

THE OTHER

THE ESSIE MAE WASHINGTON-WILLIAMS STORY

“The struggle for equality begins at home.”

For seven decades, Essie Mae Washington-Williams kept secret the fact that her father was the nation’s most prominent and notorious segregationist – and the longest-serving Republican senator in United States history – Strom Thurmond.

At age 13, Essie Mae learned that she was the product of a forbidden love affair between Thurmond, the up-and-coming scion of a prominent South Carolinian family, and Carrie Butler, a beautiful domestic servant in the family’s employ. Sent in infancy to Pennsylvania to be raised by relatives as if she were their own, the revelation of her unlikely parentage had profound implications for a young girl struggling to find her place in a society where race was a defining element of so many aspects of life.

This struggle would continue throughout her life, as Essie Mae wrestled with the impact it had on her opportunities, personal relationships, and perhaps most importantly, her sense of self-worth, identity, and belonging. The evolving relationship between a very secret daughter and a very public figure would come to mirror the ongoing struggle for, and persistent obstacles to, racial harmony in the United States.

As such, the story of Essie Mae Washington-Williams’ relationship with Strom Thurmond shines a light on some of the most subtle and damaging hypocrisies of our age. As the nation today confronts its legacy of racial inequality with renewed urgency, Essie Mae’s struggle is a deeply intimate example and profound reminder of the casual inequality that persists in our society.

The primary themes of this narrative are the destructive power of marginalization, apathy, and ethical complacency, and the critical nature of a sense of personal and collective responsibility in the pursuit of a fair and equal society. Like race relations writ large, the story of Essie Mae and Strom Thurmond is at once as simple as it seems on the surface and yet nuanced by confounding complexities. As history repeats itself, as America wakes up to the reality that it is not enough for individuals to make their own peace with racism, our story serves as a deeply personal illustration of the price of complacency, the false lure of neutrality, and the devastating consequences of inaction.

THE FRAME

“Will the story be told...?”

While the bulk of the narrative will consist of detailing the evolution of the relationship between Essie Mae and Strom as it parallels the evolution of civil rights in America, the story will be framed by a scenario that plays out over several days in 2003.

Strom Thurmond has died at age 100, and the burden of the secret she has kept since 1938 weighs heavily on 78-year-old Essie Mae. For decades, her children have promoted the idea of going public with the details of her parentage, but for many reasons – some shared, some held close – she has never truly considered it. Until now.

We open the series by introducing the frame, wherein one of Essie Mae’s grown children, Wanda Williams-Bailey (49) is in the process of moving in with her aged mother. Over the course of several days, as the two women go about the mechanics of creating a shared living space, mother and daughter discuss the recent death of their father/grandfather and what it means to them. Inevitably, they renew an old debate, with Wanda adamant that Essie Mae reveal her family history to the world, and Essie Mae uncertain.

Wanda believes the revelation would be important not only for her mother’s peace of mind, but also as an example for the world at large. Essie Mae has spent a lifetime sorting through the meaning of her relationship with her father – questions of love, loyalty, responsibility, and identity – and is struggling to decide upon the best path forward.

The frame, then, consists largely of the back-and-forth between them as they seek the best possible solution. We open on the frame, and then return to it from time to time throughout the series – in essence, reminding the viewer that what is being revealed through Essie Mae’s narrative is the substance of the deliberations between mother and daughter.

This structure allows Essie Mae to offer insight into her perspective, both as it was and as it has changed over time, to leave her in the emotional space she occupies at present. At the same time, it allows Wanda to counter with her own, perhaps more contemporary attitudes and opinions on the matter. In large part, Wanda’s attitude and interrogation will likely mirror the emotional seat of the viewer as both try and understand how a situation like Essie and Strom’s father/daughter dynamic was able to exist and persist.

As we proceed through the series, the frame will serve to:

- Set up the story and highlight the resonance of the story in today’s cultural and political climate – emphasizing why this story matters.
- Move the story along, fill in expository gaps and bridge time gaps to allow us to focus on the moments of greatest dramatic impact and relevance.

- Provide a transition to the conclusion/dénouement. An examination of the question, “Okay, so then where does this leave us? What has been gained?”

In the final episode, with Strom’s death, Essie Mae’s narrative will catch up with and overtake the frame. At that point, we will have spent five episodes seeing how the relationship unfolded, changed over time, impacted the main characters, and was reflected in the events of history. From that point forward, we will see Essie Mae come to her decision and what she does with it.

