

# Ten Spurs



Introduction by Kim Cross

The Best of the Best  
Literary Nonfiction of The Mayborn Conference

Vol. 11, 2017

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FRANK W. MAYBORN  
GRADUATE INSTITUTE  
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# Ten Spurs

Michael J. Mooney, editor  
Neil Foote, associate editor



The Best of the Best  
Literary Nonfiction of The Mayborn Conference  
Vol. 11, 2017



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# Foreword

by Michael J. Mooney

You'll find in this year's edition of *Ten Spurs* a broad array of people and places. There are tales of loss, tales of joy, tales of that put into words the sheer destructive power of both humanity and mother nature. Within these pages, you'll meet sweet strangers, smart drug dealers, a long-dead author, and at least one tornado. You'll also hear from a diverse collection of writers, with notably different voices and perspectives on the world.

You'll also find a beautiful introduction from Kim Cross—an essay about her life-changing experiences at the Mayborn conference and in Archer City. Kim, now a *New York Times* best-selling author, was working as a travel writer at a big-name lifestyle magazine, what sounds like a dream job to most people. But she wasn't getting to write the in-depth, personal stories that she craved, the kind that take readers into new worlds and reveal new parts of the human condition. When she came to her first Mayborn conference, she found a group of people dedicated to doing the same thing and she felt at home in a way she never had before.

When I read stories like this, it reminds me of what George Getschow and Mitch Land and Sue Mayborn had in mind when they held that first conference in 2005. It turns out there are a lot of people in this world who want to tell stories that matter, people who care about well-written, important nonfiction. And there are not a lot of places in this world where those people can come together. Over the years, this has become the pre-eminent gathering of literary nonfiction writers. That original goal was to inspire people in exactly the way Kim Cross was inspired, and that's what happens to hundreds of people every year.

This is one of the things we talk about when we talk about “The Power of Words”—the theme of this year's conference. As children we're told that words can't hurt us, but we know they can. Anyone who's ever seen a political scandal or a public apology knows that words have power. The power to insult. The power to heal. The power to inspire and inform, to differentiate and demoralize.

Words have the power to connect disparate people through time and space. They have the ability to take you into someone else's life, into someone else's mind. Words have the power to make the world better and worse. Words can crack walls and launch wars. They can indict and exonerate. They can uplift the poor and punish the powerful.

Words are tools. They can be used the way Michelangelo used his tools, to create works of art that stand the test of time. Or they can be swung and thrown, used to chip away at things that should be valued. Like any power, words come with responsibility.

For writers, words have the power to pay the electric bill—to literally power our existence. Words are a means, a way of transcending individuality and sharing experience. They are an end, the perfect way of putting something, a phrase we might search for over years. For so many of us, words are everything.

That's why, when those of us who do care so much about words find each other, it feels a little like home.

# Acknowledgments

by Neil Foote

What's amazing about *Ten Spurs* is that every year we are absolutely thrilled at the outstanding caliber of work that is submitted and published. This book is a very symbolic representation of the many hours of hard work over days, weeks and months that includes the researching, writing, re-writing and editing that these writers have devoted to these outstanding works. In the long run, these articles are timeless snapshots of people, places and events that now are memorialized for eternity through the written word – in print and online. As a writer, I know it is never easy to craft words to capture the emotion, the drama, the scene in a rhythmic, flowing manner that makes sense to readers on this literary journey. The articles published here are extraordinary works that challenged our dedicated team of judges who took time out of their overflowing schedules to read, review, discuss which pieces that would be featured as “*The Best of the Best Literary Nonfiction of The Mayborn Conference.*” Let me make a gallant attempt to acknowledge all those involved.

Let's start with the writers: Meta G. Carstarphen, *Can I Get a Witness?*; Frank Christlieb, *Digging Up, Digging Deep*; Leta Cunningham, *My Mother's Bread*; Leeanne Hay, *The Children Left Behind*; Philip Kelly, *Birdsong*; Casey Manuel, *Jay-Money*; Mary Pfeiffer, *Searching for Sarah Powell*; Melissa Stoeltje, *Mourning a Mother Still Here*; Sue Whatley, *Milledgeville, a Bird Sanctuary*; and Seema Yasmin, *Tornado*.

Our team of unpaid judges kicked back many cups of coffee, tea, soft drinks, and other beverages along with lots of snacks to read through every one of these pieces with a great deal of tender loving care. They all are writers so they understand that every writer has injected their personal soul into these pieces. They know that each word matters for every writer. Thanks to Joanna Cattnach, Michael Lindenberger, Brantley Hargrove, Jamie Thompson, JK Nickell, Elizabeth Langton, Stella Chavez, Sonia Smith, Tom Huang, Andrea M. Valdez, David Mann, Tim Rogers, W.K. (Kip) Stratton, Zac Crain, Jim Donovan, Jim Hornfischer, BJ Robbins and Ronald Chrisman.

Our workshop leaders are the other team of dedicated souls. These individuals spend the day with these writers “workshopping” these stories on the first day of the conference. They huddle themselves away in the usually windowless meeting rooms. With great care, understanding and patience, they help authors dissect their stories, carefully analyzing each word, quote, description and scene to help these writers transform their stories into even more compelling narratives. You really have to be in the room to watch what happens. There are tears, laughs, angry words. “*Read that section aloud.*” “*Why did you use that quote?*” “*Where are you taking the reader?*” “*What is a better way to describe this person?*” “*You know, if you move this section of the story here, it will make more sense.*”

The writers, who in many cases have exposed their most personal emotions and intimate experiences, are quick to defend, explain, then, in time, relax. Since each writer experiences this range of emotions, there's a camaraderie, a bond created among this brethren of writers. Thank you Sam Eifling, Michael Graff, Jonah Ogles, Peter Simek, David Tarrant, Susannah Charleson, and W.K. (Kip) Stratton for sharing your experience, offering sharp, constructive criticism,

and encouraging each writer to embrace this sometimes cruel, but immensely rewarding craft of writing.

There are many of other pieces of *Ten Spurs* that are required – beyond the writers, the judges and the workshop leaders. It's the work of many others who have to design, lay out and ensure that the publication continues to live up to its outstanding national reputation. Artist Kate Green reads through our essays then pulls out her pencils and charcoal to create memorable cover art and additional illustrations that are sprinkled throughout the publication. Jim Dale, the Mayborn School's marketing director, works with Jake Straka, the talented graphic artist and designer to do all the production work for the book, including the layout and design for *Ten Spurs, Vol. 11, 2017*. My co-director, Mike Mooney, juggles his intense career as a writer, often traveling around the U.S. and world to report his stories, to edit these essays to get them ready for publication. He reached out to longtime Mayborn Conference fan and participant Kim Cross to pen this year's introduction.

The reality is that so much of these essays may have never seen the light of day if JoAnn Livingston, a Mayborn alumna, didn't spend hours on the phone and responding to dozens of emails, urging writers to submit their entries, answering their questions and cracking the proverbial whip to make sure they met the contest deadlines. She also corrals the judges, making it even more convenient this year for them to access stories online, then setting up the in-person and conference calls with the judges to sift through the essays to choose the winners.

I'll be honest with you. I can't help but smile when I talk about – and read - *Ten Spurs*. This book, the writings within it and all those who make it happen are true guardians of storytelling and narrative writing. Their work, as demonstrated in this book, represents excellence year after year. Thank you all!



# Introduction

by Kim Cross

Somewhere around midnight in Archer City, I climbed the horse-whisperer's tree. Embroidered with glittering strands of white lights, and misters duct-taped to the branches, this Hackberry is my favorite seat in Jackie's garden. Decades of writers have gathered under this tree, each one here for a different reason. I like to drape myself over a branch and listen to their stories drifting up from below.

On this night, in this tree, I was bit by some bug. Not sure what it was, but it stung like hell. I climbed down and watched my forearm swell a bump the size of a mango. My scalp and skin itched fiercely. My tongue grew stiff and began to swell.

"*Oh thit!*" I said. "Doth anyone hab any Benedwill?"

The nearest hospital is in Wichita Falls, a half-hour away. I choked down two Benedryl and tried to stay calm. The glittering garden spun around me. Stars pulsed from distant galaxies. My stomach lurched, and I stumbled to the bathroom, where I lost my guts in an iron tub painted with pictures of unicorns. The horse whisperer held my hair. I remember having one distinct thought:

*If I die in Archer City, at least it will make one hell of a story.*

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One summer night three years ago, I stood on the tailgate of a pickup truck. In the distant dark, Archer City smoldered like a signal fire. It was the end of one era, the beginning of another, a pause before the world pivoted. The wrong turns and red herrings of my writing life finally made sense. Because here in the wide open nowhere, I had finally found my Tribe.

It was my first trip to Archer City, a one-stoplight town with a literary heritage of which I was profoundly ignorant. I didn't know about *The Last Picture Show* or the Royal Theater. I thought *Lonesome Dove* was a shower gel. I had no clue who Walter Benjamin was, or why he would eat at a Dairy Queen. The name Larry McMurtry rang a bell, but I had never read a word he wrote.

George Getschow, founder of the Mayborn conference, had invited me here to speak to the students of a workshop he had been teaching for a decade. His classroom and dorm was the Spur Hotel, a charming 1928 inn with 13 rooms. Its front porch has two benches and an ashtray. If you loafed there, you'd have a front-row seat to a day in a small Texas town. Before dawn, you'd see cowboys gather at Murn's for a breakfast of chicken-fried steak. After dusk, you'd hear Waylon spilling from the Ford 150s cruising the two-block strip. You'd notice how conversations naturally pause when an oil truck grumbles by.

I had never been to a workshop, and had no clue what one did there. I imagined it would involve a lot of talking about writing. Maybe listening to stories read aloud and responding with what I call the "poop sandwich"—praise, gentle criticism, and encouragement—applied in that precise order.

This sounded like a vacation. Which is to say, a break from *actual* writing. Having recently submitted the very first draft of my very first book, I was still convulsing with agony and ecstasy. Writing a book is a year-long labor contraction with no epidural. Squeezing out that first draft, a phase John McPhee calls "the pit and the pendulum," inflicts an exquisite suffering, distinct from any other pain I know. Joyce Carol Oates nails it: "Getting the first draft finished is like pushing a

peanut with your nose across a very dirty floor.”

The author’s particular brand of misery does not end, I am sorry to say, with turning in the manuscript. It is followed by the bipolar fugue of debut authorhood, a furious teeter-tottering between hubristic glory and paralyzing insecurity. You hope everyone in the world will read your book. Then you worry they actually will.

On the first day of the workshop, we gathered around a dining room table beneath an antler chandelier, where George promptly put me on the spot. “Your book was born at the Mayborn,” he said, as his students blinked at me earnestly. “Would you read us the first chapter?” I side-eyed the table centerpiece, an intimidating heap of books by great men and women of letters: Capote, Mailer, Didion, Wolfe, Orlean, Larson, Roach. I felt a little queasy. But I would read, on one condition: I wanted honest, specific feedback. They had to be brutally honest—gently.

The students were too kind. But George delivered. So did the visiting pros, including Bill Marvel, a veteran of *The Dallas Morning News* with a long white beard, a cane, and the mind of a literary ninja. Then there was Bob Shacochis, a National Book Award winner with a newly released novel, *The Woman Who Lost Her Soul*. Bob was awkwardly (and uncharacteristically) reticent. I pressed him.

“C’mon Bob,” I said. “I have a callus on my psyche an inch thick.”

“What’s going to make this different from *every other* book about tornadoes?”

I thought about that. Good question. The weaving together of science and story? Cinematic scenes? Meticulous reportage? Plenty of pretty-good books have those things.

“It’s *the language*,” he said. “The difference has to be in the voice, the language.”

I had always considered “voice” as one of those intangible notions as easy to define as pornography: You know it when you see it. Bob laid it out simply. “Voice is the personality of the voice on the page. Tone is the mood of the voice,” he said. “Voice is personality. Tone is the mood of that personality.”

Reporting, he argued, is not enough. “You have to have an original mind.” Objectivity may be a goal of journalism, but the subjectivity we bring to a story—the meaning we find, and the style with which we convey it—is what sets the best stories apart. “A fact is an important thing, but it is meaningless without insight,” Bob said. “Only language can open up insights.”

Bob wore a black T-shirt with a single word spelled out in bold white letters: REVISION. When he gives readings of his published work, Bob reads with a pen in one hand. A piece of writing is never really done, even after it is in print. Revision—round after round after round—is where the magic happens.

“Yes,” I told Bob. “But I have so little time!” I had exactly one week to revise 85,000 words. He spent *ten years* revising his book. “What can I realistically do in seven days?”

Bob balled his fingers and rubbed his eyes. *Did he just call me a crybaby?* I lost my words. My middle finger spoke up. The table erupted with nervous laughter, and George dismissed us for lunch. That’s when Bob and I realized we were going

to get along swimmingly.

Bob—and George, and Bill, and others—pushed me in ways I desperately needed to grow as a writer. They were coaches hollering from the sidelines, offering strategic plays, unyielding encouragement, and daunting expectations. I soldiered on through seven revisions, polished and tweaked obsessively until my deadline cut me off. *What Stands in a Storm* won some awards and became (briefly) a *New York Times* Best Seller. More importantly, though, it made me realize who I am as a writer.

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When people ask, “How did you find your agent?” I tell them, “At a bar.” It was Bonnie & Clyde’s, the hotel pub where the writers gather on Saturday after the conference. “That’s where the *real* conference takes place,” George had said when he invited me as a speaker. He kept mentioning “The Tribe.” I wasn’t really sure what this tribe thing meant. But as long as it didn’t involve loincloths, I was game.

This invitation came at a time when my career path twisted every which way but the one where my compass pointed. I was stuck in someone else’s dream job: travel writing. I was paid to go and write about things other people do on vacation. I had an expense account, a matching 401(K), and a health care plan that didn’t cost more than my mortgage. I knew I was stupidly lucky. But I felt like Cinderella’s ugly stepsister, gimping around in crystal stilettos that would never, ever fit.

I was at a lifestyle mag that thrived on good taste and great recipes. My colleagues were award-winning editors, stylists, and photographers gifted at creating beauty on demand. I tried so hard to learn their trade, but I never got good at “concepting,” “packaging” or “curating” beautiful features. All I could do was words.

But I knew how to make a reader *feel*. Surely we needed this too. I launched an earnest (if misguided) campaign for long-form in my lifestyle glossy. There were some victories. But designers and editors looked at my narratives and saw a “wall of text.” Most of my stories were eventually killed by features on ice-box pies.

I longed to write stories laced with tension and meaning. I wanted to paint with words. I had good instincts, but I lacked the vocabulary to describe them. I had never heard of a “story arc” or “in medias res.” Whenever I pitched stories, it was like I was speaking in tongues.

One of my double-edged idiosyncrasies is a knack for what my first boss called “gentle pressure, relentlessly applied.” (Another boss called me “the velvet hammer.”) I’ve learned that “no” doesn’t always mean “no.” Often it just means “not right now.” I pushed with Sisyphian persistence. Eventually I was told by my boss’s boss: “Maybe you should redefine what you think of as a story.”

My heart made the sound of a crystal slipper dropped on a concrete porch.

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One day the perfect story fell, quite literally and terribly, from the sky. The biggest tornado outbreak ever recorded tore like a giant weed-eater through the South. Pieces of Mississippi fell on Alabama, and Alabama rained down on

Tennessee. My boss spoke the words I had waited nearly a decade to hear: *This is our story. We need to tell it.*

That story became my ticket to the Mayborn, and later the seed of my book.

Here's how I felt at my first Mayborn: Imagine you're fumbling around a big warehouse in the dark, with a vague notion of what you're looking for. You have nothing but a glow stick to light your way. Then someone turns on the floodlights.

I came as a professional speaker, but I came as a secret listener. These writers all around me were fluent in a language I had been struggling to learn. Suddenly, I was swimming in a mother tongue I never knew I spoke. I filled my notebook surreptitiously, hoping no one would figure out what an imposter I really was.

I didn't want that day to end, which is probably how I survived to Last Call. As the bartender locked up Bonnie & Clyde's, the stragglers spilled into the lobby. George thrust his drink at the roof and began round after round of toasts. (Note to writers: It's Mayborn tradition. Avert your eyes until you are ready. And do not expect to get out of it.)

The crowd was a mix of Really Big Deals and nobodies like me. There was a bearded rising star (Mike Mooney, now co-chief of the Mayborn) and some hot-shit writers I had never heard of (Tom Junod and Chris Jones, then at *Esquire*). Tom Lake, a *Sports Illustrated* wunderkind groomed by Gary Smith, was celebrating his birthday. He stood on a wobbly barstool, unfolded a passage tucked in his pocket, and read from "Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man."

It was all so very *Dead Poets Society*. I never thought I'd meet anyone as painfully earnest as me! So *this*, I thought, is what George meant when he spoke about The Tribe. For the first time in my career, I no longer felt lost. Or maybe I was still lost, but wandering in good company. When I got home, my husband looked in my eyes and said, "You need to go back there every year."

A few months later, I quit my job. Three days later, I sold my book to a publisher in New York. I was living the dream—for seven rad months. Then my husband lost his job. I sold 50 more stories, wrote half of a second book, and turned my manuscript one day late. Do you know what got me through that year? (Besides the glassy-eyed eating of pickled okra in front of an open fridge.) Those writers I met at the Mayborn.

The next time I spoke at the Mayborn, the greetings were hugs, not handshakes. It felt like a reunion. I didn't know it yet, but the conference was a portal to something else: Archer City.

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On my first night in Archer City, we gathered in the horse whisperer's garden. Jackie Lane is a beloved local who has hosted generations of writers who come to Archer City to meet characters like her. And the workshop really begins in her garden, with cheap beer, boxed wine, and a potluck supper that has become a non-negotiable tradition.

I cannot, with a straight face, call Jackie a "cowgirl," because that sounds all fringe and rhinestones. Let's call her a female cowboy. Silver-maned and retired

from ranch work, she still trains horses in her back-yard paddock and breaks in colts for her granddaughter, Emma Kate, a teenage barrel-racing champ.

Jackie smells like smoke, laughs like crushed gravel, and wields a switchblade wit. Made of unicorn leather and razor wire, she has been shot in the leg (by a boyfriend, in a bar) and stabbed in the throat (by a fiancé). When her two front teeth were knocked out by a heifer who kicked a metal gate in her face, a cowboy said, “Can you help me load the rest a them before you go to the dentist?” She did. She will never whine, but her middle finger is shaped like a Z.

