' despised by most of the planters in the region. He is the true reason for stepped up slave patrols in Gloucester and not the Nat Turner revolts a decade prior.

People of the county respect Edward for his hunting skills and he maintains a humble existence around white folk. For fear of them seizing his property and selling him to planters in the Deep South. So, he keeps his head bowed, and mouth shut. His opinions stay in his head. But, his wisdom he shares at every opportunity.

Edward instructs Melvina on what to do. "Listen and remember when dealing with folks that perceive you as inferior, controlling what they see is your only leverage. Remember this and they will always underestimate you," he says, and she never forgets. "Perception," he continues "has nothing to do with how we see ourselves. White owners see us as property, even as freemen, they will always seek to dominate. We are fair skinned mulattoes, this is a blessing, and a curse. The masters despise and crave us in the same breath. They are nearby, remember what I have said," he says.

The young girl looks up and bares a toothless smile;

her crystal blue eyes a glow from the sun reflecting off the pond. Edward has her cover one-third of the fish they have caught with a tarp and hemp. The remaining lots of fish stay out in the open or in a cloth bag put into the pond out of sight.

“Papa why are we hiding the fish?” she asks and her father places his gun inside his buckboard and stands there. “Now you sit there on top of our fish and do not say a word unless spoken to” he commands, young Melvina responds as children do “Yes sir” Edward turns to the road and sees that the party is now of a mile away.

Edward bids the men good afternoon, they exchange pleasantries, and the fish come up in conversation. Edward offers of his catch to the planter who accepts.

He motions for Melvina to get off the fish she is sitting on and he gathers them and puts the catch in the white carriage. “Evil men are always on these roads Masa McGee. Po farmers gots to be more careful,” he says playing small for the white man and feeding into his perceptions. The planter is very pleased.

McGee’s attention turns to the young girl. He inquires as to Melvina’s age and if she is reading and writing yet. Edward does not take the bait, “No sir it’s agin the law to teach negroes but Masa Massey say to bring her up to the big house when she turns 12, and she will learn the ways of the house,” Edward says and waits.

“Nonsense, yes it’s against the law to teach a slave but you are free mulattoes and quadroons, so I see no problem with education. You send her up to my place in three winters and my wife and daughters will begin her learning.” He says and Edward removes his hat and thanks the man. Edward then cautions the men to be careful on the road and they leave.

He does not intend to let Melvina step foot on that man’s plantation, a place where he breeds with his slaves.

The owner keeps the children near his house, so that when they come of age, he can continue to have his way.

Melvina can read and write but no one other than the family needs to know.

“Child we gave him enough to satisfy his curiosity. His perception led him to underestimate our craftiness. No matter what they say, white folk will believe their eyes, remember that.”

For much of her life, Melvina reacts to the perceptions of her, by feeding into the natural bias inherent in people. These perceptions of her she manipulates throughout her life.

Her ability to move in and out of the world of white folk is not without pain, regret, or anguish. She accepts this emotional and often brutal ride, with great class and poise. However, Melvina still wants the one thing her status cannot give her, trust.