EPISODE ONE: THE GIRL

“I just wanted to belong... to someone.”

Episode Summary

Framed by the scenario of a Wanda moving in with Essie Mae, an old photo triggers a conversation that the daughter has had before but wants to have again. It is quickly apparent that the recent death of Strom Thurmond – Essie Mae’s father and Wanda’s grandfather – has opened both old wounds and old debates.

Essie Mae holds that keeping the secret of her parentage was part of an old bond between her and Strom, and that she doesn’t see how revealing the truth now will make any difference. Kindly but firmly, Wanda argues that the world has changed, that people need to speak up against the silence and repression of the past, and that telling the truth will be liberating for Essie Mae’s long struggle with her own sense of personal identity. Essie Mae counters that Wanda doesn’t understand how it was, what has led to this. “Explain it to me,” Wanda beseeches her mother. “Help me to understand.”

And Essie Mae does.

She was just a normal girl, she relates, growing up in the shadows of the steel mills of Coatesville, Pennsylvania. We follow into her recollections...

Essie Mae’s life seems pretty standard. The man she knows as her “father” works for the steel company, her “mother” runs the household and, while loving, makes it known that children are to be seen and not heard. A friendly, somewhat quiet girl of 13, Essie Mae seems happy and content. She excels at school and is comfortable socially; she has friends who are black, white, and recent immigrants. Even as we establish her relatively benign universe, we see the signs of racism lurking in the corners – the segregated movie theater, the off-limits public pool, the store that sells to blacks but won’t allow them to try on the clothes.

As she enters eighth grade, Essie Mae learns that for the upcoming academic year, the students will be segregated by race into two schools. This jolting change has an immediate impact on her. The inequality of the two schools, not to mention the segregation itself, makes Essie Mae

more aware of other inequalities in her world that formerly she had brushed off. Suddenly the all-white YMCA doesn't seem very Christian to her. A line seems to have been drawn – which perhaps was always there – between the haves and the have-nots.

Amid this gradual awakening, a white girl (Helen Moore) is raped by an unknown assailant, and a black man is arrested for the crime. Essie Mae's father and uncle are among the collection of black men who arm themselves to counter a white mob that assembles with the intention of lynching the suspect. Bloodshed is avoided by the intervention of the sheriff, who insists that the town will not have "another Zach Walker" on their hands. This alarming incident takes on an even more disturbing meaning when Essie Mae learns who Zach Walker was – a black man lynched and burned alive in Coatesville thirty years previous, whose attackers had escaped justice by the collusion of an indifferent citizenry. Days after the narrowly avoided lynching, a white man confesses to the rape of Helen Moore.

Still reeling from the revelations of her town's recent (and apparently unlearned-from) history, Essie Mae's family is visited by an "aunt" named Carrie Butler. Smitten by Carrie's kindness and beauty, Essie Mae is floored when Carrie lets slip that she is, in fact, Essie Mae's mother. It is explained to her that Carrie had given birth to Essie Mae in South Carolina at a very young age (16), and the family had felt that Mary, Essie Mae's married sister in Pennsylvania, would be better able to raise her. This revelation excites Essie Mae, although it sends her sense of belonging into a whirlwind of confusion.

Over the next few months, Carrie makes sporadic trips to visit with Essie Mae in Coatesville, and at the end of the school year, invites her to come live with her for a month in Chester, near Philadelphia. Mother and daughter bond, and Essie Mae is exposed to a slightly broader view of the world, but they never touch on the identity of her father, and Essie Mae is left to wonder.

Essie Mae's uncertainty about her sense of place and identity drives her to excel in school and plan for a self-sufficient future, and as she prepares to enter high school, she begins to work as a nurse's assistant at Coatesville Hospital. Here she gets an even deeper sense of the quiet line drawn between black and white, as black patients receive meager poverty ward-level care. It is not lost on Essie Mae that this is the same hospital building from which Zach Walker was dragged to his death by an angry mob only a generation ago.

Near the end of the summer, 1941, an aunt dies in the family's hometown of Edgefield, SC, and Mary and Carrie take Essie Mae to attend the funeral. On the long train trip south, Essie Mae is keenly aware of the increasingly overt signs of inequality and segregation, culminating in the ubiquitous Jim Crow laws south of the Mason-Dixon line. In Edgefield, she meets her extended black family and notes the deep, clearly drawn divide between the veritable slums where her family resides and the palatial manors of the town's prominent white citizens.