She has roped heifers, branded calves, and talked her way onto the backs of unwilling horses. She has converted generations of bull calves into steers, wrestling them into the rising dust before reaching for her knife. “I used to cut 15 gallons a nuts a day,” she says. “And that’s a lot a nuts.”

Her father called her Cowboy Jack. So did everyone else—until she married a cowboy named Jack. That ended long ago. “I never met one stout enough to run with me,” she says. (Note: Bulls are not the only creatures she has managed to emasculate.)

Her other talent: Reading people the way she reads horses. She zeroes in on the weak parts. Like some potty-mouthed redneck oracle, she sizes up writers and says exactly what she sees. Some are coaxed from their shells. Others recoil. Some react like her former fiancé, who pulled his knife because she looked at him wrong.

“She exposed a writer’s soft spots,” George says. “People would squirm. Resist. Lash out. Deny. But the people who paid attention learned the thing that was holding them back. She put her finger on someone’s psyche.”

Jackie will cuss me for telling you this, but that rusty barbed wire hides a velveteen heart. On any given night she is sitting with a friend in the soft glow of the Christmas lights threaded through her Hackberry. The friend is either laughing or crying, celebrating or healing. People take refuge for many reasons in Jackie’s garden of boxed wine and wisdom. The more you need to be here, the more welcome you will be.

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It’s hard to write about what happened next without feeling like a televangelist or a motivational poster. Bear with me.

Our bellies filled with baked beans and cheap beer, we piled into the bed of a pickup truck and jounced down unpaved roads, trailing clouds of dust and glory. We parked on a rise overlooking the town. Archer City glowed in the vast dark lonesome. The dome of stars swallowed us up.

This is the moment, every year, when George stands on the tailgate, thrusts a can at the stars, and toasts the gods of literature. He reminds us why stories matter. Then he asks us all to take a stand and answer a single question:

*Why are you here?*

Because it’s dark, people open up. Because it’s dark, people listen. Sometimes the truth lies is not the words, but in the silence that hangs between them. If writers hold back, George calls bullshit. He pushes them until they finally crack open—and

then the raw truth spills out.

“It was a moment of reckoning,” George says. He never lost sight of the guts it took, and he was often moved to tears by the unexpected truths that emerged from those dark silhouettes. “It was something almost baptismal for a writer. Something almost sacred.”

This year, George did not start with a toast. Instead, he made an announcement:

“This is our last year in Archer City.”

The workshop was over. After a decade, it was time for George to write his own book, focus on his own writing. He deserved this more than anyone. Still, I was upset. I might have cried. I had already made up my mind to come back, to keep this magic going. I needed this place, these people, this chance to embrace what really matters.

*How could this be the end, when for me it feels like the beginning?*

When it was finally my turn to stand on the tailgate, I confessed my struggles through the lonely years. I broke open. At the risk of sounding trite, I said: “I feel like I’ve finally found my people.”

As soon as I said those words aloud, a shooting star lit up the horizon. It streaked brighter and longer than any shooting star I have ever seen. I had time to blurt out three or four sentences before it finally burned itself out.

That’s when I knew this might not be the end.

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To appreciate what’s at stake in the end, let’s go back to the beginning. The beginning before the beginning.

Once upon a ranch there was a little boy who fell in love with stories. Larry McMurtry grew up ranching but much preferred reading, an anomaly in a town with more cattle than books. But whatever the town lacked in printed literature, it made up for with a wellspring of material. In the oilfield workers and ranch hands of Archer City, young McMurtry saw timeless characters. In this middle-of-nowhere place, two flat hours northwest of Dallas, he tapped into a lifetime of stories. Though he moved to New York in the 1960s, most of his novels unfurled in the west, with sharp echoes of Archer City.

McMurtry’s novel, *The Last Picture Show* (1966) was inspired by the real-life Royal Theater, Archer City’s small-town silver screen. (The book was adapted into an Oscar-winning movie, Cybill Shepherd’s debut, which was filmed in Archer City.) After a fire destroyed the iconic theater, its ruins lay in shadow for 35 years.

Then, in the late 1990s, ideas began bubbling up about rebuilding the Royal. Another local rancher’s son, Abby Abernathy, had been acting, directing, and writing plays in New York for nearly a decade. His people called him home to oversee the Royal’s rebirth, and he selflessly answered that call. When it reopened in 2000, the Royal sparked a renaissance of performing arts. (Abby—who owns The Spur, and also wears spurs to his day job—still lives in Archer City and supports the local arts.)

Most folks who know anything about McMurtry know his prolific body of work (29 novels, three memoirs, two essay collections, and dozens of screenplays.) Many have heard of his book store, Booked Up, the cavernous trove of collectible books he relocated to Archer City. Few people, though, are aware that he created a small center for the arts.

The McMurtry Center for the Arts, opened in 1997, sponsored fiction contests, awarded scholarships, and bestowed lifetime-achievement awards upon writers, actors, and artists. But its primary purpose was the Young Writer Workshop, a summer creative writing program for high school students living in small Texas towns. It gave these kids a creative oasis in a culture that exalted sports and cowboys, but offered little in the way of the arts.

The Center was a joint effort by McMurtry and two other small-town natives who had grown up as artists and aesthetes in the shadows of Friday night lights. Louise Thomas, a Wichita Falls businesswoman, served as the primary donor. Dr. Fred Reynolds, a New York English professor, directed the Center and led the workshops. The Center was associated with Reynolds's alma mater, Midwestern State University in nearby Wichita Falls.

The Center hosted a summer residential workshop at MSU, part of the trio's vision to germinate permanent programs in writing, theater, and art—a legacy that would out live them. But after four years, they severed ties with Midwestern when a new university president soured the relationship. They dismantled the Center and moved the high school workshop to Archer City, where it thrived for around a decade.

Reynolds by then was deputy dean of the MFA program at City College of New York. After a year off from Archer City, he reimagined the program as a summer Master Class for his college students. He flew them to Archer City, became cook, chauffeur, and teacher, and The Spur again came alive with writers. "We had our own miniature Breadloaf," says Reynolds, who is still at CCNY. It thrived until he felt this program, too, had run its course.

Now in his 80s, McMurtry spends most of his time in Arizona with his wife, Fay Kesey (Ken Kesey's widow) and his writing partner, Diana Ossana. But his specter hovers over Archer City like the billboard eyes of T.J. Eckleburg in the Great Gatsby.

"My Center didn't last long, but we did perhaps nudge a few students into fruitful paths," McMurtry wrote in his memoir, *Literary Life*. "The Center ultimately failed, but not before causing some change in Archer City, which has now become a sort of seminar town."

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In 2005, a new camp of writers rolled into Archer City. They were undergraduate and graduate students from the University of North Texas, there for a literary nonfiction workshop taught by professor George Getschow. That first year, they holed up at The Spur for a three-week experiment—this one in immersion journalism.

"I was scared and nervous," says Mike Mooney, one of the writers at that first

workshop. “Nobody knew what we had just gotten ourselves into.”

Every morning they dissected an element of the craft—scene, character, dialogue, point of view. Then they wandered into the community to practice what was preached. They didn’t just sit around talking about writing. They went right out and *did* it. Archer City and its characters provided the raw material.

“It was this weird unstructured thing—we were going to go out in the middle of nowhere and learn about writing” says Brantley Hargrove (first year), then 23, now a debut author with a six-figure book deal. “There was something spontaneous and unscripted about the way we interacted with that place and sought out stories.”

A fresh crop of writers appeared in Archer City each summer, wide-eyed, lost, and searching for something, even if they didn’t know what it was. They traced the patterns of the first-years, but always found something new. The little town became an incubator. Decades-long friendships took root. People fell in love, chased a dream, or ditched an old dream for a new one. Writers were born here. And reborn.

“A lot of aspiring writers have transformative experience out there,” Mooney says, “and I’m pretty skeptical about transformative experiences.”

JK Nickell (seventh year) went out there with a carefully crafted future, admitted to grad school for something other than writing. But he felt restless and unsatisfied. That time in Archer City was “like a meditation,” he says. “It gave me the space to dive deeply and think about why stories matter, how they can move people, and what sort of role I can play in that.”

After a week in Archer City, Nickell scrapped the first draft of the life he had planned. *Select All... Delete!* He became a long-form editor at *Southwest: The Magazine*, where his writing and editing is winning awards.

“It truly was a turning point in my life,” he says, six years later. “This is what I was born to do. This is all I want to do. This is the thing that gives me meaning in life.”

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I knew absolutely none of this history when I stood in the dark on the tailgate, as so many had stood before me, pouring out my guts. All I knew was one thing: I need this. Whatever “this” is. I never realized what I was missing until I found it—and suddenly faced losing it. I asked myself a scary question:

*Does Archer City really have to die? Can we reimagine it?*

This is how I accidentally co-founded the Archer City Story Center, a non-profit program of the Royal Theater, a 501(c)(3) community theater. My co-founder, Sarah Junek, an alum of George’s workshop, uprooted her life in Houston and moved with her sister to Archer City. She runs The Spur, handles the admin, and resuscitated the Young Writer Workshop, which has expanded the notion of storytelling to include not just writing but drawing, acting, and filmmaking. Largely funded by local grants, it has rocked a few kids’ worlds.

I’ve adapted the literary nonfiction workshop to be appropriate for professional writers. We tweaked our Rules of Engagement a bit, out of respect for the town and its people, not all of whom care to be written about. Archer City is not a zoo, and its people are not lab animals. As writers, no matter where we are, it’s imperative to

remember that. We are not entitled to anything. Every story is a gift.

Instead of unleashing writers on the town, we've recruited locals who support our mission: We Train Storytellers. We view these residents not as "subjects" but "partners." That is, co-owners of the stories we're learning to tell. Our writers must read them their stories aloud and ask for honest feedback. *What did we get wrong? Did we miss anything? How did the story—not only the telling, but hearing it told—affect you?*

That isn't standard journalistic practice, of course. But what we're creating in Archer City is a simulation of reality, a training camp for writers. We're creating a semi-controlled environment for real-time experiments that push us into unfamiliar territory, into the realm where we learn and grow. We need a safe place to try new things—and fail—without the pressure of publication.

Where else in the world can you do that?

Last summer, our first group of professional writers gathered at The Spur. They had come from 12 states and Canada. They were green, seasoned, gay, straight, black, white, ranging in age from twenties to sixties. There were newspaper reporters at small-town dailies and major metros, and freelancers struggling to make ends meet. We had an English professor, a playwright, a person with a Harvard PR job who longed to get back to her storytelling roots.

They came for many reasons, each seeking something different. A path out of a rut. A push out of the comfort zone. Validation. Inspiration. Confidence. Constructive criticism from others who understand the agony of writing. A chance.

I recruited a team of instructors I would personally want to learn from: Jacqui Banaszynski, Pulitzer Prize-winning feature writer, college professor, Poynter instructor, and teacher of storytelling workshops around the world. Glenn Stout, series editor of the *Best American Sports Writing* and author, editor, or ghost-writer of more than 20 books. Eva Holland, a Canadian rising star whose byline I kept seeing on the Best-of lists.

I won't tell you what happened in Archer City. That stays in the group. But I can say this: We're coming back this year.

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How long will this go on?

I don't know. I can't tell if I'm beating a moribund horse or giving CPR to a unicorn.

As I write this, my insides ache with fear. We're operating on a shoestring and a prayer. We have no grants. No wealthy donors. No institutional support. Our writer-friendly tuition is not quite enough to cover our costs. We do have a new partner—*The Dallas Morning News*—willing to invest in the next generation of storytellers. That gives me hope.

Most days, though, I struggle with that ache. I'm not afraid of failing (I'm a pro at that). I'm afraid of not deserving all the chances I've been given. I want to give other writers the gifts that Archer City gave to me.

Friends ask me: *Why are you doing all this? Isn't it a lot of work? Don't you have a*

*book to write? Are you even getting paid?* As a natural-born over-thinker, I wonder why I asked myself none of these questions. What was I thinking?

I wasn't. I simply saw a beautiful torch sputtering. The same illogical instinct that once led me to rescue a baby squirrel (long story) compelled me to pick up this torch. How could I not? It had lit my way on a very dark night. I couldn't just watch it die.

A few days from now, a dozen shadows will gather around a pickup truck under stars that make Texas feel small.

I will stand on a tailgate, lean into the dark, and ask them:

*Why are you here?*

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# Can I Get a Witness?

by Meta G. Carstarphen



On a cold, winter night, fuzzy with drift of a steady snowfall, I stood behind the closed door of my walk-in closet. In the dark. Half-dressed. Shivering.

A quiet and subtle flow of warm air confirmed what I knew to be true and logical—my home’s heating system still worked. In the dim light, the clothes that surrounded me appeared as vague, indistinctive shapes, lurking menacingly, had I not known each fabric piece personally and intimately.

I should have felt safe in my own home. Logically. But my rapid heartbeats contradicted sound judgment. Before I ran into my closet, the biggest dilemma I faced that night was in choosing what to wear for our holiday night. I wanted something special for our New Year’s Eve family dinner and activities. I wavered between two outfits when a glaring, white light flooded through my bedroom window. I heard voices and saw a fleeting body move through the enclosed patio attached to our house. Beyond that point was a private pond on our property, so there was no easy path nor reasonable explanation for why someone would be moving around in that area. I screamed and ran instinctively away from my bedroom into a walk-in closet, to the comfort of darkness and more clothing.

Was this a joke, I wondered.? Had my husband chosen this night, this moment, for a practical joke? Perhaps, I thought, when I dressed and walked into our living room, I would find him grinning, with a mix of remorse and delight, at ... at ... .

My reverie suddenly snapped like a dry branch lying, without defense, under the weight of a determined foot. Amid the familiar cadences of family members, there seemed to be a new,, deeper, and unfamiliar intonation. He, so obviously male, was speaking but I couldn’t make out the words. A stranger was in my house. This was not a joke.

Caught between fury and confusion, I gingerly peeked out of the closet door. Outside my window, I saw the remnants of flashing lights, pulsing urgently, against the tree-lined sky. My throat tightened. I recognized the formation, and then there was only one question in my mind. Where was my son?

*“The story of Emmett Till is not the story of bad individuals who committed a horrible crime. It is the story of an entire system that made it possible for people to believe they could get away with murdering African Americans.”*

In the way that history informs memory, I have tried to make sense of the swell of mediated accounts about violent assaults against men of color by looking to

the past. Recently, books and documentaries by two African American filmmakers, Stanley Nelson and Keith Beauchamp, tackled the iconic story of a Black youth murdered by revisiting the tragedy of Emmett Till.

Mamie Till-Mobley, Emmett's mother, was a courageous and legendary mom. She sent her fourteen-year-old son to Mississippi relatives in 1955, hoping that the warmth of family affection and the presence of male relatives would help the young boy move successfully through the tricky negotiation of manhood. How many times had I sent my own son to visit family for a similar opportunity to bond with family and enjoy a different pace?

After Emmett's brutal murder, Mamie chose to display her son's savaged body for the world to see, generating international headlines and outrage. She endured a trial where the defenders of her son's killers challenged the entire reality of the atrocity. And, for the rest of her life, she advocated for better opportunities for children in poor neighborhoods, while vainly waiting for the criminal justice system to convict the perpetrators of her son's murder.

In 2012, Sybrina Fulton sent her seventeen-year-old son, Trayvon Martin, to a small Florida community where his father lived. This teenager left the perceived safety of a gated community at night to go to a nearby convenience store. As Trayvon tried to return home, a lone witness observed him and interpreted his presence as threatening. Then—in defiance of a police dispatcher's advice to not intervene—this witness, George Zimmerman, decided to punish the intruder. Zimmerman confronted Trayvon and shot him to death. When her son's murdered body returned to her, I wondered, with a mother's heart, if Sybrina herself felt what Mamie did. I wondered, as so many across the nation and world wondered—was Trayvon Martin the new Emmett Till?

In 2014, I learned that a Cleveland, Ohio, police officer shot to death twelve-year-old Tamir Rice. I wept with a mother's heart at the loss of this young, African American boy whose only crime had been the audacity of imaginative play.

Emmett. Trayvon. Tamir. And so many more I could name.

I quickly dressed, wearing convenient clothes. I no longer cared if the colors matched. I just knew I had to leave that room. Whatever safety I had imagined earlier had evaporated, chased away by history's ghosts.

Turning the handle, I walked into a display of lights. There were my own holiday greens, blues, reds, and gold, twinkling against holiday decorations we always keep up way too long. But then, to my left, I saw the bright, white pulsing lights as they pushed through the covered windows. These lights danced with flashes of red and blue. Police lights. I thought of blood.

Striding quickly round the short hallway corner to my right, I saw him. My son. Sitting as he usually did in one of our plump chairs, he looked puzzled, but was otherwise as I wanted him to be: alive and well.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, for startling you," the tall, uniformed officer said, politely and sincerely, to me. He had his hand on another door, backing out toward our patio. He held a large flashlight that was now blind and the mystery of the piercing lights into my bedroom was now solved. My husband stood, like a calm guardian,

between us and the policeman. And in that moment, while I was still trying to piece together what happened, I glimpsed someone else outside behind the policeman, moving away from the house in the outside darkness like a phantom. Moments later, I thought I heard the sound of a car starting and driving away from my house.

The officer was saying something, repeating something and my husband was responding, calmly and respectfully. And I was trying to remember something that I wanted to forget. But what was it?

Within moments, the policeman left after he and my husband shook hands. The door closed and locked, I began to breathe again. As I stood in my own living room, I saw my husband move next to the recliners where, apparently, both he and our son had been sitting before the interruption. The television continued to roll through muted programming. Locking his eyes on mine, sensing my fury and confusion, my husband spoke evenly. There had been a mistake. No problem. A woman driving in the opposite lane from our son's car thought she saw the vehicle swerve. It was snowing—a rare event in Oklahoma—and streetlights are rarer still on the country roads that lead to our neighborhood. She apparently turned around on the highway and followed our son's car to our home. She called the police because she was “concerned.” An officer came and that's where we were when I came in.