On the final day of her stay, Essie Mae is shaken awake very early by her mother, who helps her into her finest dress and tells her she is being taken to meet her father. Astounded by the sudden turn of events – and by the potential implications of this momentous life event – Essie

Mae allows herself to be led to the town square and up the steps of a stately office building. When a black attendant opens the door for them, Essie Mae nearly throws her arms around him, but Carrie shakes her head. Instead, they are led through the fancy building to the door of an old-school, formal office, and as the door begins to open, we cut to black.

Episode Takeaway

The main point of this episode is that Essie Mae grew up in a world that was, in many ways, just as bigoted and segregated as South Carolina, resulting in a sense of inequality that was more subtle, revealing itself gradually as she came into adolescence. Essie Mae's early struggle with identity is further complicated when she learns that her parents are not really her parents, and when it is announced at the end of the episode that she is about to meet her father, Essie Mae is at a loss – will this be the moment in which she finally finds her place, or will it lead only to more uncertainty and a greater sense of otherness?

EPISODE TWO: THE JUDGE

“The President of the South...”

Episode Summary

The episode opens on the other side of that office door, as a little boy bursts through and crosses the empty office to a window, through which he watches two white men exchanging angry words on the sidewalk out front. After a moment, one pulls a pistol and shoots the other point blank. The boy scurries to attention as the shooter stomps through the building and into the office, tossing his pistol on a chair. “Well, boy,” he says in a heavy upcountry drawl, straightening his tie. “That settles that.”

In voiceover or with a quick return to the frame, Essie Mae tells Wanda: “By 1908, the little upcountry town of Edgefield had produced nine South Carolina governors. Strom’s daddy Will was not going to be the tenth.”

The episode proceeds to give some backstory of Strom and the Thurman family, the local politics of Edgefield, Carolina, and the South, and the history of Strom and Carrie. Who is this man Essie Mae is about to meet?

We delve into the dynamics of Reconstruction and the drawing and hardening of racial lines – the bloody history of the scramble by the Southern white establishment to reestablish power after the Civil War. The birth and perpetuation of segregation as a means of social control – in which the Thurmond family played a significant role – is revealed through short scenes from the state’s political past, building a thorough picture of the society – and family – into which Essie Mae will be born. Information about the Thurmonds and Strom’s progression from student to teacher to judge is related by various sources, including Carrie’s ancient Aunt Calliope, a sharp and sassy former slave.

Strom's father Will nixed his chances at political office by very publicly killing a man in cold blood over a question of honor. Instead, Will Thurmond diverted his considerable resources into supporting and puppeteering candidates who promoted the cause of segregation, the disenfranchisement of blacks, and the perpetuation of white control – most notably, the virulent (and violent) racist Benjamin “Pitchfork” Tillman.

Against this backdrop we meet a young Strom – a serious student and fitness fanatic – and Carrie Butler – a beautiful domestic servant in the Thurmond household. Their flirtation leads to a clandestine romantic connection, which leads to an unexpected pregnancy. Although Strom professes deep feelings for Carrie, it is understood immediately by both parties that special arrangements will have to be made, and that there is no public future for the two as a couple. After giving birth to Essie Mae in Edgefield, they send her to Coatesville to be raised by Carrie's sister, Mary Washington. Shortly thereafter, Carrie herself departs Edgefield to live in Chester, Pennsylvania. Strom can't resist the urge to say goodbye, and comes to the Butler home in a fancy black car to see Carrie off.

We alternate between the paths that Carrie and Strom follow over the next decade. Strom becomes a high school teacher and coach, spends a term as a state legislator, and is elected to a judgeship in Edgefield. Carrie begins a new life in the north, working a variety of jobs, although periodically supported – and visited – by Strom. Their relationship is somewhat nebulous, although it is strongly suggested that their romantic flame is not extinguished. As the years pass, they discuss the issue of how much to reveal to Essie Mae, always seeming to kick the can down the road by agreeing that they will let her know “when the time is right.”

We catch up with Strom in 1941, at home in Edgefield, dressing meticulously, a bit nervous as he prepares to leave his beautiful home. It's only a short walk to his building on the town square, where...