My son was looking puzzled but calm. I focused on my husband's eyes again as he repeated, in a soothing voice, that all was well. He had handled all of the goodbyes to both the officer and the unnamed witness with grace.

I remembered what I wanted to forget. I remembered what connected Emmett, Trayvon, Tamir, and so many others beyond the beauty of their skin. They all fell victim to the tyranny of a particular kind of testimony.

For instance, I recalled that it was one witness account—uncorroborated and singular—that triggered the whole tragic chain of events that led to Emmett's death. One white woman, Carolyn Bryant, claimed that Emmett whistled at her and made inappropriate comments to her. Some decades later, as other witnesses began to add their testimonies to public record, the details of what actually happened remain disputed. And, of course, there is no public record from Emmett himself.

I also thought about how I pored over the news coverage of Trayvon Martin's death and how one chilling fact stood out to me in the wake of a trial that failed to convict his killer of a crime:

*“With doubts shadowing the quality and scope of the police work, the prosecution and the defense will be left to tackle critical questions even as they debate the evidence. And ultimately, what happened on the rainy night of Feb. 26 may come to rest on the word of one man, George Zimmerman, the 28-year-old neighborhood watch volunteer who fired the fatal shot.”*

Toni Morrison's brilliant study, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, invoked a significant and long exploration about the nature of “whiteness” that has permeated scholarship in many fields, but especially in

literature, language, and rhetoric. It seems fitting that in elevating the discussion of white identity beyond individual agency (though not to the exclusion of it), Morrison asked us to understand the connection between power and symbolism, between privilege and metaphor. Whiteness, as she deconstructed in seminal texts that are part of the American literary canon, became the substance of mythmaking that lies at the heart of our American experience. It reverberated throughout the culture, including media representations in all the myriad spheres of entertainment and information.

Zimmerman cloaked his defense in a so-called “stand your ground” law that allows citizens to act on perceived threats with violence, if necessary. Perhaps Zimmerman imagined himself to be a superhero, cloaked in supreme visibility as a volunteer neighborhood watchman and endowed with the material powers of a constructed white identity to use at will.

The history of violence against men, women, and children of color is littered with moments like these, where people I have come to think of as “shadow witnesses” speak with illusion, half-truths, and authority. White privilege enlarges the place of innuendo and suspicion into action and conviction.

This privilege, as a construct of imaginary whiteness, I believe, breeds an implicit power of testimony. Time after time, we see these incidents triggered by the authority of an often unnamed, unseen and, usually in initial reports, a racially unmarked witness. Under the false guise of universality, imaginary whiteness believes that what **it fears, we all fear**. This state of denial obscures the reality, and the humanity, of its targets.

Linda Martín Alcoff expands upon Morrison’s initial project exploring whiteness, describing the condition of being white as the “white imaginary.” She goes to define this state of identity construction, this state of whiteness, as an ideology that comprises “... an imaginary relationship to the real. And, like other ideologies, imaginary whiteness has very real and material effects.”

The power of the shadow witness exists largely because of its unseen, unchallenged stance in the narrative. Privilege that defines this power also protects it, allowing the testimony of the shadow witness to weave in and out of an emerging narrative like invisible thread. Consider the ironies as reported in the Tamir Rice tragedy, where the initial witness to the child’s playground activity claims to have said to the police dispatcher that the gun was “probably fake” and that the holder of said gun was “probably a juvenile.” Did the dispatcher, I wondered, consider Tamir’s neighborhood and address as sound reasons to deliver a threatening kind of testimony? Did the officers who arrived see Tamir’s brown body as an automatic call-to-arms?

Too often, African American neighborhoods, experiences, and bodies bear the witness of others about the validity of our lives, becoming more overpowering than our own truths.

Our oldest son is grown, college-educated, and has worked in the public schools system with autistic students. Over the years, I have, yes, been relieved that he has made it past those teenage years alive. But that was before an Eric Garner, a John Crawford, Luis Rodriguez, Philando Castile, and so many other grown men who

have died in some “misunderstanding” with police. It was before I found myself in my closet.

I wish that I could say our incident happened so long ago that it is only a distant memory. But that would be a lie. This was in 2013, less than a year after Trayvon Martin’s murder. It was fifty-eight years after Emmett Till’s lynching. And it was less than two months before family friend Luis Rodriguez would be beaten to death by five uniformed security guards, including police officers, as he was leaving a local movie theater. Brown-skinned Luis blended in easily in his native Puerto Rico but, in the Oklahoma landscape, he must have seemed like one big, dark threat.

And so, I fear, did my son. I marvel at the actions of a stranger who would follow him while he was driving a modest car into a neighborhood of wooded trees and ponds. Did she decide he didn’t belong? Did she believe that he was one, big, dark threat which she had the power—even the responsibility—to stop?

Exposing these shadow witnesses whose testimony may have no real form or substance might be the start of an honest conversation about true witness. We must not continue, as a society, to give unquestioned weight and authority to tenuous claims about who is threatening and why. And we must continue to be hopeful for a better way, even in the face of hopelessness. Alcoff even challenges us to re-think what we ourselves may believe about the tenacious grip of the imaginary whiteness or what she calls “white exceptionalism.” As a socially constructed identity, “whiteness” should be as subject to evolving definition as other positions and experiences. If our society can imagine whiteness being defined primarily by its linkages to racism and oppression, maybe we can conjure up something else for whiteness as well.

Now, I can be grateful that in our family’s moment of potential crisis, one unnamed officer had the wisdom to discern our truth, to understand that our son was not a threat nor a stranger who did not belong to us.

As the officer drove away, I looked at my son again. I know my testimony about him—his character, his worth, his humanity. My stories must be stronger than the shadows.

Echoing my husband’s assurances, I spoke words of certainty I did not entirely feel into the spaces of our home. But sometimes language is necessary, and sometimes we are called upon to speak peace into a turbulent void.

“Everything,” I repeated calmly, “everything is fine.”



# Digging Up, Digging Deep

by Frank L. Christlieb



Bathed in sunlight and clothed in torn khaki trousers, green shirt, rope belt, and blue canvas shoes, the bloated corpse drifted south with the Hillsborough River toward Tampa Bay. Stuffed inside his pockets were Lucky Strikes, Pall Malls, and matches, along with three pennies, a pink comb, and a church key for opening beers. He had cuts on his nose and above his swollen, blackened left eye.

The guy'd been dead over twenty-four hours, tumbling into the river as the ultimate loser of a drunken fight he started at the Matassini fishing docks, which a fireballing pitcher could just about hit from Tampa's skid row. He might've floated right into the Gulf of Mexico had it not been for the phosphate plant workers on Seddon Island who saw a head at the surface, then hailed a cabin cruiser that dragged the body to shore at the end of a rope.

He died a broke and broken man, a life swallowed up and puked back out by obsessive vice and weakness like so many others. The old-timer he scuffled with didn't kill him. He did himself in—and his family—by letting booze decide, for years, what mattered most.

Bob Workman did love his wife Betty, two sons, and daughter. Sometimes, when he was clear-headed, and before the drinking began its destructive crescendo, he showed it.

But what kind of father and husband would get sloshed as a routine, even bringing his young sons to bars with him while he was on the clock? What kind of father would molest his first-born repeatedly, leaving the boy so confused, scared, and scarred that he'd come up with any reason to avoid his own home? What kind of man would blow every chance his bosses gave him to sober up and make an honest buck without screwing up? What kind of father would threaten, in an alcohol-fueled rage, to take his preschool-age daughter away from her mother?

Dead and buried at age forty-five with other indigents in a service attended by nobody, Bob did all of those things. When he cashed out in those dark, lonely waters on July 1, 1962, he got what he deserved.

\*\*\*

Your father: He can be the man who helped raise you, disciplined you, wiped

your tears, took you to ball games or daddy-daughter dances, taught you to drive, gave your boyfriends the third degree, walked you down the aisle. You may love him dearly. You may wage emotional battles over whether to like him.

He can be the cruel bastard who abandoned you and your mother. No excuses or pleas for forgiveness could ever soothe the hurt he so selfishly caused your family.

There may be a man who contributed his seed to your being, but nothing else. He's not your father, and he's not a father figure. He means nothing to you and never could. You might be curious, may even want to meet him if he's still alive. People say you take after him in certain ways, but that doesn't make you want to bond with him, living or six feet under.

There's no handbook telling you about a right place or a wrong place for your heart to wind up when you learn disturbing truths about the person who fathered you but wasn't your father. When some of the behaviors you're told of are too much to stomach.

For me, that man was Orval Bradford Robert "Bob" Workman.

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In the summer of 2005, everything changed. After forty-four years of having two parents, I suddenly had four, at the end of a furious, several-month quest to dig up who I am. Three—the mother who raised me and the couple who conceived me—were dead.

Over these eleven eventful years, my birth family journey has taken hold of my essence and squeezed without end, all the while supplying affirming breaths of fulfillment and a conviction that I've done the right thing.

When I learned in my second year at Texas A&M that I'd been adopted as a newborn in West Virginia, it wasn't exactly a you've-gotta-be-kidding-me moment. When you're 6'2" and fair-skinned, showing no hint of being anything but 100 percent Anglo, with a dark-skinned, accented mother from Panama who's fifteen inches tinier, you wonder if you're in the right family. (Though the trials therein were many and painful, my conscience knows I was.)

But learning the long-withheld truth didn't turn me into some kind of adoptee gumshoe. Life doles out enough pursuits and challenges when we're young adults that the identity I was born with didn't seem worth uncovering. Not yet. Someday. Plenty of time.

Only there wasn't. While I built a journalism career and then a family, I failed to build up the motivation—or the courage—to leap into such clandestine territory. Curiosity wasn't my hang-up. I never stopped wondering or wanting to know.

The refrain of "this is something I have to do before it's too late" gradually picked up speed. A short-lived split with my adoptive father and brother made the need almost paralyzing. My search finally began twenty-three years after the secret inadvertently escaped my adoptive mother Olga's long-sealed lips—like Bob's, drenched with alcohol.

"I don't love you anyway—you're adopted!" she yelled at my adoptive brother, who soon told me of her revelation about us.

Since tracking down my three older, full-blooded siblings and making up for what feels like a lost lifetime, the pangs of one regret haven't subsided—and won't: My soul reason (no typo) for sprinting down the path I'd nonchalantly walked for so long couldn't share any of it with us in the flesh.

Betty had died thirteen years before the children she reared embraced the child she entrusted to an adoptive family in early 1961. The child she told her teenage sons she'd lost, the one they assumed died at birth. The child she never told her grown kids the truth about, even as lung cancer was killing her.

Forgive me, dear Betty, for squandering all the years we could've had.

\*\*\*

It's evening in early June 1960 as Betty, five-year-old Teresa (Terry), and twelve-year-old Robin walk up the steps to their rented duplex on Eighth Avenue in east Huntington, West Virginia. Betty doesn't have her key so she knocks, knowing Bob's there. They've been divorced just over a year, but God knows why, he's been back in the picture despite a judge's decree and injunction forbidding him from "further bothering or molesting her."

Betty spent a complicated existence showering folks with compassion and forgiveness, her two alcoholic husbands being among the most frequent recipients. She had an undeniable strength and resourcefulness about her, but also could be rather naive. And she kept biting on Bob's line that he'd make things right and quit drinking.

Little Terry can see the glowing TV through the darkened window. Bob opens the door, and he's drunk. Soon he's yelling at Betty in their upstairs bedroom, as sixteen-year-old Crys pleads with him to stop. "Let's see just what kind of man you are," Bob, standing 5'10", challenges his 6'1" son.

Bob grabs Terry, shouting, "I'm keeping the baby!" and pushes Betty away. Terry breaks free, hurrying downstairs and out the back door. Robin runs after her. Mrs. Arthur, the neighbor, calls the police, who show up in minutes and surprise Bob, handcuffing and hauling him away.

For Betty and Bob, love had hit countless potholes, but always managed to avoid a blowout—until now. He'd used up every reprieve she'd so readily given him.

It's the last time Bob's family will see him, save for photos—and memories, many of them, at least for the children, hurtful. But Betty can't begin to imagine he's gone to stay.

She also can't have any notion yet that, weeks from turning thirty-nine, she's pregnant. With Bob's fourth child, conceived in mid-May, this time out of wedlock.

How could Betty have let this happen? Alcohol must've fed a surge of passion that even unforgivable child abuse and an all-consuming drinking problem couldn't snuff out. And despite how Bob had shattered his family, she'd never stopped loving him.

But now, fearful for her kids' safety, Betty hastily packs up the family with help from Crys, thrust by hardship into being the man of the house. Within a couple of days, they board a bus and head northeast, not to return to their hometown until

Betty was almost six months on her way to giving her baby boy to an adoptive family.

\*\*\*

In my first phone visit with a brother born seventeen years to the day before I was—equally stunningly, at least to me, during World War II—Crys calmly and openly told me of his father’s drinking. How Bob often was too hungover to work and couldn’t hang on to jobs as a refrigeration mechanic. I hated to hear how it had ripped apart their family, but I didn’t yet know the sweep of heartache Bob had caused.

Three days later, I awoke to an email from Crys’s wife confiding that Bob had sexually abused him as a boy, and that Crys had been in therapy for several months earlier in 2005. I was both sorrowful and angry that this gentle soul, with whom I already sensed a brotherly bond forming, had been victimized by the man claiming to be a father to him.

For three years he had fondled and violated his young son, whose recurrent flashbacks to those horrifying betrayals evoke the smell of alcohol on Bob’s breath. Crys was between seven and ten years old, the years 1951 to 1954.

Although we’d suspected it, we wouldn’t confirm until the following month that the molester was my biological father, too. During my family’s trip to Colorado to meet Crys, Terry, and their children and grandchildren, the three of us teamed up for a DNA test. Exactly one month after I anxiously reached out to the unknown, we had the results: 99.99 percent chance that both Betty and Bob were parents to all of us.

As I found out more about Bob and what he’d done to my new/old family, the resentment festered and I saw him as heartless and gutless. Much as I wanted to know everything possible, how could I reconcile that insatiable thirst with my disgust for a man with whom I felt not a shred of kinship?

Rising above my ill will toward Bob, I easily developed a posthumous connection with Betty. From my siblings to numerous people who knew her, I’ve learned of her goodness, beauty, grace, and love for others. And of her singing ability, which she’d given of freely as a performer with dance bands in West Virginia, Ohio, and Kentucky from the 1940s into the 1960s.

One of those gigs lasted several months in 1960 at a historic hotel’s bar in Ironton, Ohio—while Betty carried me and concealed her condition from co-workers. After fleeing Bob and then Pittsburgh—where her late aunt’s husband drunkenly tried to have his way with Betty as frightened Terry lay next to her—the family of four ended up in the industrial Ohio River town just 20 miles from Huntington.

As the amazing yet distressing story kept revealing itself, nothing could chase away my bitterness.

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*THE TAMPA TRIBUNE, Tuesday, July 3, 1962*

*Body of Tampan Found in River*

### *Two Held After Police Told of Drunken Fight*

*The body of a 45-year-old man was recovered from the Davis Island shipping channel yesterday evening, providing a tragic proof of a “drunk’s story” about a fatal fight at the Fortune Street Bridge Sunday night.*

When the photocopied newspaper clipping arrived in the mail two months after my joyous reunion with Crys and Terry, it was a jarring revelation about Bob’s death. Two men were arrested on charges of public drunkenness and held for investigation of murder after telling officers of a fight in which Bob was either pushed or fell into the water and drowned.

The depths to which Bob had otherwise sunk after moving to Tampa sometime in 1960 became clear when the article reported he’d been arrested twice previously for drunkenness. After the boat ferrying a small group of tourists recovered his body, the address police found in his moneyless wallet was a Salvation Army shelter.

All Betty would tell her children was that Bob had drowned when he fell from a bridge in a construction accident.

Late that same month, I received a nineteen-page stack of copies from the Tampa Police Department: the file on Bob’s death, along with his autopsy. Barely legible on the front page were the words HOMICIDE REPORT.

From page 3: “Subject who identified himself as: Burnett Peters, had witnessed a w/m (white male) being beat up by another w/m identified as: Harold Wicks and that Wicks knifed the unidentified w/m in the stomach with a fish knife and threw him off the pier into the river and then, took a pole, struck him on the head when Peters threw him a line trying to assist the subject to get him out of the water.”

It seemed so inconceivable, I couldn’t absorb what I was reading. Had Bob really been murdered by a drunk who told police he was seventy-two years old? I scoured the report several times.

On the next page, the unfolding plot did a 180. Peters, described as a wino, recanted his story of a stabbing, telling police he’d been medically discharged from the army because of blackouts and amnesia, and couldn’t explain how he’d concocted his earlier tale. He was drinking wine near a fishing boat, saw a fight and a man fall in, then tossed out a rope, but said “the subject seemed to just sink into the water under the boat.”

Wicks, who told police he’d also drunk a good bit of wine, said he had been sleeping aboard the *Six Brothers*. He stepped off to use a restroom on the dock, then returned to the boat. His version, whether you want to believe him or not, continued on the next page:

“A w/m unknown to him grabbed him around his waist and stated, ‘I think I’ll throw this old S.O.B. in the drink.’ With this, Wicks states that he threw his arms out, causing the subject to break his hold on him and a struggle ensued at which time, the w/m fell over the side. ... He states that the subject in the water appeared to be swimming alright so he went back aboard the Six Bros. and went back to sleep.”

That was about noon on Sunday, July 1. Bob's body wouldn't be recovered until 5:45 the following afternoon.

The homicide investigation lasted a couple of days before the state attorney's office closed the case as an accidental drowning. Perhaps because it was concluded that Bob started the fight and the old man was protecting himself, Bob was deemed at fault for his own death.

Among those interviewed by police, a clerk at the nearby Lighthouse Gospel Mission said Bob had worked driving a truck at the mission's farm in the suburb of Gibsonton for about two months until June 23, when he was discharged for drinking. The man told police he knew Bob "to be a nice person when not drinking, however, when he was drinking, he was very obnoxious and also, a loud mouth."

The foreman who fired Bob said he'd "had no trouble with him and (he) appeared to be a very good worker," but "when drinking, he was belligerent and seemed to have a chip on his shoulder." Police also learned Bob had stayed at the mission only one night since his firing, then moved to the Salvation Army home.

His autopsy pointed out a panther tattoo on Bob's left shoulder, a salute to the navy (he'd served in the U.S. Naval Reserve from 1937 to 1941 before a medical discharge). Crys remembers seeing it when Bob would wear his muscle T-shirts. But another note in the autopsy, unpleasant as the document was to read, left me bewildered.

On Bob's right shoulder were three names: Crys. Robin. Teresa.

Not his wife. His children. No telling how long he'd worn them or what their presence meant. He loved his kids so much, he had their names etched on himself for eternity? He got the tattoos after leaving West Virginia because he so profoundly missed them? Or because he was obsessed with them, to the depraved extent of sexual abuse?

As I struggled to process the final months of Bob's torment, I felt somewhat sorry for him. Since his arrest in Huntington and move to Tampa, he'd become a homeless drunk whom some witnesses knew only as "Poor Boy." No man, no matter how shameful or immoral a life he's led, deserves to land in such a dead end.

With little desire to think the whole pathetic story through and try to understand what might have put Bob on his miserable road to dying destitute, all I could do was blame him for throwing away everything for nothing. I felt anguish for Betty and her family but could muster only contempt for Bob, hardly taking his humanity into consideration.

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"Ladies and gentlemen, the music you have just heard was recorded in Logan, West Virginia. As you heard, it was a benefit program for the March of Dimes. I re-recorded it onto tape for future reference and future listening because I enjoyed it so much."

I had no idea whose deep voice flowed from the fragile reel-to-reel audiotape

projecting its contents through the speakers facing me. Minutes earlier, I'd sat in a fellow's home studio in Irving, Texas, damp-eyed and wrapped up in the reverie of Betty's first-rate rendition of "It Had to Be You" in a recording dating to 1951.

The nameless "announcer" went on to list the band members, including "the beautiful, talented Betty Workman." But when I heard the words "Bob Workman on bass," it hit me: I was listening to him. My siblings had told me Betty wasn't our only musically gifted parent—Bob played string bass, guitar, and drums.

As improbable as it seemed, I'd been given the chance to hear the voices of both biological parents in the same poignant setting without being in their presence.

That sunny morning two days after Christmas 2010, nervous anticipation had steered my car to a meeting with Phil York. He'd come recommended, and I had three old tapes for him to work his magic with. They had been in my birth family for more than fifty years, but Crys and Terry had no notion of what they might contain. When our brother Robin died unexpectedly at sixty-one almost two years earlier, his wife had given the tapes to Terry, and our only hint was that Robin had said something about Bob singing "Take Me Out to the Ballgame."

After visiting Terry and Crys in Colorado earlier that month, I'd carried the tapes back to Texas, determined to luck into someone with recording equipment that could spin out their secrets. There had to be something rich and sentimental on them, and I was convinced that unraveling their mysteries would nudge me ever-nearer to the parents I'd missed out on meeting.

But what if they were too damaged to play? What if the atrophy of time had made them so brittle that the first rotations would slice them into oblivion, making it impossible to ever know what treasures they held?

Entering Phil's modest white house straight out of the 1950s, I wandered into an electronics wonderland. Pushing seventy, Phil lived in a recording studio, wall to wall in machines, dials, switches, monitors, and other gadgetry the likes of which I'd never seen. I saw something round, golden, and framed on the wall, and soon learned that Phil had worked decades as a sound engineer and producer—and recorded three Grammy-winning songs along with dozens of other nominees.

As the tape rolled and I listened to this man I'd come to know primarily as a drunk and a pervert, I wasn't thinking about his failings. I was immersed in the moment, visualizing him speaking into a microphone while pretending to be an emcee or a radio announcer as he introduced Betty's songs. He embellished his little production by saying, on three of the arrangements, that she was accompanied by Nat King Cole, Frankie Carle, and Fats Waller, when it was really just the Logan musicians.

Near the end of the tape came Bob's attempt at singing, as he crooned "Take Me Out to the Ballgame," "Five Foot Two, Eyes of Blue" and "Minnie the Mermaid." I smiled, thinking, for the first time, that he sounded like a fun, decent sort. He probably downed a Falls City—a Louisville beer and one of his libations of choice—while he made the recording.

The long-unheard tapes made it obvious that along with inner forces he could never defeat, Bob had a creative sense of humor and a flair for showmanship.

Hearing his voice humanized him and left me saying, simplistic as it might come off, “He doesn’t sound like a bad guy.”

For once, I could see something in Bob other than evil.

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Billy Hodgkin and Babb Adams never met before their deaths in recent years—Billy a thirty-year plant worker for Chrysler in Indianapolis, Babb a minister at Orient Park Baptist in Tampa and several other Florida churches over his fifty years as a preacher.

But each encountered Bob Workman—after his demise.

It was a perfect afternoon on July 2, 1962, when Billy, his wife, and another couple, all visiting Tampa from Indiana for a week’s vacation, chartered a thirty-six-foot boat to cruise the Hillsborough River into the bay. About halfway through their excursion, Billy saw it.

“I looked up and said, ‘Hey, there’s something floating up there in the water—it’s a man!’” recalled Billy, a World War II veteran who fought in the Battle of the Bulge, when I found him four years ago. “Sure enough, it was.”

After the *Sea Star*’s owner tied a rope to the body and the craft pulled it to a nearby concrete pier, officers were waiting. “They came on the boat and said, ‘This looks like the fella we was huntin’ last night,’” Billy said.

It was, indeed, the man who’d flopped into the river upstream after a drunken tussle. Officers gave the boat party a cockamamie story about someone barging into the police station, crying and half-drunk, exclaiming, “I just killed my buddy!” while they’d been messing around on the dock.

The wives, spooked by their vacation’s ghastly turn, refused to return to the boat, which the visitors had rented for another day. But, captivated by the drama, Billy snapped a slew of photos—crime scene and all—and saved some press clippings. At age eighty-six when we spoke, he had no use for them, so he gladly mailed them my way. Seeing the images, shot from a reasonable distance with a white sheet covering the body, was more compelling than shocking or sad.

Eight days after Bob was pulled from the water came the young preacher’s chance meeting with the West Virginian who came to Florida to die. Rev. Adams stood with only the caretaker beside an unmarked hole, leading a brief burial service in the back section of Orange Hill Cemetery where derelicts were laid to rest.

Of that day, the minister—only thirty-three when a funeral home owner friend asked him to perform one of his life’s more depressing duties—remembered most the utter hopelessness.

“There was no one there. I remember having a conversation with the groundskeeper about dying alone and being alone,” Rev. Adams told me in 2011. “We talked about, despite the fact of how it happened, it still was heart-rending, because he was somebody’s brother and somebody’s son and somebody’s father.”

Somebody’s father. But not mine.

As more pieces of Bob's life and death came together, tinges of sadness and sympathy, once unthinkable, started to emerge. We're all imperfect, capable of loathsome, even criminal, acts against others. I grasped at factors that might have driven Bob to wrong the people he was supposed to love and protect.

Did his father—about whom my siblings and I know nothing because he died at age forty-nine in 1937—drink heavily and abuse Bob, too? Should I just accept that Bob chose to slide inside a can or bottle as a prescription for adversity, or when he had nothing better to do than get soused?

Maybe. But I still couldn't forgive.

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The possibility filled me with dread: Am I like him?

I'm not an alcoholic, and I don't become an arrogant jerk when I drink. I've never sexually abused anyone. I've never smoked. I've never done harm to my children and don't have vices that would hurt or bring humiliation to my family.

But I can be overly impatient and short-tempered. I worried, was Bob the same way? No, Crys says, not when sober.

Like Bob, I have frailties that have been tough to overcome. I've done things that epitomize weakness, that I'm ashamed to tell anyone. Sometimes when I do something I regret, whether inappropriate or mean-spirited, I can't help thinking he'd also have done it.

My wife insists I'm nothing like him and could never be. But we're flesh and blood, and there's no knife sharp enough to cut all the way through that tie. Early on, sister Terry pointed out mannerisms of mine that remind her of Betty. No one's done that with Bob. I'm still uneasy.

I've seen dozens of photos of him, and I'm always struck by how different we look. Bob had a mechanical mind and a handyman's knack—again, that's not me.

"One of his best qualities was his knowledge of how things worked," says Crys, now seventy-two. "He was very serious about working things out and explaining things logically. It's a pity the logic failed him when he drank."

As Bob's addiction swelled, he withdrew from his family. There would be anger, threats, and physical violence, but when sober, he could be reserved and thoughtful.

Those last two traits, I'll willingly put in the similarities column. But the apprehension about whether Bob and I have more in common than I'm comfortable with lingers.

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Resident by resident, occupation by occupation, I spent scattered, eye-straining hours poring over the 1956 Huntington city directory online. The names didn't matter—against crazy odds, my fixation of the moment was locating anyone listed as an employee at the Fix-It Shop, an appliance repair business downtown where Bob worked in the '50s.

Or, where he worked when his bosses, devout Baptists Howard and Bonnie

Young, repeatedly excused his drunken shenanigans and let him come back. They needed a skilled refrigeration man, and Bob was a hell of a good one.

*BELVILLE Naomi J Mrs clk Fix-It Shop r 6th av*

Desperate to turn up a living, breathing source who could take me back more than fifty years and tell me more about Bob, I hurriedly opened a new computer window and looked her up. There she was, seventy-seven years old, living in Proctorville, Ohio, just across the river from Huntington. I called her the next day, and she remembered Bob and his affliction's toll all too well.

But Naomi was just the first find of my Fix-It Shop breakthrough. She mentioned Junior Robbins, who'd worked with Bob, and soon called me with his number. It wasn't long before I contacted J. R., and over an hour later, I finally had a detailed, candid perspective of Bob from someone other than my siblings.

"You're prepared to hear the worst, aren't you?" he warned up front.

I was.

"Everybody felt sorry for him in a way. He was such a talented person, and he was just likable. And yet it seemed like he had no control over that part of his life," said J. R., a novice refrigeration mechanic in his early twenties when he and Bob, in his early forties, worked at the shop.

Hearing nuggets of decency sprinkled in with what, until then, had been an avalanche of impropriety was refreshing—and unexpected.

"When it comes down to it, it is sad that a boy with his talents, and the chance at life he had, that bottle robbed him of all that," said J. R., who was seventy-seven and living across the river in Chesapeake when we first talked in late 2012.

Long before J. R. came on staff, he knew about Bob. J. R.'s father and brother had worked there, too, and Bob's boozing was a source of constant concern for his well-being and that of the business.

Often, Bob headed out on a repair call in one of the Fix-It Shop's trucks and wasn't heard from all day. Co-workers would have to drive out to Guyandotte, on the eastern outskirts of Huntington, find the truck at the joint where Bob was swimming in spirits, and drive it back to the shop.

Other times, when Bob wasn't sleeping it off and missing work, he could keep it together, earning esteem from colleagues for his sensibility and technical smarts. And he just didn't look the part of a drunkard, J. R. insisted more than once.

"I never did meet your mother, but everybody said she was a good-lookin' woman, so they couldn't understand why Bob didn't straighten up," he said.

While Bob teetered on the edge, Betty worked as a saleslady at a women's department store and did what she could to feed and clothe her three kids while protecting them from their father.

"She's the one that actually kept things together," J. R. said. "What I have heard about your mother is that she truly loved Bob, and that's the reason she kept giving him so many, many, many opportunities to come back ... and then it just wouldn't work out with him."

J. R. can still vividly recapture his last glimpse of Bob. Poor choices and unreliability had caught up with him, costing him his job at the Fix-It Shop.

“Used to be a lot o’ guys would go out to 10th Street and drink next to the river bank,” J.R. recalled. “When I came in one time, I seen him and the guys walkin’ past, headin’ out there. And at that time I thought, ‘Such a waste—that boy is talented and smart as a tack.’ They was sorta what you’d call panhandlers—just get money, the guys did.

“He just didn’t look like he belonged with ’em—they was all dirty and looked like they’d been sleepin’ in their clothes. Far as I can remember, that’s the last time I laid eyes on your dad.”

Figuring my Fix-It Shop leads had dried up, I called J. R. weeks later to ask a few more questions. Turned out he’d forgotten a couple of fellows, including a kid who’d worked with Bob while attending Marshall College in town. Went on to be a journalism professor on the same campus for thirty-two years.

Considering I’d been in the newspaper biz more than thirty years, that was too coincidental—and too fantastic. Confident I’d be getting more views of both sides of Bob’s character, I couldn’t wait to hear Dr. Ralph Turner revive him further for me.

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“He was kind of a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. When he was good, he was very, very good, but when he was bad—very, very bad.”

Ralph’s observations and recollections of Bob were newspaperman-sharp. Like his long-ago colleague J. R., Ralph spoke of a complex individual whose positive qualities were often shoved out of sight by his overpowering disease.

“The Youngs had a lot of respect for your father and his great knowledge about appliances, and they also knew how important Bob was to keeping the shop going,” he said.

When Bob made it to work and didn’t disappear to drink, he was a proficient tradesman. He also took more pride in his appearance than most others at the shop—gray trousers, black leather bowtie, shirt with a name patch, well-groomed hair.

“He looked like the Maytag guy,” pictured Ralph, now seventy-seven. “He was more professional with his dress than his dependability of showing up for work every day.”

The college kid sometimes drove the truck when he and Bob made repair calls. The man could fix damn near anything, even if it didn’t involve refrigeration. Ralph literally was just along for the ride. (“I didn’t know what the hell I was doing.”)

Through the eyes of an eighteen-year-old, Bob Workman was a middle-aged enigma, and the shop’s smartest employee. Their time together gave Ralph an awareness about some of what Bob believed in and what aggravated him. He didn’t like to waste time with foolishness or BS. Results, not excuses.

But Ralph gained another impression of Bob that jolted me, wiping away some

of the unsavory veneer that most of the other memories had given him.

Bob didn't like to see people mistreated, and he felt great empathy for the downtrodden, those who'd been dealt a losing hand. Surely in them, Bob saw himself—or at least the part of him plunging ever downward. Something in his psyche prodded him to feel the pain of total strangers. But what about the years of pain he'd inflicted on his own family?

On a trip back to Huntington last summer, Terry and I met Ralph and talked about Bob over lunch at, of all places, a Bob Evans restaurant. The one-time reporter and retired professor proudly held out his hands—no tremors, thanks to his Parkinson's meds. Ever the journalist, he threw out questions neither of us—the daughter who wasn't in school yet when she last saw Bob, and the son he didn't know he had—could answer.

“Whom did he confide in? What was he trying to get away from? Did he ever get help? Are there any clues in his family background?” Terry and I could only shake our heads.

I welcomed the contradictions J. R. and Ralph had offered me, as they helped dilute my negative perceptions of Bob. I'd become determined to see good in him and move closer to acceptance, if not vindication.

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For nearly ten years, I couldn't ask Crys about it, not wanting to make him relive what he'd already lived through once and forever. A quick mention would come up every so often in conversation, but I was reluctant to be so inquisitive as to bring it all flooding back.

While visiting Crys and Terry in Colorado in January 2015, I wanted to talk with him about Bob—only Bob. And for an hour and a half, we did. After one of those passing references to what his father—our father—had done to him during his youth, I decided it was time.

The family of four had moved back to Huntington in 1951 after a couple of years living in the coal-mining community of Logan, where Bob worked at a Borden dairy and he and Betty played gigs with a local band. Crys became a seven-year-old second-grader, and Betty worked late-night shifts at the Owens-Illinois glass factory, one of Huntington's largest employers.

“Twelfth Avenue was when he started taking me to bed with him,” Crys said matter-of-factly, in his usual soft voice.

In a house where the family lived upstairs, Bob would take Crys from his bed and bring him to the one he and Betty used. Somehow, the youngster always woke up in the safety of the room he and Robin shared.

“I was afraid of him at that age,” Crys said. “He was so much bigger and I was a kid and didn't know what to think. Obviously sexual touching is a good feeling. It was just tactile. There was no sexual penetration or anything like that. The more he did it, the more it bothered me.”

As he grew older and the family moved into a new home across town before Terry's birth in December 1954, Crys stayed away, often at night, to avoid Bob.

Meanwhile, through the rest of the '50s, Bob's drinking escalated from fairly manageable to uncontrollable.

Crys doesn't think Betty ever caught Bob with him, and Crys never told her about the abuse. And although Bob seemed to have singled out Crys, he didn't stop there. Crys believes that's what Betty found out about, and when she knew in 1959 that divorce after twenty years of marriage was a decision she had to make for her children.

"I don't think our dad was a sexual deviant. I think he was an alcoholic, and that lowered a lot of inhibitions, maybe brought out some feelings deep down," Crys surmised.

It wasn't until Crys hit sixty that the memories, pain, and guilt rushed back, with little warning. That's when he entered therapy and convinced himself it wasn't his fault.

The likelihood that Bob was abused, and that his father also drank excessively, seems high. But after his traumatic childhood experiences, Crys didn't fall into the same pattern. Fortunately, neither paternal heredity nor Bob's mistakes shaped the character of any of his four kids.

Talking with Crys about the abuse and Bob's other indiscretions couldn't have come at a better moment for me. For a handful of years, my attitude toward Bob had slowly softened as I saw how shortsighted I'd been, harshly judging him without conceding the demons behind his misdeeds. Flaws in his makeup. Desires he couldn't, through little fault of his own, suppress.

Incurably, I had not been able to forgive. I could only hold him entirely responsible. Perhaps Crys helped me shed the dead weight of hard-heartedness by himself forgiving Bob long ago:

"I couldn't live with myself if I hadn't. I can't just hold a grudge. I'm not that kind of person. I can't hate. So that's where I'm like our mother—I'd rather be forgiving."

Me too, big brother.

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You never knew about me. But I'm your son.

I'm glad you weren't the father who raised me. Not because of what happened. I just love the only father I've ever known too much to wish for that.

"I'm an alcoholic," you admitted, in front of your oldest son, to the minister Betty invited to the house. The first step to recovery. But, surprisingly, Betty must've refused to believe how bad it really was. "Oh, Bob, don't talk like that," she said, possibly out of embarrassment.

So why didn't you try to get help? I realize it's not as simple as "just didn't want to." Did you know there was an Alcoholics Anonymous office on Fifth Avenue in the '50s? Maybe friends or relatives offered guidance and you rejected them. Back then, I know, folks rarely sought a way out from drinking and drugs. They didn't care, they overcame it themselves or they stayed on a skidding course to the crashing end.