The door to his office once again opens to reveal Carrie Butler and his daughter, whom he is meeting for the first time.

The meeting is short and awkward. Strom is formal but complimentary, and falls back on his schoolteacher's demeanor – instructive and encouraging, but not affectionate. At one point he shows Essie Mae a framed coin bearing the state seal with the Latin motto, “Who can separate us?” Essie Mae is moved by the message in the gesture, but leaves the meeting disappointed that at no time did Strom actually acknowledge that he was her father. She and Carrie return to the Butler home, Essie Mae's mind racing at what all this may mean.

At the Butler home, it becomes clear that the entire family except Essie Mae was aware of the relationship, and the arrangement to keep it quiet. It was simply understood that the secret would be kept safe, as folks in Edgefield knew better than to talk, and Coatesville was far enough away for it not to matter. It was also acknowledged that this sort of arrangement was not exactly uncommon, that this sort of thing had a long history in the South. None of this is a

comfort to Essie Mae, who wonders if the oddity of her secret parentage makes her something extra special, or something “extra other.”

The episode ends as Essie Mae and the others are preparing to return to Pennsylvania. An elegant black car pulls up in front of the Butler home, very out of place in this very poor neighborhood. The scene is strongly reminiscent of Strom’s goodbye to Carrie years earlier, and Essie Mae is thrilled. Is her daddy coming to send her off with love and regret, too...?

In a voiceover, Wanda asks her mother: “So that’s how your relationship with Strom began?” Essie Mae responds: “Well, in a sense.”

It’s not Strom who gets out of the car, but his sister. She quietly and rather formally delivers an envelope stuffed with \$200 to Carrie and departs. Essie Mae is crestfallen.

Episode Takeaway

The main point of this episode is Strom Thurmond is from a different world, one that exists right alongside but completely removed from the world of Carrie Butler, and in time, that of his daughter Essie Mae. This is not presented as sympathetic or as justification for his actions, merely as a presentation of facts – this is the idiocracy from whence Strom springs and to which he is committed. The revelation of his paternity to his daughter pulls the rug from under Essie Mae’s sense of self, and sets in motion her lifelong struggle with a sense of “otherness.”

EPISODE THREE: THE FAMILIES

“What can separate us...?”

Episode Summary

The third episode opens with Essie Mae back in Coatesville, resuming the life she once led with Mary and James as her parents. On the surface, nothing has changed, but within, she enters high school burning with unanswered questions and unresolved emotions. The elder Essie Mae reveals to Wanda: “I didn’t see my father again for three years.”

As World War II consumes the headlines and dominates all aspects of daily life, Essie Mae is consumed by the contradictions of her family situation, a new and overwhelming consciousness of race, and despair at the inequities of a society that continues to reveal its inherent bigotry. She studies history and learns about the political chicanery used to keep blacks underfoot in the South, atrocities such as the Hamburg Massacre, and the fact that her Thurmond forebearers were slaveowners themselves. She sees segregation all around her and sees it personified in her own life – after all, what better example of segregation can there be than a father who claims to care for his daughter, but refuses to be with her?

By 1944, when she is summoned to meet with Strom in a Philadelphia hotel room, she almost doesn't want to go. Wanda asks her mother: "Then why did you?" Essie Mae responds: "I wanted to belong to someone. I wanted my daddy." Strom has returned from the war, and is full of stories about D-Day and his service. Aside from this, however, the meeting turns out to be more of the same – formal, friendly but distant, and ending with an envelope full of cash. Carrie, notably, is not present, and Essie Mae wonders what this reflects about her parents' "love affair."

Upon graduation, Essie Mae moves to New York City to work and study nursing at Harlem Hospital. This exposes her to the opportunities and contradictions of big city life – racism surround her in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, but a greater sense of racial mobility also seems available, as evidenced by glamor of Harlem high society and the many interracial couples she encounters. After she abandons nursing to pursue studies in education, Strom visits Essie Mae in Harlem, where he convinces her to continue her education at South Carolina State – a school he has worked to support as a means for the advancement of blacks. Lured in part by the possibility of being closer to her father, Essie Mae eventually agrees.