When and why did your life turn the direction it did? You couldn't have been an alcoholic when Betty married you in 1939, or she wouldn't have done it. Then again, since she ended up with two husbands whose love for her and booze practically ran a dead heat, maybe it was just her calling.

You and Betty must have been happy for a time, and then the inebriation kicked in. But the neighbor girl who used to babysit Crys in 1944-45 remembers she'd often hear yelling next door. Crys, in his innocent and unaware earliest years, couldn't have known how bad things were already becoming.

Were you, as the cliché goes, drinking to drown your sorrows? Or did you just like the taste, like how carefree and invincible it made you feel, like being with your drinking buddies? Did you look at your drunken self and not like what you saw, driving you to drink more?

You had a lot of black friends—a lot of friends, period—and were fiercely loyal to them. I'm relieved to know you weren't prejudiced. But your loyalty to family faded under the influence of a liquid authority so much stronger than you.

You used to do some of the things a father does and be more involved at home—play catch with your sons, teach them to fix their bikes and mow the yard, let them plunk the strings on your old '40s arch-top guitar. When did all that stop mattering?

You loved electronics and photography, even set up a darkroom at home. I wrestled with many a film spool in a cramped room while taking photojournalism in college, so I'm sure we could tell each other some great stories.

You were so black and white. "There was a certain way to do things, according to him, and that's it," Crys says. "No questioning it." I can be a bit like that, unable to see the big picture, but not to your extreme. It's part of the reason my feelings about you budged so little—you were just a bad person, and I couldn't shake that bias.

I hope you understand why it's important for me to soak up everything I can about you and Betty. I came from both of you, and I need to know who you were. Every bit of you.

If it had all worked out, if you'd beaten your sickness, if the family had stayed together, if I'd grown up a Workman, you might have done to me what you did to Crys. Like him, I was a shy, sensitive, passive child. But I don't think you would've.

Beneath your tough exterior, past the antagonistic alter ego alcohol created, in your heart and mind you must have been a good and decent man. Crys believes it. The guys you worked with at the Fix-It Shop believe it. I know Betty believed it.

And after years of seeing only the worst in you, I believe it.





# My Mother's Bread

by Leta Cunningham



I didn't exactly eat meals back then, not really. Instead, I ate small snacks throughout the day. A package of walnuts—100 calories. An apple—50 calories. Half a spoonful of peanut butter—45 calories. Fifteen goldfish crackers—36 calories. It wasn't food I ate. Not exactly. I ate numbers.

Each of these tiny meals was planned around my high school class schedule—one snack per class period. This is what it looked like:

*I wait until exactly the beginning of class to eat, my hands shaking imperceptibly, my feet tapping against the tile to keep myself warm. I reach into my hand-me-down backpack to pull out a Ziploc baggy marked "second period," or "third," or "fourth," and place it in my lap, glancing around to make sure no one noticed. I quietly unzip the bag, pulling out a single item—a peanut, a cracker, a low-fat slice of cheese. I hold the precious food in my bony hands and lift it to my mouth slowly, savoring the barely-there smell wafting up to my nose. As I part my lips, I place my salvation on my tongue, tasting the stale flavor with every inch of my mouth. Chew and chew and chew. Swallow. Repeat. My fixation on my food mutes the voice of my teacher, which doesn't matter, because I didn't do the homework anyway. I barely notice anything around me. All that matters is the rapidly emptying plastic bag clinging to my clammy thighs. And as soon as the bag is empty, I briefly consider ripping into the other carefully packaged and labeled bags in my backpack to ravage their contents, filling myself with their energy, their taste, their warmth. But I'm a good girl. I don't give in.*

Food haunted my dreams whether I was awake or asleep. I dreamed of ice cream, and Snickers bars, and breakfast tacos and waffles with syrup. Every inch of my body longed for sugary snow cones with their syrup dripping down my wrists in the summer, or glazed donuts that made my jaw tighten with their sweetness, or French fries dipped in milkshakes. Mostly, though, I craved my mother's bread.

My mother has always baked fresh bread. Rich, nutty, soft, moist bread. It's so absolutely satisfying on its own that it requires no butter or cheese or jam. Growing up, my brother and I would sit in the kitchen next to the oven with our knees up to our chests, waiting for the timer to signal its finish. Sometimes we became so impatient that we couldn't wait for the bread to cool enough to be sliced, so we pulled pieces out with our fingers, the steam rising under our touch, the hot bread burning the roofs of our mouths. Her bread was the staple of our household, something we ate with every meal. We put eggs on warmed slices in the morning, used thick hunks to soak up remaining steak marinade from our

dinner plates, slapped turkey and slices of cheese between it for school lunches, and ate peeled-off nutty crusts between meals with nothing at all.

Seven torturous months went by, days of precisely packaged meals, midnights spent crying over the scale I hid in my closet, and endless evenings of refusing my mother's food before I was finally checked into an inpatient hospital facility. I was an impressive forty-one pounds underweight. My mother dropped off loaves of bread during visiting hours every Sunday, for me and the other skinny-armed girls who lived in the facility with me. I assured her every week that we would eat the loaf in full, a weak attempt to distract her from the collarbones she saw through my T-shirt, to draw out the dimples from her faked, shaky smile. It was a lie. This is what we really did:

*We're laying around during free time in the sterile three-bed hospital room I share with two other girls, the loaf of bread on the bed in the middle. One of my roommates, Alice, who still has a feeding tube up her nose, lays on her stomach and kicks her legs back and forth in the air, complaining about a nurse who talks to us like we're babies instead of teenagers. Rebeckah, a girl in her third stint at this inpatient program, picks at the crust of the bread. She interrupts Alice. "How many calories are in this, do you think? Like, in just one slice?" I stare at the ceiling and answer automatically. "120, give or take." Alice scratches her scalp, pulling away a few strands of hair with her bony fingers, and says, "God. How is your mom, like, not fat?" I shrug. "Exercise, I guess." I pull a thin oatmeal-colored blanket over my legs, and Alice tucks herself underneath it with me. We're always cold. We discuss how people who eat like that could possibly stay thin until the intercom announces art therapy and we lazily lift ourselves from the bed and exit my room, turning left down the hall toward the activity room in our wing. I hang behind Alice and Rebeckah and throw away the whole loaf of bread in the trash can next to the door outside my room.*

My mother smiled in that same forced way she smiled the first day I started refusing her bread. I had just read an article about the fattening properties of carbohydrates, and I knew I could no longer indulge in slices of something that would go straight to my thighs, straight to my stomach, straight to the patches of fat under my arms. The day I started refusing those rich carbs, the smell of the bread baking in the oven drifted through the house, under the crack in my bedroom door, taunting me, tempting my empty stomach. This is what happened:

*I'm laying in my bed, wrapped in a comforter and hugging a stuffed animal to my chest when my mother knocks on the door. I don't say anything, but she comes in anyway, standing next to my bed in the light from the open door. "Hey, sweetie," she says softly, a hint of optimism in her voice. "I made some fresh bread; are you hungry?" She out-stretches her arm and I see a thick hunk of bread on a napkin weighing in her hand, a heavy portion of butter slathered over it, still steaming a bit from the oven. I want to devour the bread. I want to eat loaves and loaves and loaves. "No, I ate after school. I don't want any." My mother smiles that smile that keeps her dimples hidden and my insides turn to ash. "OK," she begins, and then pauses, withdrawing her arm. "Are you okay, Leta?" A scream builds up in me, and it wants to rip up my sweater sleeves to show her the red scabs on my arms I've carved in myself, and beg for food, and sob, and hug her, but I suppress it and*

*stay quiet. Rolling over on the bed to face away from her, I answer quietly, "I'm just tired." She stands in the doorway watching me for a moment. When she closes the door softly behind her, she leaves me in darkness, the scent of the bread still heavy in the air.*

I don't remember, exactly, when my spiral began. It wasn't that one day I was healthy and happy and loved myself, and the next I was eating 600 calories a day, but sometimes, when I look back, it seems that way. I can't remember what came first—the crying spells under the covers of my bed in the middle of the night, the razor blades I screwed out of my pencil sharpeners and slid across my arms, the panic attacks that came whenever and wherever they pleased, the class periods spent hiding in a bathroom stall at school, or the intense food restriction and hours logged on the treadmill in my neighborhood gym. Maybe it all happened at once, or maybe gradually. The truth is that my senior year of high school is still a smudgy mess in my mind, and I can't quite get a grasp on it even when I try. Because I was a healthy and happy child who loved herself once, and then, I just wasn't.

There are studies done by psychologists that claim that people who were picky eaters as children are more likely to develop eating disorders later in life. I don't know if that's true, but I do know, as far as picky eaters go, I was one of the worst. This is what it was like at mealtimes:

*I sit at the paint-chipped table at dinner time, five years old, an empty plate in front of me. My mother stares at me in desperation while I avoid making eye contact with my giggling brother. "Please, for the love of God, eat something, anything," she begs. "Just name one food that you like and I'll make it." I open my mouth to suggest ice cream, but my brother interrupts me through his laugh. "She doesn't like anything, Mama. No hot dogs, nothing that smells like fish, no green stuff, no ketchup..." I giggle and pitch in, "No dogs, no cats, no elephants, no alligators, and NO LETTUCE!" My brother and I break into hysterics, and my mother drops her head into her arms to hide her smile. I end up eating chicken nuggets for dinner.*

I almost starved to death after my mother stopped breastfeeding me, simply because I wouldn't eat anything. My older brother, commissioned by my parents, would put on elaborate song and dance shows to distract me long enough for my mother to get a few bites into my mouth. As soon as I cracked my smile or opened my mouth in a giggle, my mother was ready with a spoon of whatever objectionable food I had refused. This meant my encounters with food were associated with trickery, or were simply *panem et circenses*. Later, sleepovers with friends were nearly impossible because I was always that one kid who didn't like anything the host family prepared for dinner. My mother, embarrassingly, would send a gift loaf of bread with me, fully knowing it might be the only thing I would eat that night. I grew out of my picky habits by my early adolescent years, I think. They say children learn to vary their appetites naturally as they grow. But then, a few years later, my parents started having to force me to eat again. I felt like a child. A toddler. An infant sitting in a high chair while adults tried to distract me long enough to get me to eat. But this time, I was eighteen years old and no one was laughing. My mother was crying, and my father was begging, and I was just

counting, counting, counting.

I wish I could tell you why I got sick. I wish I could tell you that a boy at school thought I was fat, so I was desperate to lose weight. I wish I could tell you that my parents were overly critical and led me into a battle for perfection. I wish I could blame my self-starvation on society, on skinny models in lingerie stores, on magazines, on my friends who didn't listen, on my father who didn't come to my birthday parties, on some kind of trauma I'd never recovered from. But I can't blame my eating disorder on any of those things. People asked me for months, "Why did you stop eating, Leta? Didn't you know you were killing yourself? Didn't you know that your heart was failing, your kidneys were failing, your whole body was giving in? Why would you do that to yourself?" But I don't know. I don't know. I don't know.

They say that there's an "anorexia gene," that my propensity for developing an eating disorder was built into my DNA. I'd like to blame my illness on that, but I don't think that's the cause. Here's the only explanation I can come up with: When I was a kid, I hated crafts because I could never make them perfect. In middle school, I hated math because I couldn't stand getting less than perfect grades. In high school, I obsessed over keeping my room spotless and my papers organized to perfection. Everything always had to be flawless in my mind, and after a while I guess I started measuring my own skin and bones against those same impossible standards of perfection.

Or, maybe not. I'll never know for sure. I do know this: There is a place in me, past the scars on my arms and legs, beneath the fatty parts of me I loved to hate for so long, deep down in the pit of my stomach there is an ache that maybe I was born with, that maybe was put there by something I don't remember, an ache that convinced me that my body was—is—the enemy, and the smaller I became, the more it grew.

Inpatient treatment was all sterile sheets, early mornings, and half-drunk bottles of En-sure. We, the residents, settled into a routine of dysfunctional normality—where points were awarded based on how much you ate at meals, rewards were given for gained weight, therapy sessions were attended three times a day, and the most dreaded of all were the 6 a.m. weigh-ins where we had to strip down with our backs to the wall while nurses determined our health for the day. I remember standing on my toes, unashamedly dressed only in ill-fitting underwear and a sports bra, peeking over the nurse's shoulder to try and see what my numbers were for the day. The first time I found out the numbers were north of 100, a few weeks after my arrival at the treatment center, I used the tab of a Coke can to cut thin red lines into the flesh along my hips where the waistline of my underwear hid them from the suspicious eyes of our nurses. The second week I weighed in at over 100 pounds again, I cried while they proudly granted me outdoor privileges, but smiled as I planted a pear tree where I could see it through the window in my assigned bedroom, knowing that the tree was much more permanent in this place than I was. The third week I stayed in the triple digits, and they sent me home.

My mother came alone to pick me up on discharge day. When she got there, she joined in on a small goodbye party with the other girls in my wing. The celebration was like this:

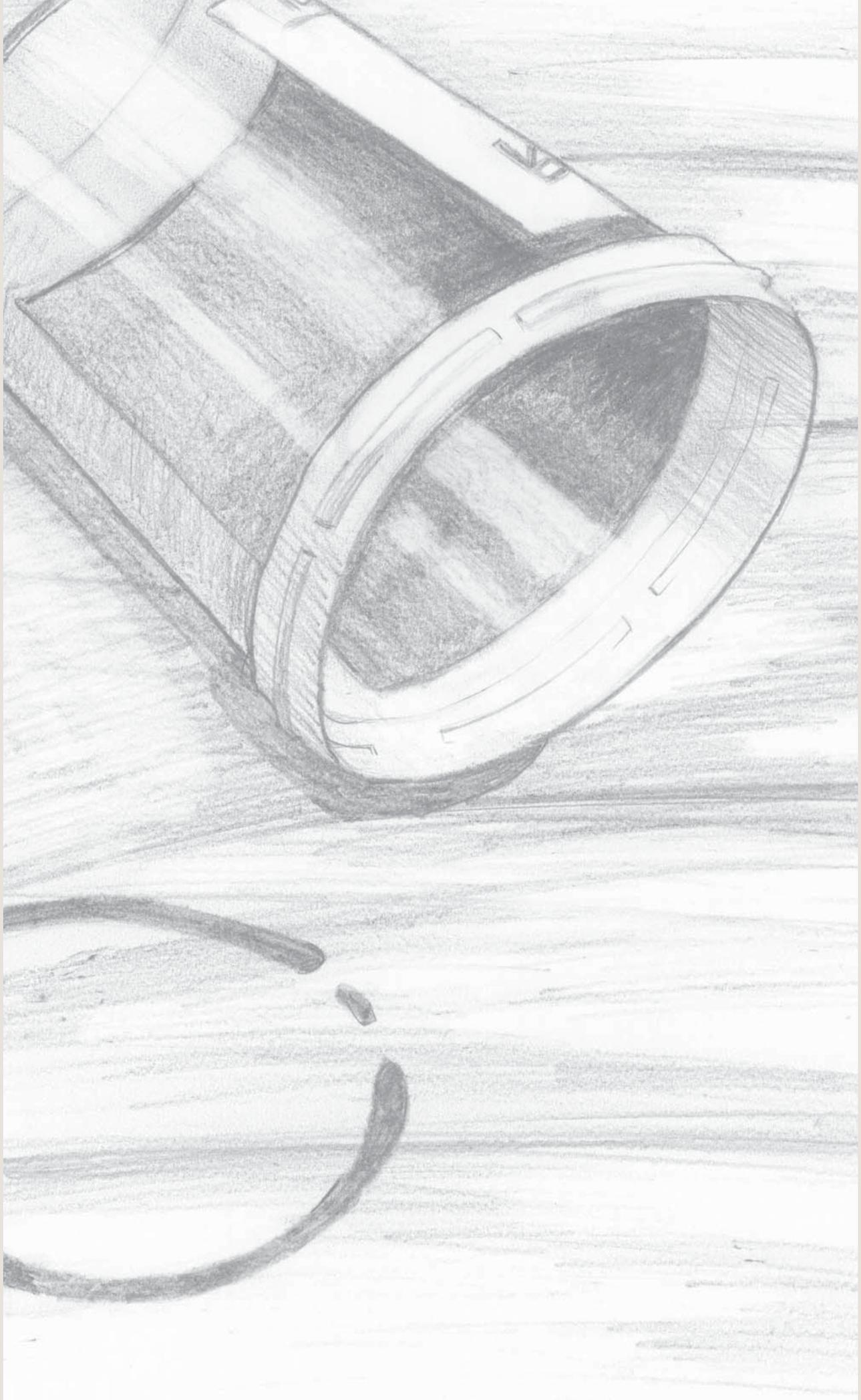
*There are eleven of us, not including my mother, in the activity room. A multilayer Costco cake with the words "Congratulations, Leta!" sits on a round table in the center, and the other girls and I all stand awkwardly around it, trying not to be uncomfortable with the block of sugar and calories in front of us. I make eye contact with Alice and we both crack a smile over the ironic torture of feeding cake as a reward to a group of girls with eating disorders. My mother stands close to the door and watches as the program director hands me a fat slice of cake, smothered in blue icing. I look back at my mother with the cake in my hand and smile. She smiles back, with her dimples this time. I take a bite and try not to count the numbers in the cream between the layers of the cake.*

When I got home, fresh bread was baking in the oven. The smell hit me as soon as I stepped through the front door. I barely noticed my dogs, who jumped on me as though I'd been away for years instead of two months, barely noticed my mother trying not to cry, barely noticed the homemade "Welcome Home!" banner strung up in the living room, because I felt like a little kid again. Not a little kid being force-fed in a high chair, not a fifth grader turning down salmon at dinner because it smelled like the sea, but like a little girl with scabby knees who ate bread while it was still hot, who was too full to eat dinner because she'd eaten five slices of bread and a candy bar after school, who didn't know what calories were, and was so, so impossibly happy.