Arriving in Orangeburg, SC, Essie Mae is surprised by the almost total political apathy of the all-black SC State student body. The lines of segregation are more sharply drawn here, most starkly in the chain-link fence that surrounds the campus, but it doesn't seem to rankle others as much as it does her. Essie Mae learns that her father has been elected governor, but doesn't see or hear from him until he surprises her with a secret meeting in the university president's office near the end of her freshman year.

Essie Mae blossoms socially in her new environment, making friends and even a few boyfriends. Her first, a fellow student named Matthew Perry, is active in the NAACP and expresses a relatively common belief about the new governor – that while not ideal, Strom Thurmond is about the best that can be expected. This activism/resignation opens Essie Mae's eyes to the constraints felt by many Southern blacks regarding the pace of progress.

Less resigned is war vet and pre-med student Julius Williams, who captures Essie Mae's heart with his deep voice and deeper social convictions. The fact that he is the polar opposite of her father concerns Essie Mae as their relationship grows serious. Soon after their meeting, Julius switches from pre-med to pre-law for the purpose of dedicating his life to fighting for equality.

Meanwhile, as governor, Strom becomes further entrenched in the national political scene, emerging as a voice for the South in the post-war years. At home, he is outspoken about the sham justice administered in the wake of the Willie Earle lynching in Greenville, 1947, earning him the nickname "the Southern Roosevelt." The 46-year-old governor's engagement to Jean Crouch (21), an aide in his office, takes Essie Mae by surprise, and despite her mixed feelings, she congratulates her father at their next meeting in the president's office. Essie Mae also confronts Strom about the horrors of the Willie Earle case, and Strom expresses his regret, his commitment to ending such injustice, and his frustration over the obstacles to doing so. Strom concludes the meeting with a hug – their first – which is very meaningful to Essie Mae.

Essie Mae learns about her father's wedding to Jean in November of 1947, hurt but resigned that she was not invited. Still, she believes her father has good intentions, both for her and for black people, and is working toward progress on both fronts. This confidence is rattled to its core when she watches news coverage of the Southern Governors' Conference in Tallahassee, February 1948. Convened for the purpose of opposing federal interference with Southern states' repressive policies, its ringleader is none other than her own father, who passionately declares from the podium, "South Carolina is ready to fight!"

Episode Takeaway

The main point of this episode is that Strom works hard to create two separate worlds, represented by his two families – the very definition of segregation, on an extremely personal level. Essie Mae wants to love her father, but is distraught by this marginalization, and struggles to find her own place in the world, a place where she is not "other," but primary.

By the end of the episode, Strom actually has his own white family. He seems to believe that this can work, that he can have it both ways – separate but equal – but it is not working out so well for his secret daughter. The consciousness that this is not enough, that this is unfair, is growing steadily in Essie Mae. When Strom busts out as a key national figure in the battle for segregation, Essie Mae is stunned, and the lines are drawn.

EPISODE FOUR: THE NATION

"That's just politics..."

Episode Summary

The episode opens with Strom in firebrand form at the States Rights Party Convention in Birmingham, July 1948. Leader of this new "Dixiecrat" party, Strom is nominated as their candidate for the upcoming presidential election. His fervor at the convention – adamant support of segregation, vitriolic condemnation of federal interference with Southern ways – stands in stark contrast to the racial tolerance he expresses when visiting with his daughter.

This will be the focus of the fourth episode – a lens trained on the turmoil of our nation between 1948 and the 1960s, and the stunning contradiction between Strom's public life and the placating lines he feeds Essie Mae. This episode takes a wider view of the state of the world as Strom rises to greater power and prominence and the Civil Rights movement gathers steam. Something has to give.

Wanda is incredulous that her mother didn't cut ties with Strom once and for all, or at least strike back against his hypocrisy by revealing it publicly. Looking back, Essie Mae tries to explain that matters of the heart are tricky, and that she was focused on trying to make her own way in the world.

As Strom is rallying the South in defense of segregation, Essie Mae quietly marries Julius in North Carolina, where they are both working at a resort for the summer. Babysitting the children of rich whites, Essie Mae grows close to them, and wonders at what point do Southern kids start thinking of blacks as “other.” The newlyweds enjoy their honeymoon summer, but they can’t keep the turmoil of the outside world from leaking in, often in the form of escalating proclamations from the campaigning Strom Thurmond.

“Segregation in the South is honest, open and aboveboard,” he declares to Time magazine, of which he makes the cover. “Of the two systems, or styles of segregation, the Northern and the Southern, there is no doubt whatever in my mind which is the better.”