These are what my first moments back at home looked like:

*I sit next to the oven with my knees to my chest, my bare feet on the tile, my head leaning against the warmth of the oven door, and my mother sits down on the floor next to me. We don't speak, but after a while I move my foot so that our pinky toes overlap. I can feel that ever-present ache in my stomach, pulsing like a tumor, that old familiar voice that tells me I'm not good enough, that I'm too much, that I need to shrink myself down, to all but dis-appear. I close my eyes and ignore the ache that once tried to kill me, and swear that even though I haven't smothered the voice yet, one day I will. When the timer goes off and the bread is done, we pull it out of the oven and eat it straight from the loaf pan with our fingers.*

*It burns the roof of my mouth and I smile.*



# The Children Left Behind

by Leeanne Hay



In the early hours of a frost-covered October morning, the woods and fields around a country farmhouse in a county far from Dallas were filled with night vision binoculars focused on the fenced perimeter as the occupants slept inside. Small puffs of quietly exhaled breaths hung in the air from local law enforcement deputies, U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration agents, and Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms agents. Few words were exchanged. The plan to execute the narcotics search warrant had been carefully crafted to minimize casualties going through the front door because at least one child was known to live there.

The deputies and agents continually scanned their quadrants of the area for signs of movement. Then suddenly with no lights on, the front door swung partially open. Focusing on the green glow that a warm body gives off, one deputy saw through his binoculars a small dark figure run out through the front gate to the unpaved road. The little body, clothed in what looked like a skeleton outline, looked left then right, then ran back into the house. The law enforcement team continued to observe and wait. Through the next thirty minutes, the little body would repeat five times the actions of running outside, peering left and right, then running back into the house. No one could have imagined what was going on, but they would find out soon enough.

The time arrived for law enforcement to disrupt the dawn and take down the house hard and fast—without harm to the child, a little boy named Lorenzo\*, who was found sitting inside the front door wearing pajamas printed with a glow-in-the-dark skeleton design. Quickly scooped up and wrapped in a blanket, he was carried out of the residence by Agent Meyer\*, who was assigned to look after him while law enforcement simultaneously executed the warrant and made arrests.

Lorenzo was promptly removed from the scene by Meyer and driven to the police barracks to wait for Child Protective Services to arrive. During that time, the law enforcement agent (himself a father) talked with Lorenzo to make him feel comfortable and learned that he was six years old. As they talked, Meyer asked the boy why he kept going in and out of the house. The hardened agent assumed that the child was being used as a lookout. The truth would turn out to be a small testimony to the innocence of child adapting to his environment.

“I wanted to make sure I didn’t miss the [school] bus today,” Lorenzo said. “And my mommy told me never to wake her up, so I got up and got dressed up myself. I went outside to look for the bus so I wouldn’t miss it ‘cause I wanted to go to the Halloween party today.”

Meyer knew that, despite all of Lorenzo’s effort and obedience to his mother’s wishes, he would miss the party that day.

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Forget big city crime with high-profile pseudo-celebrities in a barrage of daily “breaking news” hype—with remote acreage comes bad habits and black market economies built on prescription drug abuse. Visit a different doctor at a different clinic four times a month and collect 360 pills from those money-saving ninety-day supply prescriptions-by-mail promoted by insurance companies. Take some and sell the rest or grind them up as a cut for another “product” and money is made. Entrepreneurship of this kind is alive and well off of the farm-to-market roads across Texas and just next door, too.

For the kids left behind after their parents are arrested—or overdose—a story like this will be quietly buried in the back of a dark closet of a family’s history. Just as these crime scenes pile up for those who answer the 911 calls, they are like heavy sins that weigh upon the lives of everyone involved. Consider the undercover officers’ own family lives that were wrecked by all the late nights and weeks they disappeared to go “on the job” with no more than a brief comment to their loved ones of “I’ll call you when I can.” It is another kind of collateral damage that never appears in the statistics of prescription drug-related crimes, just like posttraumatic stress disorder used to be omitted from diagnoses related to wartime casualties.

Early one morning in a suburb of Dallas, Detective Seaton\* stood in the doorway of a home where two bodies laid. Her first thought was, “What in the hell am I going to tell their children when they ask me how their parents died?” Fortunately, it wasn’t up to the police to determine the cause of death of the victims. The responsibility of determining a cause of death was conveniently in the job description of the medical examiner. The detective had two victims and would observe and state only the facts. “Don’t speculate,” she said.

What you see in the police report are staccato specifics: one white male, dead, visible sign of a gunshot wound, and one white female, dead, visible sign of a gunshot wound. Identification at the scene indicated they were married. “No handwritten ‘goodbye cruel world’ note, no person standing there with a smoking gun in his hand, and no comfort for their family and friends,” Seaton stoically observed.

She knew that if she sat and thought for a few minutes, she could probably count the number of dead bodies she had seen over a twenty-five-year career in law enforcement. The number of distraught family members and the ripple outward of devastated friends would be too many to recall. She looked over the crime scene and knew that the press would report what had occurred on this quiet, affluent street in Collin County in sensational sound bites. The evening news would make her angry and sick—sick of strangers clamoring for gory details that had nothing

to do with the safety of the public at large nor even the family left behind to mourn.

In the hours immediately following the discovery of the deceased couple, Detective Seaton would only get relief from her general disgust with anyone wearing a press badge by unloading on her department's information officer, Sergeant Gabriele\*. They had gone more than one round in the argument of what should and should not be released, the public's right to information and how, regardless of their own personal preferences, an established legal protocol was always followed. Seaton called bullshit on Gabriele more than once, but since he had known her for more than fifteen years and didn't expect her to change any time soon, he said he "didn't take it personally."

What Gabriele took to heart—and he hated to admit that he did—were the calls from the immediate family who, in their shock and grief, would spit out venomous phrases filled with curses at him for the television coverage that ensued. His deep empathy for all his victims' families belied his outward strong presence and dead-eyed cop stare when the television lights were on him. He understood the balance he needed to strike between confirming facts in the public domain to the press and being on the receiving end of whatever a family in grief and anger hurled at him. He knew that they weren't attacking him, per se, just the lousy circumstances that led to their lives crossing paths.

"I'd sue the shit out of anyone who wrote anything about my family that was a conjecture," Seaton spat out through clenched teeth. "And I mean one word that was not a confirmed fact from another source and I'd be on them ...."

Seaton is tall, fit, and smart. With an angular, short haircut, the soft Texas lilt in her voice belies the fact that she can handle whoever or whatever crosses her path. With a hard exterior and the verbal skills to reinforce her presence, it would be easy to miss the compassion she carries deep within her. It is rarely shown.

Gabriele and Seaton are more similar than they would probably like to admit. Despite their arguments and differing points of view, it is clear that they deeply care about the children left behind in the aftermath of a crime. It must be exhausting, even here in the tidy subdivisions of streets with pretty names.

Then there are the kids at a scene—not criminals, just bystanders, not responsible for the turmoil in their lives. In early 2014, during a multi-agency law enforcement investigation known as "Operation Cold Spell," federal and state authorities made arrests for drug trafficking and manufacturing with one count of firearms smuggling in Commerce, a small town sixty miles northeast of Dallas.

Multiple teams of law enforcement worked in tandem over several months to apprehend more than twenty-three suspects in the one-day action. Also in attendance was another state agency whose skills were required—Child Protective Services—for the removal of four children ages two through seven who were the bystander victims of their parents' criminal enterprise.

Measuring the societal and economic effects of these children left behind is not easily accomplished. Texas has not quantified the impact to services and the state budget for children who are raised by someone other than a biological parent due

to prescription drug abuse or death from overdose. Kentucky is one of the few states that has.

Thirty-seventh of the fifty states in size, Kentucky has the sixth-highest rate of overdose prescription drug deaths in the United States, as reported by CNN and the Partnership at Drugfree.org, with estimates that more than 86,000 children are impacted.

To gain some perspective of how many Texas children might be affected by their parents' criminal prescription drug abuse, consider this: Kentucky has one-fifth the population of Texas and no foreign country with discount pharmacies on its borders.

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Far from the Texas–Mexico border, in a small wood-framed house off of a farm-to-market road so remote that both Hunt County and Kauffman County deputies would have a difficult time determining whose jurisdiction it fell in, Seneca's\* mother, Melanie, was found dead by her father in the master bedroom when he awoke on a cold Saturday morning. With an empty prescription bottle of Xanax found by police on her mother's nightstand refilled just nineteen days prior for ninety pills, her father's statement to law enforcement was that his wife “... was known to abuse her medications.” After her mother's body had been removed from the home by the coroner, Seneca's older brother, Joseph\*, 18, and his girlfriend helped Seneca, 13, get settled at their grandmother's home a few miles away. Their father, Todd, would remain alone at their little house, refusing to leave.

Later that evening, Joseph and his girlfriend would return to the family home and later report to law enforcement that they saw his father in a small white pick-up truck parked outside of the house. They assumed Todd was passed out from drinking. When his father didn't return to the house after a while, Joseph's girlfriend went outside to check on him. She found Joseph's father “cold and blue” and immediately call 911. Emergency medical responders arrived, but it would be too late to perform any lifesaving measures.

Law enforcement deputies would call a coroner and funeral home to remove the body after they photographed the scene. In Todd's truck they found a pill bottle with eleven Xanax, fifty-four Hydrocodone pills, eighty \$100 bills, a plastic bag with marijuana, two empty pill bottles, one metal grinder, and a green cloth sack. There were no questions asked or suggestions made about what actions these items might have been a bigger part of—addiction, distribution, and origin of the drugs were never addressed. The impact on the lives of the children and what behaviors this might lead to are not theorized. There are no records of reports to or from Child Protective Services this time. The deputies' and investigators' reports contained short, clipped sentences.

Dihydrocodeine plus alprazolam *plus* tetrahydrocannabinol *plus* a few more substances equaled “mixed drug toxicity” in the medical examiner's report for Todd, 45. The report for Melanie, 43, called it “poly-drug toxicity” with no other details except the same conclusion on the manner of their deaths—“Accident.”

Was it the combination all at once or was it due to remnants of drugs ingested

from days gone by that built up and interacted with the last dose ingested? Was it a conscious intentional suicide or an unconscious accidental overdose from grief? Or was this just an accidental legacy that a mother and father would leave to their children?

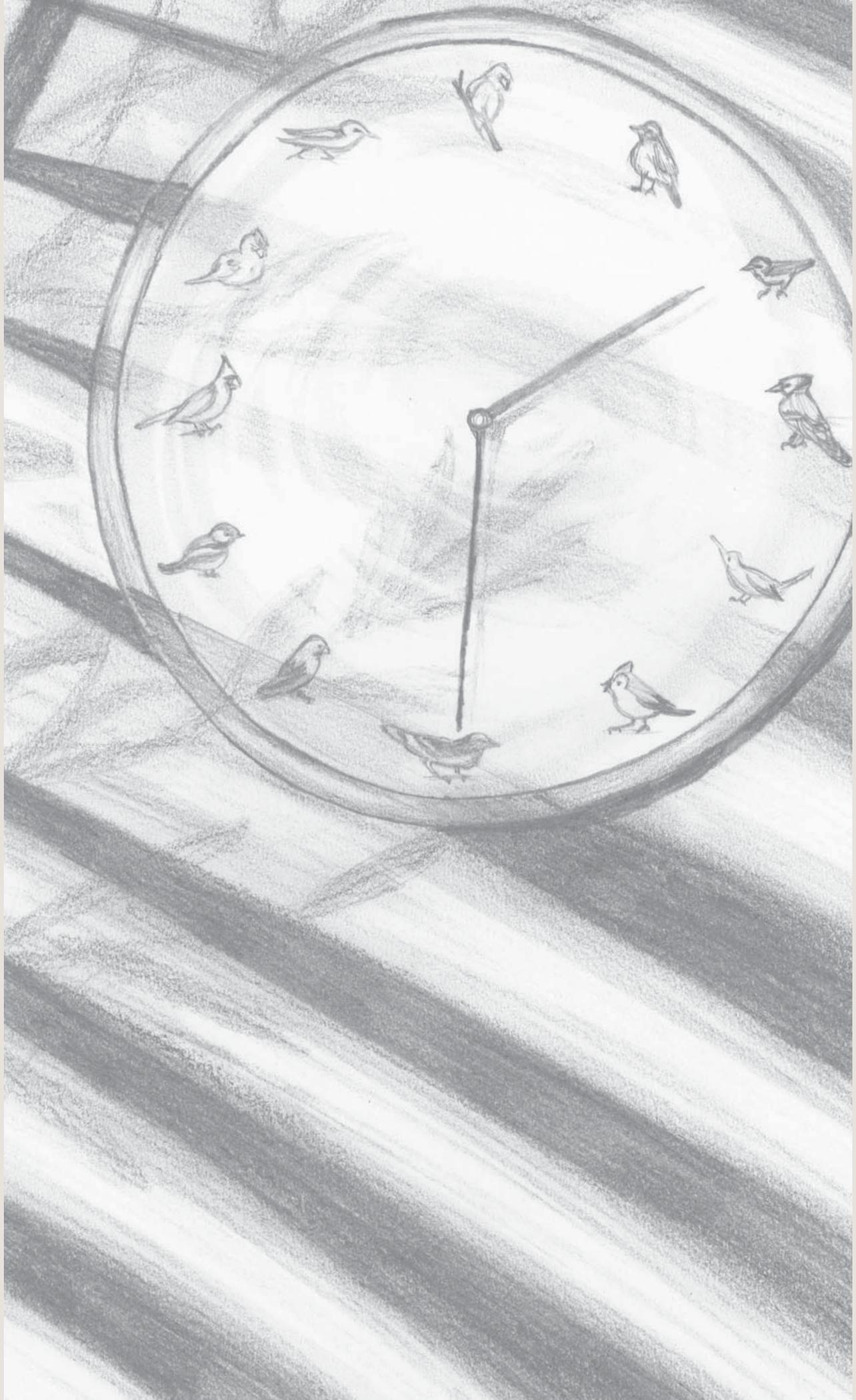
The families don't want to talk about why or how what happened is now a part of their family history, but social media has revealed their hearts.

Similar in style to the deputies' reports and medical examiners' findings, the obituary for Seneca's father and mother is each a few short sentences and mentions only the facts about important events (birth, marriage, death) and a list of family they are survived by. Yet with one additional declarative sentence at the end of her mother's obituary, the reader is left to wonder about the thoughts, feelings, and questions it conjures up for Seneca.

It says, "She was a stay-at-home mom who loved her children dearly."

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*\*Author's note: Names used for minor children and their living family members are pseudonyms to protect their privacy. The writer thanks the municipal and federal law enforcement officers, agents, and deputies who shared their stories and has used pseudonyms to protect the confidential nature of their work. Source and research authentication is available for editorial review.*



# Birdsong

by Philip Kelly



*The Past comes to us, oft times, dressed in a fine-remembered romance.  
The Future, hopefully, flies in fancy-colored balloons.  
The Present ties, seamlessly, the two.  
But what if something goes wrong in time? What if one afternoon this smooth  
unspooling suddenly stops?*

“Flip!”

Flip, that’s me. Mom is calling from the bedroom down the narrow hall of our rented condominium. We are living together, again, for the first time since I left for college and my life, thirty-three years ago. Our separate wanderlusts have joined.

Mom is, has always been, undyingly curious. As a shy, platinum-blond cigarette girl in Boston, she took her breaks at the Boston Public Library and read books on freighter travels around the world; read beneath John Singer Sargent’s murals and dreamed of the far-off. So, married to Dad, she led him to Arizona, Del Mar in Southern California, and finally to that lovely necklace of green islands, Hawaii, where we were raised.

She always said, “Go, go, see the world. Life is so very short.”

And went, went, I did go with the gift of her wanderlust. I wrote postcards home from Paris, Khartoum. When I lived close to my folks, my mother and I would pore over maps and make plans for our separate trips.

Now we plan together. A year, now, after Dad’s passing, we live together in a quiet condo in a red-tiled suburb of San Diego. The life that whirled us, naturally enough, apart, has gathered us now like planets; and, like planets, we have nestled into a gentle orbit around an unknown but familiar star.

“Flip!”

I know her voice. This call to me has a quizzical ring to it. Maybe she’s planning an outing for us—the movies, a picnic in a park, or a visit to the zoo—and just wants to know if we should.

But I know that voice—“Flip!”

It’s curious, yet with an ominous undertone of doom, which usually means

something is misplaced or lost—perhaps a wig pick or a book from the library. We always find the “lost,” lost under a pillow or the white-and-blue quilt that warms her feet on the cool nights. The three years since my father passed has taught me her voice. And taught me patience and love.

Well ... I can see the road of patience; it's always just a bit in front of me, paved with understanding and good humor. The love part has only grown.

“I'm coming, Mom.”

I put my books and studies aside on the kitchen table, bring along a thought of something just read as I go down the hall. I am all hubris and newfound intelligence—my second year of study in a Master of Arts program.

Everything I read, I feel, is important—startlingly important—and I share it all with my mother.

*Mom, in his later years, according to Vasari, Titian painted mostly with his fingers. Imagine that, Mom, just imagine!*

I am a house painter by trade—“Twenty-eight Years Painting Houses by the Sea,” my business cards read. Now I am on sabbatical, living with my mother, getting a master's. I pay closest of attention to the study of art and artists. As a painter, I feel like an artist.

*Mom, Tiepolo's wife gambled away his Venetian paintings while he was off in Spain painting for the king. He was bankrupt. Imagine, Mom, all that beautiful work lost for the toss of a die!*

“I'm coming, Mom!”

She sits by the window, spring sunlight playing on her. Slight, spare, high cheekbones, and two smallish bunkers above her prominent collarbones. Her mother, my grandmother, used to joke in Lithuanian that she could rest an egg in each cleft.

She is wearing her favorite blue sweater, robin egg blue, with two gold rings of thread encircling the sweater's wrists. The skin on my mom's hand is thin as air-worn parchment, parchment colored to match. The indigo veins, the writing.

Mom holds a book, as always, her finger as a bookmark, the book folded on her lap. The room is simply decorated. Two single beds separated by a maple bed stand hold a prayer book, a box of Kleenex, and a silver rosary with onyx beads. A porcelain lamp sits on the table between the beds—three laughing Chinese monks with fishing poles chase one another around the lamp's base. I send them to darkness each night, snap the lamp off, kiss Mom goodnight.

Other bits of maple furniture dot the room—wedding presents for my parents those years ago in Boston. A clock dots the wall opposite my mother.

It's an old clock of fading birds—a cactus wren at 1, a mockingbird at 2, and so on—the birds losing their color to time, their hourly songs now faint squeaks. Outside, a Russian olive tree brushes leaves across a window screen. I sit on the bed next to Mom's chair and hold her hand.