Julius rails against this bigotry, still unaware that Strom is Essie Mae’s father. He compares Strom to Hitler: “I fought the Nazis to come home to this?” Essie Mae knows that she can’t keep this secret forever, at least from Julius, but is terrified as to what his reaction might be.

Back at school, the newlyweds move off-campus, in part to be together and in part to avoid the rumors sweeping the school that the governor has a secret, black daughter enrolled there. Essie Mae is kicked out of a laundromat that a light-skinned friend was allowed to use, and wonders if she should just blurt out that her daddy is the governor. Julius continues his law studies and renews his vows to use his degree to fight racism... and Strom Thurmond.

Unable to contain the secret any longer, exhausted by the inner tension it is placing on her marriage, Essie Mae decides to come clean to Julius about her father. When she tells him, Julius has a good laugh, thinking it’s a joke. When she doesn’t laugh along, we close in on the realization dawning on Julius’ face...

Cut to Strom in the final days of his presidential campaign. The rhetoric is ugly, loud, and gaining a wider audience.

Back at school, Essie Mae receives a call from Mary in Coatesville. Her mother is very sick – the diagnosis is renal failure, and the outlook is bleak. Essie Mae travels to Coatesville to confer with Mary and tells her of her marriage to Julius. Mary asks what Essie Mae’s husband thinks about her daddy, and we cut back to the rest of Julius and Essie Mae’s conversation.

After recovering from the shock, Julius asks a few questions, and is ultimately understanding. He says that he will always love her, but asks her not to ask him to love her daddy. Essie Mae’s relief is profound, and this security allows her to complete the difficult task that awaits her.

Essie Mae visits Carrie in the dingy poverty ward of a Philadelphia hospital. As Carrie is unresponsive, the conversation is one-sided, and Essie Mae unloads her joy and confusion, her continuing struggle to make sense of it all. She expresses her love for Carrie, and realizes that now, all she will have is a father. Essie Mae is booted from the hospital by a rather uncaring (and white) nurse, and before she can return the next day, Carrie dies at 38.

The next week, Strom is destroyed in the presidential election. This provides Essie Mae with some grim satisfaction, but she is disturbed that her father managed to garner over a million votes nationwide. Her emotions are mixed when, soon after, she receives another secret summons to the college president's office – her daddy wants to meet.

Finally, after all the years, Essie Mae lets him have it. “How could you say all those horrible things?” she demands. Strom falls back on his old chestnut – “it’s just politics” – but it isn’t flying this time. She accuses her father of being a racist, believing that blacks are inferior. “Not inferior,” he claims, “just different.” He pleads for more time, that old ways die hard, and that the races can’t simply be forced together by legal proclamation. “What if your husband tried to force you to kiss him?” he asks.

Essie Mae’s response is to refuse the hug he offers. She leaves him standing in the office, for once rejected, for once held accountable.

Episode Takeaway

The main point of this episode is that, much like Jim Crow, separate-but-equal isn’t going to work between father and daughter. You can’t have it both ways, and moreover, you shouldn’t want to have it both ways. Despite reassurances to Essie Mae that some things can’t change, and that there’s a difference between political maneuvering and one’s true conscience, it is increasingly clear to Essie Mae that either you believe in – and stand up for – what is right, or you are on the side of what is wrong.

EPISODE FIVE: THE STRUGGLE

“He’s not your father where it matters...”

Episode Summary

Wanda asks her mother why she put up with any of it. “You didn’t owe him anything,” she says. Essie Mae isn’t so sure. More than filial loyalty, she expresses the belief that she was a positive influence on Strom, that her presence in his life might have been a counterweight to the sinister forces that sought to bend his voice to their will. Wanda is dubious.

The fifth episode emphasizes the widening rifts in the nation and in the growing sense of separation between Essie Mae and Strom. We follow the advancing careers and growing families of both father and daughter, and focus on the ways that black empowerment is fighting for the attention of a divided nation – while racism persists and economic disparity increases.

“It couldn’t have just been the money,” Wanda ventures. “I know you too well for that.”

Essie Mae concedes that the money was helpful, but also that she feels the money he continued to provide was Strom's way of demonstrating love, shame, and frustration. Again, Wanda is dubious.