It must be something misplaced or lost. Mom sits me down next to her. A cricket chirps outside. Maybe it's the yellow pick for her wig, which always reminds me of a harp. Or a favorite book; maybe the silk scarf she wears to Mass. Things get lost. Mom is eighty-six. Things get lost. We'll chat as we do, and we'll figure all the lost things out.

Our chats. We always chat quietly, away from people or noise. We chat intelligently, earnestly. No small talk with my mom. Time is important. We share our nuggets of news like princes opening their pouches of jewels to each other.

Three years before, we sat at a picnic table surrounded by wayward yellow-green grass, holding hands, our backs against the table, Mom swinging her legs like a child to some distant tune, Dad just recently gone.

"Mom, I want to go back to school, get my master's, perhaps teach and put down my paintbrush and sandpaper."

She smiled immediately, both of us at our best outside.

"Behind us, Mom, farther up the hills, there is a campsite."

I wave at the hills, brown chaparral rising and diving into rocky barrancas. Live oak serpentine a streambed, meadowlarks chatter in gnarled limbs.

"I'll put up my tent, save rent. I'll work in the day and go up this hill in the evenings. There'll be stars at night and we'll still have our weekends. I've checked my cell phone strength. I can call every night."

"It will be hard, Flip. But you can do it. Nothing beats your education."

Mom turns and tucks her legs beneath the table, pats the love-carved redwood with the tips of her fingers as if nailing this chat into the table.

"I'll say the rosary for you each night after you call!"

It was spring; it was wild lavender in the air; it was birdsong, loud and generous birdsong—cactus wrens and yellowthroats. We shake hands with great solemnity. Once, twice. It was a grand balloon of a future soaring over brown hills and gullies, the quick rabbits and the odd-hipped gait of nonchalant coyotes.

It's a wonder how Mom gets her wheelchair down this hall each morning for breakfast. The hall is narrow as a sailboat's below and unlit.

Of course, it's not a perfect journey each morning. The doors and jambs bear witness to that.

And it's generally about three each morning. I stumble from my room and sleep as she collides past—"Mom, it's only 3 a.m.; let's have breakfast later"—but she insists with an angelic smile that she'll make it herself.

"I'm up, Mom. You rest."

And I push the toaster down, heat the water for her tea. It's a simple breakfast and a simple routine, Mom happy and grateful for the littlest of kindnesses. And I chide myself if I inwardly grumble.

I leave her to her quiet and lie back down for a bit 'til I hear the telltale clink of an empty cup to a saucer and rise to help her away from the table, down the narrow hall, and tuck her gently back into bed. A kiss on her forehead.

“Now go to sleep, Mom. It’s still early. Not even the birds are up yet.”

She smiles, and sleeps.

I got into grad school, buoyed by rosaries, and bought a twenty-four-foot used travel trailer to live in. I studied in my little home, read with a great hunger, and slept to the sound of hooting owls in a state park close to my mom. Time was slow and generous—like turning the pages of a well-weighted book, touching a wetted finger to a corner and turning with pleasure to the future.

Then, on two successive New Year’s Eves, Mom fell and broke a hip. One, then the other. I was there each time, sleeping on the couch, watching the ball fall in Times Square, calling the ambulances.

With the recovery from the second hip, my mother and I fell into the dispiriting swirl of big-company health care.

We were rookies—trusted all doctors, nurses, and hospital officials.

They wrote my mom off in a way, dropped her into the eighty-five-year-old wheelchair-bound vortex and like flotsam she slowly circled the depths. I fell with her, tossed in the darkness of my trailer, felt as if we had been torn apart, hands reaching out to but thin air. Then one day I decided it was our lives to live.

Mom was in the slim and sad patio of her convalescent apartment: out of energy, outside in her wheelchair, sitting in the shade beneath a towering, flowering jacaranda. I whistled as I came upon her. I held the surprise behind my back.

Mom had a slice on her leg from an immovable doorway and I knelt and tended to it. It was healing. Slowly. Mom watched, vacantly, the customers of the liquor store across the street sip from their brown bags. Occasionally a blossom from the jacaranda would parachute down to land on her shoulder or lap. She would give up just a twitch. There was no book in her lap.

“Partner,” I began.

I could finally say that again with some conviction after these months of kowtowing to the “experts” and letting responsibility for my mother’s happiness slip through our fingers.

“Partner.”

Mom turned to me with a weary lean of her head. Her hair had been combed and stretched severely into a bun, tight as the string around a top. No bouncing, auburn wig. I picked a lavender-colored blossom from her shoulder and tucked it into her folded hands.

“Mom, do you want to be roommates?”

It took a second to hit her. A crow called from a branch above us. Mom’s lips moved but no sound came. She leaned forward in her chair. Her gaunt hands tightened on the armrests like a bird gathering for flight.

“I have a condo rented near where you and Dad lived. Pretty place on a hill. Same stores, same church, same streets we always walked down. It has a screened-in porch that would be perfect for a book and an afternoon read. What do you think?”

Mom laughed. A burst of bright laughter! And she rose to go. Rose to go!

And in fact, we left that day. I gathered her meager belongings, slipped her from the property to my car, and settled her in the front seat with a book and sandwich I had made. Caretakers scurried. Papers were brought out with signatures on them. I knew they couldn't stop us. The balloons had been loosed again and lifted with a great speed into the blue future of the sky.

We live gently together in that condo on the hill. Mom reads, and naps, in the screened-in porch; I study and shuffle books around on the dining room table; bunnies hop along the cement paths and birds call from eucalyptus nests.

We walk the streets twice a day. Well, I walk and push Mom in her wheelchair, both of us chattering, pointing out birds and bright flowers. I push Mom, but I know that in her heart she is walking.

Twice a day we roam the smooth, paved streets. I can chant their names—Rios to Callado, Callado becomes Obispo, which dives into Lomica. We walk and talk along Palomar, Pastoral, Santiago. On Meandro, we pass a wooden stairway, ash-gray, that leads up a steep hill. The hillside is dotted with planted bougainvillea. Mom always looks up with a fierce determination.

*Tomorrow I'll climb those steps, Flip!*

And I pat her bony shoulder and say Mom, one step at a time, one step at a time. Our future is always bright with promise.

We go to Mass on Saturday evenings and spend Sunday in our beloved library.

I study and sneak off to school two nights a week and spend the whole class time worried about Mom home alone. For there are "whoops" here and there. Twice she slipped books under her wheelchair seat at the library, the alarm going off as we strolled through the glass doors, Mom with a "Now, who would have put those books there?" look.

Breakfast is still at three in the morning. But sometimes she forgets and rolls down the hall for another at five. Once she cautioned me to drive extra slowly because Dad was in the back seat napping. She turned to me with a smile and winked.

I pretty much ignore these "whoops," put it down to the heat or planet realignment. And I just know that no matter what was dinged, I am the glue.

"Flip!"

"Coming, Mom."

Something lost. Perhaps her rosary calling that hint of alarm.

I bring a tidbit from my studies—Degas, Turner—to soothe the misplaced.

Mom is sitting in the slanting sunshine by the window—blue sweater, book in hand, a quizzical look on her face.

"Flip, I can't read the time."

The old wall clock with the whispering birds adorns the wall opposite.

"Here, Mom, I'll just move it to this wall."

I point just to our right.

“It will be much closer to you as you read.”

“No.”

My mom pats the bed next to her. I sit and she picks up my hand and places it gently in hers. She touches her fingers lightly on it. Touches, brushes thoughtfully my knuckles. Lightly, she pats again.

“No, I can see the clock, Flip; I just can’t read the time.”

At this moment, time halts. The room becomes a stage set. There is the maple ladder-back chair with the woven straw seat, a colorful Mexican blanket draped on its rungs.

I see the maple cedar chest with its memories in photo albums and small boxes of treasured letters saved. I see her bed, neat with an afghan of many colors, blue pillowcases. I see the beautiful oil of my great-grandmother on my father’s side. She sits serene, clothed in black, a curl of a white collar and pearl-white pendant, just one gray hair loosed and fallen across her forehead.

I see Mom and the Russian olive beyond. Here is the room, the set, where there now appears a *before* and an *after*. We sit in the immense empty space between.

In that moment, in that room, I squeeze Mom’s hand and promise to fix it all—get a digital clock, get a clock with larger numbers, get a clock with younger birds.

Mom pats me to relax. And I do. I sit next to her and hold her hand. We hold each other in our hands. We sit in peace, quiet peace. The Russian olive, a year older now, brushes the window screen with bright green spring leaves. A cricket sings through the grass outside.

And we hear, at that moment, the call of a cactus wren somewhere in the distance.





# Jay-Money

*by Casey Manuel*



It had been a whole month since my cousin got out of jail and still no call, no text, no nothing. I know I hadn't written him while he did his bid but I sent plenty of money, magazines, and books. I've known my cousin Herbert, better known as J. R or Jay, because he was a junior, but all the hustlers call him Jay-Money. All my life but I never could tell what was really going on with him. I couldn't tell what was really going on with him because it was hard to pinpoint exactly who he was as he mimicked many ghetto legends very well. His favorite being Jay Z. He is a man of many faces. Faces he uses to hide the one he cannot face in the mirror.

Growing up on the streets of Gary, Indiana, during the '90s, you had to be hard or you wouldn't survive out there. For years, Gary had the highest black population and had come to be known over the most part of the decade as the murder capital of the United States. Eventually he came to my house one cool February morning and we picked up where we left off, bonded like brothers. But then, once again, he was gone like the wind, on to bigger and better things, I guess.

I had just moved back to Katy, Texas. I left years ago to grow up honestly. Moving has never been a problem for me. After moving to Texas as a child, my mother would fly us back to Gary every summer to spend time with our grandparents, aunts, uncles, and many cousins. And we would always travel alone on the plane. As a child I still remember a spiritual book given to me by my mother detailing how scientists placed cheese in various locations in a maze to see which mice would be willing to leave the normal feeding spot, the comfort zone, which was a decreasing food supply, for bigger supplies of food located in the maze. Though their senses alerted them of bigger and better cheese somewhere else, many stayed, ate until the food ran out, and stayed in the same spots waiting for more. The book went on to tie in how Jesus Christ even had to leave his hometown to fulfill his message. Katy was definitely my comfort zone; I spent all of my high school years there and many after. After meeting the woman I would marry and have kids with, fate it would seem brought us back to my old stomping ground, and we purchased a house in the neighborhood I dreamed of living in as an adolescent. I tried not to let it bother me how Jay would occasionally come around to tell me of his newfound life, saying things like, "Man, I told myself I don't need all that bullshit no more, fuck them clothes, shoes, drugs, I don't need to hustle ... my freedom is priceless." He popped his collar as he began to itemize his clothes.

“These collared, button-up shirts, some nice slacks or Dockers, I’m rocking these Vans and Sketchers now ... This my new wardrobe, like Mark Zuckerberg. You can’t even tell them white boys worth millions, nigga, ‘cause they ain’t spending they money on all this shit niggas hustle for. They riding around in Hondas lookin’ like five-year-olds dressed in kids’ shoes and shit. They not buying expensive clothes and jury and fancy cars. But they ain’t ghetto rich either. They got real money and that’s what I’m about now.”

It didn’t take long for my cousin Jay to find me again. Blah, blah, blah ... he was talking the same shit, different pile. I really didn’t want to waste my time and money on another business venture with him. Slow money has never been his thing. And as much as he hustles, he’s always falling off. I knew it was just a matter of time before he gave up. But he did what he does best. He convinced me.

“I need you to find us a house, kinfolk. I been thinking about this for months, waiting to come home,” he said, and handed me a brochure. “All I need is ninety days, kinfolk. I’ll get this money from the school and I’m set.”

He had done research, made contacts, and even had a mentor who owned multiple retirement homes. She had too many patients on her waiting list and was ready to give us some of them. The only problem was I needed to find a house for my family and I was running out of time.

“You seen the movie *Wolf of Wall Street*? Naw? That’s where I got the name concept for the home ... a lot of constants is what’s worked for other corporations. Anyway, I almost fucked myself off when I went downtown to find what all I needed to get going. I’m glad I didn’t file nothing though. The lady I told you about, lil’ bitch that wanna fuck with me, that’s going to give me their patients for the retirement home ... she gave me the game. As long as you have less than four residents, you don’t even have to register. That way the city government won’t be all in our shit with the visits and site checks and whatnot. We’ll just keep opening new houses every time we reach five residents. Hell, I’ll live in that bitch, set up an office then we put up bunk beds in the room so that’s about a four bedroom we’re looking at. Hire a nurse to give ‘em they medicine. You got the food,” he said and sat back, his arms opened wide.

“We winning, five patients \$2–3,000 a month. That’ll take care of the rent. So what’s up?” Jay said and looked at me, confident.

“Sure, I’m in,” I said. He sold me. But I wasn’t convinced he was serious. “I thought you were bringing the business plan?” I asked. I never saw this “business plan.”

My current situation at the time was trying to recover from an L. I had just took a loss trying to get into real estate because the lease on the house we were at was going on the market and we were not interested in buying, even after doing most home repairs on the house for the two years we were in it. However, it turned out my business associates were two cons from the Big Apple and had been pulling this housing scheme all down the East Coast. With that situation still lingering and another baby on the way, everything I had was going into a roof to put over my family’s head. And when I didn’t come up with the house for us to start the retirement home ... poof ... Jay was gone.

Eventually my family and I found a house. It was not what we wanted but I won't complain. And eventually Jay started to come around again. But only after he started back smoking. I was holding some bows for a good friend trying to set up a grow house in Cali. It wasn't that gas, but anything could get Jay high after a two-year hiatus in jail. We would smoke and strategize for hours, dreaming of better days. He was still set on getting that house and having a legit business.

"Man, KD, I need ninety days," he said. "I'm going back to school. I'll use that money to get that house."

Jay is a short, skinny guy with an obvious Napoleon complex but I never noticed. I was an athlete, yeah, but I learned on the court and on the field you measure a man's heart, not his height. And Jay's personality was always larger than life. When he first moved to Texas in 1996 all my friends called him Tupac and later Ja Rule, you know, before 50 murdered his career. Jay had been on the "da" block selling rocks since he was twelve years old in Gary, Indiana. When he got down here to Texas back in the summer of 1996 and started slangin' again, that's when I started calling him Jay-Money.

Everyone thinks Jay hates the name Jay-Money. The truth of the matter is that he loves the attention. He never takes pictures, downplays the materialistic things he spends the majority of his money on, and has passed his way of thinking along with a list of other stereotypical hood habits to his nine children with six different mothers. The first is still his wife, but he lives with baby mama number four (that I know of).

My mom didn't want that for me. She got us out of the projects in Gary, Indiana, a long time ago. I didn't forget who I was or nothing, but I was well taken care of, spoiled rotten by my grandmother on my dad's side. I was her first grandchild. My dad was never in the picture, so Grandma felt the need to fill that role; she got me everything I wanted. She would tell me it was out of guilt of her son not being there for us and I would take advantage of it. I was always used to having things. I gained an appreciation for things my friends and some of my family never had. Not everyone had it so good, especially in predominately black cities like Gary. When me and Jay first met, one summer when I was visiting Indiana, we bonded instantly. Of course we remembered playing with each other during our annual family reunions, but we had many similarities and interests as adolescents. He loved the things I had; I loved his style, charisma, and hustle. We always made a great team. His weaknesses were my strengths and vice versa. His style was impeccable. If he had \$5 in his pocket, he still looked like a million bucks. And to this day, he still works a budget better than any financial planner I've talked to or hired. I was relieved when he had a plan to get his own house without my help. I didn't know how to tell him I was stretched thin between the house, my business, a new baby, and getting back to school myself. But I was happy for him. I knew he was laying the act on thick because he wanted me to invest and if I could have, I would have. He seemed so genuine and I think he really wanted to do it the right way ... at first.

It wasn't long before after Jay got out that he started showing up to my house with Big Boi. I met Big Boi back in high school when my mom got her first house in Katy. Big Boi was a dark, chubby guy with a messed-up grill. He was funny

looking but hilarious. He kept us rolling all day. He was one of Jay-Money's cronies when he started hustling in Katy back in '96. I didn't run the streets much back then. I was still playing ball and had dreams of playing for a D-1 school; my high school junior varsity coach had planted that seed in my head before getting me on the varsity squad two years before my classmates and friends, after only playing B-team the previous two seasons. However, in the years that followed I would spend way more time on the streets with Jay than I did in a gym perfecting my craft. I even left Mayde Creek and switched to Langham Creek and didn't even play ball my senior year. My dad played ball at Indiana University and even won a NCAA Championship with Bob Knight and Isaiah Thomas. But he never taught me shit about ballin'. He would just periodically show up to my grandmother's house to play me and criticize every aspect of my game. That's where my fierceness came from. My hatred of him. I was determined to be a better baller than my dad. So I started working on my game. However, at my first basketball tryout at Hoffman Middle School in Acres Homes, Houston, Texas, I didn't make my seventh-grade team.

We lived in some apartments in Houston around 1992 before we moved to the 'burbs. In sixth grade, an older kid named Trey moved to our complex in Acres Homes, a black community on Houston's north side. Acres Homes was better known as the "44" after the metro bus route that went through the neighborhood. Trey was from Houston but he reminded me of the grimy street guys from Gary. He was a good kid. Like me, he loved girls. We were both sexually active and I loved hanging with him because he was older and knew a lot of girls. He had an older sister named Sharee and her boyfriend, D. J., introduced us to crime. D. J. was way older and honestly had no business hanging out with a seventh-grader and a freshman. He would always buy us alcohol. He worked for his uncle, and me and Trey were soon part of his crew. He convinced us to rob houses in the good neighborhoods for his uncle, who would pay us pennies and then go pawn it and make some real money. I was in it for the lifestyle. In Gary, you could get killed walking to school but Texas wasn't nearly as tough as Gary. I wasn't afraid of the streets anymore. And for the first time in my life girls were throwing themselves at me. With no male role model in my life, I started looking up to D. J. and his uncle. I wanted to be hood rich. It wasn't until we robbed my friend Robert's house that my conscience wouldn't let me do it anymore.