The years speed up as we are witness to a progression of scenes that show the lives of Strom and Essie may drifting further and further apart, even as they continue to meet on a regular basis – and always in secret. Essie Mae continues to stash away most of the money she receives from Strom, and continues to hide it from Julius.

As governor, Strom takes a few positive steps for the advancement of black people – appointments to previously all-white positions, public statements and policies – but Julius ain't having it. Essie Mae and Julius welcome their first child, Julius graduates from law school, and Strom runs for Senate and is defeated by the fervent racist Olin Johnson. Essie Mae follows the old-school campaign in the news – stump speeches, barbecue debates that nearly escalate to fisticuffs – and wonders which of the two candidates is more dangerous – the loudmouth Johnson who screams the N-word loud and proud, or the more dignified gentleman who doesn't, but speaks out of both sides of his mouth.

After the defeat, Strom moves to private practice in Aiken, SC, and Essie Mae's family moves to Savannah. Work for a black lawyer proves hard to find, so Julius takes pro bono cases for the NAACP. Essie Mae is again frustrated to find Savannah very segregated, and the black populace largely ambivalent to it – she finds most simply don't want to cause trouble. This frustration comes to a head when a pregnant Essie Mae defies Jim Crow and takes a seat in the white section of a Savannah city bus.

Fed up, the family moves to Los Angeles and encounters a lot of segregation along the way. They like California, where the comparative lack of racial discord, Essie feels, makes it “an easier place to be poor.” The marriage, however, struggles under Julius' drinking and building resentment over Essie Mae's tolerance of her father. When Strom is elected to the Senate in 1954, Essie sees it as an opportunity to bring the two men together, but Julius is not interested.

“Why do you continue to put up with him?” he asks. “Because he's my father,” Essie May responds. Julius can't accept it. “He's not your father where it matters,” he says.

Julius seems to be proven right when in 1956, Strom promotes “The Southern Manifesto” as a vehicle to oppose school integration mandated by the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Essie Mae is again devastated, if not altogether stunned, to see her daddy on TV, spouting the same old hatred they'd tried to get away from. “There's not enough troops in the army,” Strom declares, “to force the southern people to break down segregation and admit the nigr race into our theaters, into our swimming pools, into our homes and into our churches.”

Julius is itching to rejoin the Civil Rights struggle, and the family eventually ends up back in Savannah, where he again works for the NAACP. Essie Mae continues to visit with Strom at his office in Washington, emboldened to speak more forcefully to him about his political stances,

but never crossing a certain line. She even brings Julius, Jr. to meet his grandfather, and she's touched when Strom seems moved by the encounter... but is snapped back to reality by the Confederate flag on her father's desk. When Julius is dragged from a car and beaten by police during a traffic stop on a trip to South Carolina, the family decides to move back to California.

It's 1964 and the Civil Rights movement is in full swing, there are riots in Philadelphia in response to ongoing police brutality, political assassinations dominate the news, and a fed-up Essie Mae meets with her father before moving her family back to the West Coast. She tells Strom, who crazily clings to the delusion that he is somehow the champion of blacks, that he is hated – hated – by blacks, that he is a villain to the black cause, that his lifetime of efforts for segregation far outweigh the good any minor funding here or political appointment there might have done. Strom is legitimately stunned and sobered.

Leaving Julius in Savannah to wrap up some loose ends, Essie Mae drives the kids to California, satisfied that she has finally let her father know what she – and more importantly, what most everyone – thinks of him. She notices changes along the way, improvements from the stark segregation of their trip a decade earlier. She is full of hope when they arrive in Los Angeles, only to get the devastating news that Julius has died in bed back in Savannah, an apparent heart attack.

"You know the rest," Essie Mae tells Wanda. "I knew it all," Wanda tells her mother. "What I still don't know is why."

We are afforded only glimpses of Strom and Essie Mae's lives as the years seem to speed up, to blend together. The two continue to meet, to share, to debate, but it remains at arm's length, always tinged with formality. Never acknowledged. Essie Mae raises four kids, finishes her education, and goes to work as a teacher and guidance counselor. She notices more and more segregation around her, even in California, and watches as the Watts Riots – once again sparked by police brutality – explode the notion that racism is confined to certain areas or certain populations. Most significantly, Essie Mae in her 40s registers to vote for the first time. It's a legacy and a scar of a life spent half-resigned to the unfairness of a rigged system that it has taken her this long to do so.

At last, we come in on an image of Essie Mae as an older woman, by herself, quiet, gazing at a pukka-shell necklace she holds in her hands. In the background, the newscast comes into focus: "Strom Thurmond, dead at 100." Essie Mae wavers, then sits.

Episode Takeaway

The main point of this episode is that Essie Mae and Strom battle it out in private, but it remains only that – private. During the bulk of their mature years – Essie Mae as a working single mother and Strom as a fixture in the U.S. Senate – the battle for racial equality continues to play out in American society. Despite protests, despite legislation, despite court victories, despite raising a socially conscious family, despite an old man's (possible) gradual development of a social conscience... nothing really changes. History continues to repeat itself, and Strom

and Essie Mae's conspiracy of silence, as it were, begins to weigh on Essie Mae, begins to feel in some ways like complicity.

EPISODE SIX: THE LEGACY

"Every bit as white..."

Episode Summary

The final episode opens on a flashback to a public appearance by Strom in California. As he addresses a very homogenous audience, we pan across the sea of white faces to pause on five black ones – it's Essie Mae and her kids, the only black faces in the room.

As we see Strom meeting-and-greeting with Essie Mae and the kids after the event...

"I remember that day," says Wanda (VO). Essie Mae responds: "I think the size of the afros surprised him." They laugh, and Wanda reflects that, as a young girl, it was a confusing day for her in a lot of ways. And her mother says: "Mm-hmm."

We make one last visit to Essie Mae and Strom together, meeting in his Senate office shortly before his retirement. In his late 90s, Strom has lost a bit of his edge, and his recounting of his championing of Clarence Thomas's nomination to SCOTUS is a bit transparent, but Essie Mae indulges him. As the meeting draws to a close and she prepares to go, Essie Mae seems to be lingering, waiting for something that... just... doesn't... come.

Back to Los Angeles, 2003. Wanda and Essie Mae face each other over the breakfast table. Essie Mae holds a pukka-shell necklace in her hand.

Wanda (kindly): "You never shared a meal together."

Essie Mae: "He did so much for me. For all of us."

Wanda: "He never told you he loved you."

Essie Mae: "Not in so many words."

Wanda: "Mom..."

Essie Mae: "He sent me these necklaces, from all over the world. Always thinking of me. That's what a father does."

Wanda: "No, Mom. What a father does is stand by you."

Essie Mae finally offers a comprehensive explanation of why she maintained the secret of her parentage all those years. It was loyalty, it was love, it was protection. As much as he frustrated her, she admired her father for many things, and she was honored to be his daughter. And as much as anything else, she relished the challenge of changing him for the better, to come at his faults from a position of love instead of as an enemy.

“I don’t think it reflects any dishonor on him,” Wanda says, “for the world to know that you were his daughter. And I believe it would help a lot of people rethink their own concepts of honor and responsibility.”

With Wanda’s support, Essie Mae decides to go public with her story.

Despite initial resistance from the Thurmond family, Essie Mae and Wanda push forward with a plan to reveal the secret, assembling a team of legal and publicity specialists from amongst Wanda’s friends and associates. As they prepare to make the announcement, the Thurmond family (under pressure) beats them to the punch – publicly acknowledging Strom’s paternity of Essie Mae – which is a poignant outcome in its own right.

Essie Mae and Wanda travel to the state capital in Columbia, SC for a formal announcement. Essie Mae delivers an address to a packed house that touches on her history with her father, its joys and difficulties, and how she hopes her example can serve to further acceptance and understanding in our fragmented society. As she departs through a cheering crowd, she briefly comes face to face with two women from the Thurmond side of her family. Both have tears in their eyes.

The episode ends with a solitary visit to Strom’s gravesite in Edgefield, where it all began. Reflective, at peace, Essie Mae says, “Goodbye, Daddy,” before placing a flower on Strom’s grave. Right next to the crossed American and Confederate flags.

Episode Takeaway

The main point of this episode is closure, recognition, a lessening of the otherness. In a real sense, it’s emotional reparations and validation. While Essie Mae perhaps forced the hand of the Thurmond family in acknowledging her, it is also clear that once that hand was forced, it wasn’t all acrimony. Essie Mae’s courage paved the way for communication, for understanding between people on both sides of the color line bound too long by the antiquated restrictions of a corrupt system.