I met Robert through Trey. There were both freshmen. Dante and Roland were also friends with Trey and stayed across the street from Robert. We would walk through a huge golf course to Dante and Roland's house every day after school and play video games—Jordan vs. Bird, Bulls vs. Lakers, anything sports. We would also mess around with all the girls on his block. Everyone gained mad respect for me when the girl next door invited me over; she was also a freshman and the only girl none of them had been with. After our daily shenanigans, we would then go across the street to Robert's house to play basketball in his driveway. He had a pool but, besides him, I was the only one who could swim, so we never went in the backyard. Robert was white. He was my second real white friend. Brad was my first in sixth grade when we lived with my uncle in San Antonio. Robert was very athletic but goofy looking and he had a mouth full of metal. We had a lot in common. At a young age, I realized that there wasn't a

big difference between whites and blacks. I had a lot more in common with Brad and Robert than with my cousin Jay because we were in the same social class or environment. We had things. Robert's family was a two-parent household, like Brad's. Their parents were very giving, like my mom; we weren't always holding our hand out like some of my younger male cousins I grew up with most of my friends from the apartments that Trey never brought with us. It took him almost a year, but when Trey told D. J. about Robert, we robbed Robert's house. I knew then the streets were not to be trusted. Soon after we moved to the suburbs. What a relief. I started the first part of my life as a Catholic school kid who was spoiled rotten and, despite my roots, my welcome in the ghetto had worn out. By eighth grade I still hadn't got my game together and only made the B-team after basketball tryouts, despite being the only one who could dunk. I was starting a new chapter in my life, growing up in the suburbs of Katy, and all my new friends had grown up in the 'burbs. I kind of looked at them as sellouts because they acted so white but it was better than the shit I lived around in the "44," so I made the best of it. They all turned out to be a great bunch of guys, many of whom I still associate with today.

My sophomore year of high school, I was the only one who made the varsity basketball team, despite playing on the freshman B-team. I was becoming one of the many big dogs on campus and still the only one in the clique who wasn't a virgin, which gave me hella cred. One of my boys, Tali, originally from Brooklyn, had an older brother, Cefa, who was one of the best—if not the best—safeties in the Katy school district; an older sister, Shida, a junior and the best player on the girls' basketball team; and her twin brother, Shidi, who quite honestly gave no fucks. This gave us access to all the places to be in Houston, Katy, and any town around since our freshman year. All the hot clubs, house parties, keggers, you name it, we were there. My boy D. G. from South Acres in Houston's South Park got his first car and started selling weed that same year and we started to find our own spots without the others; we did a lot of ho-strolling. I didn't think it could get any better than this.

Jay didn't have it so easy: life was tough on the streets of Gary, especially in 1996. They were killin' niggas like hotcakes! Around that time, Gary was known as the murder capital of the United States. The fact that Jay was a well-known hustler up there is what made him stiff nigga in my eyes. Wasn't nothing soft about him. He was only fifteen, but he could go to any hood 'n he was folks, a gangster disciple, but he got love from all the Vice Lords and Renegades in the city as well. It's what made him tough.

So when I heard his voice that summer morning, I was shocked. Once I got interested in girls, my days of going to Gary for the summer were long gone. I had invested too much time during the school year building friendships with all the girls I wanted to slay. Summertime was like being a kid in a candy store for me. Gary was like being a kid going door to door with overpriced chocolate bars, whereas Texas was like Willy Wonka's chocolate factory. Girls came in all sizes, shapes, colors, and flavors. No way I was leaving Candyland to go dodge bullets in G. I.

I was awakened by the ringing of my cell phone. It was going off for the fifth

time in a row, so I figured it must be important. Everything still looked blurry from a night out on the town. I had no idea who I talked into staying the night with me; her breasts were nice but her long dark hair covered her face. I had no doubts about the voice coming through my phone, though.

“What’s up, nigga?” the voice said.

“Jay?” I asked, confused. He was supposed to be in Indiana.

“Yeah,” he said.

“Why you callin’ me from Bruiser’s phone?” I asked.

“Cause I’m in Texas, nigga!” he said, excited.

I hung up, threw on some clothes, gave a quick two fingers and a “Bye, Felicia!” to the girl with the nice tits, and sped over to my aunt’s house to see him.

When I walked in, my uncle Daniel was cutting around lumps that covered Jay’s head. Blood was still stuck to Jay’s face and all over his clothes. He was sitting on my uncle’s bar stool in the kitchen as my uncle maneuvered around the knots on Jay’s head. My grin quickly vanished and I couldn’t figure out for the life of me why Jay had a big Kool-Aid smile on his face. His smile was the only thing keeping my tears back.

After some crafty cutting around the bruises, Jay and I went outside to talk alone. I couldn’t focus on his words at first; I was too busy looking at the dried blood that had run from the top of his head, down his face, onto his shirt and shorts. Yet he was walking with a smile on his face and the hot Texas sun on his back as if he were taking a stroll on the beach.

I had all kinds of things going through my head, yet he was moseying along, flicking the BIC lighter to light his Newport. He had a look on his face like it was good to be alive, but my blood was beginning to boil as I examined the countless knots on his head and the dried blood stream.

“What the fuck, Jay,” I said. “What happened?”

He giggled, exhaled, and said, “You remember my sister’s boyfriend, Enoch? He tried to kill me.”

Enoch was a Vicelord. My cousin was folks, and they had just moved to the East Side of Gary. There weren’t many folks on the East Side. Jay eventually worked for Enoch, he ran the Vice Lords on 13th street, but Jay was making everybody’s pockets smaller so ....

Jay said it was the rocks that woke him as his head repeatedly bounced up and down, slamming against the ground. He couldn’t open his eyes because, after he had been pistol whipped, the blood had dried over his lids. He could feel himself being dragged further into the woods to the shallow grave Enoch had dug for him the night before. He knew what was going to happen—and then he heard something. The faint sound of cars, no traffic. He felt a cool breeze and knew he was near a road. He jumped up and bolted blindly for the sounds. He never heard the footsteps behind him and couldn’t see the traffic in front of him. He wasn’t going to stop running, he told himself. Run.

The car Jay found slammed on the brakes as it grazed him and slung him to the ground. He jumped up and felt for the voice.

“Young man, are you OK?” the voice questioned.

“He’s trying to kill me. Get me out of here,” Jay begged.

“Hold on, young man,” the voice said.

“He’s trying to kill me. I can’t see,” Jay repeated.

The old man Jay found was a fire chief. He turned on the sirens and sped away.

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Jay stayed in Texas after the beating. For the next few years, Jay, my cousin ReRe, and I were thicker than a Snickers bar. ReRe had come to Houston a few years after my family did, with his mother and two sisters. My aunt, like my mom, was moving to Texas to get away from an abusive, alcoholic, drug-abusing husband. Gary had many of those types of men, like that or like my father, who was all of those things as well as a deadbeat dad. We were still living in the ghetto when my aunt first moved to Houston, but it was a lot better than Gary. And about a year after they arrived, my mom had progressed enough for us to move to Katy. The three of us weren’t too far apart in age, so we grew up like brothers in Gary before my family moved to Texas. I was closer to ReRe, but Jay always was closer to me than ReRe. Me and ReRe were inseparable for as long as I could remember. Every summer I went back to Indiana he either stayed at Grannie’s house with me or we spent the night at his house. His dad was a hot mess, but he looked out for us. When his family moved to Texas we picked up right where we left off. For the most part I taught them how different the dress code was down here, where to hang, that you don’t have to constantly look over your shoulder when you’re out, how conversations and picking up girls were totally different, and Jay taught us the streets. I’m talking some real school-of-hard-knocks-type shit. Most hustlers in Houston weren’t on his level, let alone these wannabe thugs in the suburbs. Jay was all about the cash. He married the first chick with benefits he met and had kids in no time; his firstborn was with his sidepiece, and a couple years later, he had one and then another with his wife. ReRe was more the muscle, but also the crash dummy. The type who likes to wear his feelings on his sleeve, the unambitious type who would rather collect the scraps off your table than go out and get it for himself. Ironically, he was probably the smallest out of all of us but he made up for it in heart. I still remember the day he walked into a circle of South Latin Kings talking mad shit and had ’em all backing down. He was crazy.

They ran the streets tough; Jay didn’t bother with school for too long and ReRe soon followed. Anybody I had a problem with before was showing me mad respect now. And with my connections in the streets my popularity among my peers skyrocketed. Most people thought I was selling drugs, carrying guns, and heavily involved in the dealings of Jay and his associates. They would approach me for all types of things—and he had or could get it all. Jay and ReRe started calling me Kat Daddy; it was supposed to be funny, but it caught on quick and added another layer of mystery to the persona I was creating. I was never in it for the money. I wasn’t prepared to take the risk to attain the level of success I wanted; I was in it

for the lifestyle. Both of my parents graduated with business degrees from Indiana University in the '70s. That's what I knew and owning a conglomeration was my childhood dream. The streets were fun. Everyone in the crew was doing things every ghetto youth idolizes, buying Jordans, rims, pitbulls—but I was applying what I had learned and observed from some of my childhood friends in middle- to upper-middle-class neighborhoods and two-parent households. I wanted to build a foundation for my future family and leave something behind for my future kids. Some people in the crew took notice, as did others around the city. We started networking, organizing, and treating our street businesses like a real business—and all the guys I'd been competing with since I got here, now I had their respect, fear, whatever you want to call it. Everybody wanted to get close to Jay; I was always a pretty popular guy on the West Side, but pretty soon I was known all over Houston, Katy, Galveston—most of which knew of me, but they didn't know me. People were even starting to hear my name back in G. I., the type of street cred I got for being Jay's cousin had me addicted to the lifestyle. The next year I tried to finish my last year of school, but I would've rather hung with Jay as he gave his clique a crash course on hustling and street life. He had a profitable operation going and what made him so big was that he was making a lot of people money, but even back then I never felt like I was a part of the big picture. However, I stayed in school. I saw things differently, both on the streets and in the classroom. It wasn't until I began to mimic ReRe and Jay's pattern of being in and out of jail that I saw how different I really was compared to street people and people in jail. The streets truly are the survival of the fittest. Empathy and mercy are seen as weakness and will get you tested. It's a deadlier version of the same rat race in the corporate world. My first time in a jail cell was with Jay in a stolen truck, Jay's preferred method of transportation. Him, me, and my high school friend D. G. from South Park. I was amused at how scared he was, being that South Park is ghetto as hell, but it was his first time, too. I wasn't worried. We were just being held pending their investigation, and I knew Jay would take the case. Back then I didn't know how he really got down. Good thing I'm family!

Punk time, he'd call it. "I can do that on my dickhead!" he'd say.

I did not like jail. I wasn't scared or anything, it just seemed like such a waste of life.

I wanted more than to die on the streets or spend the rest of my life in jail in a failed attempt to be a drug kingpin. Being a Libra, I've always sought balance in my life, and while I loved the street life, I loved the idea of creating my own path and finding a loving type of wife, like the good wife described in Proverbs 31, a wife of noble character who brings "good, not harm, all the days of her life." And I wanted to be the kind of father mine was not and provide a nurturing environment for intelligent, strong children.

Many years later I had everything I wanted. The problem was that I still wasn't on the straight and narrow. While I had everything I wanted, a beautiful wife and children and a career, I still stayed in the streets thinking that would be my come up. My wife, Chiquera, would constantly try to open my eyes to the true nature of my cousin Jay. She would point out how his every action was for his benefit. The abuse he was putting his children and baby mamas through. How he never

seemed to have the same respect for me that I had for him and how he would use me over and over again, always leaving me angry and frustrated after being screwed over or disrespected. From back when I first started lending him my car, inviting him into my home when he had nowhere to go, and investing money into his hustles. Yet I never reaped the benefit of his blessings as he did mine.

She never tried to get me to stop hanging with Jay or ReRe. She felt it was my decision, but she never bit her tongue because my protection was her responsibility. My mom, on the other hand, always let me know I shouldn't be spending so much time with Jay or ReRe, which is why I thought it was so weird that ReRe's mother had actually asked Jay to take ReRe under his wing, help him be a better hustler. Even weirder was the fact that she was married to a preacher and viewed as the spiritual aunt in the family. Eventually I recognized perhaps his could not be shared with me because of where they came from.

But the motivation behind me getting into Jay's latest scheme, despite what I believed about him as a businessman, really had nothing to do with Jay at all. As I stated earlier, I had just been nickel-and-dimed by a hustler named J. P. from the East Coast. He and his wife were living in the Houston area pulling housing schemes. They would pose as investors of a program that helped families with bad credit get homes in unconventional ways. The program was legit, however, after a lot of research, we found he never comes through on homes. After he reaches his magic number or the police catch up with him, they leave town and set up shop in another. And while he didn't get us for everything, it was enough to set us back. You know how the saying goes, don't lie to a liar, steal from a thief, or hustle a hustler ... it made me angry. I felt like I had let my family down. I couldn't believe I got *got!*

So when Jay called again I knew it wasn't legit and his whole act was full of shit, but I needed it. I had just been conned, fucked over. It made me feel weak. After five years of playing family guy, two-story houses, HOAs, PTAs, housemaids, and lawn services, I had gone soft. I became the mark. I needed to feel whole again, so when Jay asked to bring his sidepiece to the house, I let him, knowing he would be with the type of girl my wife would hate, a hood rat.

"Hell yeah, come through," I said.

Jay's attitude, dress, and lingo were back in my house. My nigga—Jay-Money. And the side chick was thick. She talked the talk good enough, but I'm a street veteran and could tell she was just trying to sound hood; you can't say nothing slick to a can of oil. She wasn't pretty at all, but she was light-skinned. Hood niggas always go for the yellow bones, no matter how ugly they are. Jay-Money wouldn't tell me exactly what was going on but I knew it was big. He had been making a couple of racks playing middleman for a while; he was back in the game. It was an easy job. He would basically hook up out-of-town buyers with his guys in Houston. He discussed a price with his guy, added on a fee, gave that price to the buyer, and brought the buyer to the connect. The buyer pays the connect, Jay sends buyer away, then returns to the connect for his cut—but of course without the buyer's knowledge. Usually the buyer would pay the middleman but in one particular situation a certain buyer buying major weight was not. A costly mistake that made him fair game.

The buyer, Bucky, never looked out for him. Time and time again. Knowing my cousin just got home from jail, it seemed off to me that Bucky would have offered him any money. Especially since he was getting dope for so cheap. In addition to hooking Bucky up with the connect, Jay would also accommodate him as far as a hotel, car rental, security, the whole nine. But Jay never said anything. He just waited for his opportunity.

It wasn't long before Bucky wanted to bring in a friend. They had plans of expanding and wanted to get a lot of weight and cut down the back-and-forth. At last, opportunity finally came for Jay-Money. And he couldn't hold it in anymore. Frustrated that Bucky wasn't looking out for him, he decided to take matters into his own hands. We call it the remix. When buyers test dope, they usually taste test the top. There's rarely any sophistication like you see in movies. Just an eye test, a taste, maybe you bring a "tester" with you. So Jay and I talked to the connect, who happened to be a client of mine, D. C., a big-time hustler in Houston. He and another legend named Mack came up selling fake bricks in big cities outside of Texas, Atlanta, Detroit, and California. They already had a lot of dope money before they started that scam. As a bonus, they would bring girls with them to bust drank prescriptions from the pharmacies in the same cities they schemed in.

Drank was banned in pharmacies in Texas in the early 2000s, after Houston-based rappers' glorification in "screw" music led to the drug being severely abused. Really though, the shit hit the fan when the white kids' parents found out that their children were doing it. Then it was banned, which was good for the streets because the value tripled. The whole ordeal was almost identical to the banning of Quaaludes in the '80s in terms of the price increase. Me and D. C. had similar interests. Although he was a hustler, he had several successful businesses, many of which my catering company provided meals for. With him in the mix, I knew him and Jay-Money were up to something; Jay had found a better connect and hadn't used him in a while. He used the long-handled spoon for a while, that is, he was very vague and would only tell me small insignificant details, but about a week before the deal was going down, he finally told me his plan. He was going to sell this "out-of-town" client he'd been dealing with some dummy bricks. But that's the only thing he told me, besides that six figures was the payout.

It didn't take long for me to realize that I was getting played. So I pulled from the 48 laws of power—48th Street, Gary, Indiana—to see what was really going on. That's when I realized how spread Jay truly was. He gave me just enough to get me in without telling me shit. But I got friends in low places and family that's even lower. I went to visit Jay's sister. Yeah, the same sister who almost got him killed. We've always been very close. Largely because I never let her get too close to hurt me. I used the long-handled spoon with her. I needed info, so I grabbed her a gram of some fish scale—crack cocaine—to get her going. She told me everything, or as much as she knew. Our mystery guy was Bucky, my cousin's cousin on his dad's side.

Bucky had been coming to town buying bricks. Jay-Money was the middleman. He had a couple different plugs; both were A-1. Bucky was very pleased. The way it's played is, Jay-Money discusses a price with the plug or brick-nigga. He was one of the youngest members of the notorious Southwest Gorillas on Houston's

South West side. These guys were the definition of hood rich: expensive cars, clothes, jewelry, guns, and drugs. Anything you needed. Until the feds sent them all away. D. C. was one of them who missed the cut. He was very low-key, not as flashy as the rest. Jay's plan was to hit Buddy with dummy bricks.

That's when you bust down a brick of cocaine, mix some with mixing agent, recompress the brick, then compress a layer of coca on top of the brick, wrap it up, and voila! If it didn't work, Jay would be in the hole for \$30,000, the cost of the dummies. Buddy and his people were bringing \$110,000. Jay had left me out completely.

The deal went down as usual, with a little motivation from my cousin, but after that I didn't hear from Jay much. He was always changing his number; the only way I could get to him was to call his sister. When we did talk, he was always rushing off the phone. But he did ball out of control. Robin Jeans, Mercedes 5500, even a new house. He had everything we had been dreaming about since we were kids back in G. I., making fake crack out of a block of frozen white cheddar and Anbesol—and I had to watch it from a distance.

It worked and Jay-Money did what he does best. He balled out. The definition of hood rich. Before he got his house he spent \$10,000 on his wardrobe and \$30,000 on a Mercedes. We hung out a few times, nothing out of the ordinary. I never went on any of the shopping sprees, the car lot with a bag full of case, making it rain at the many strip clubs. After his biggest come up, I felt very disrespected that I wasn't a part of the celebration, festivities, and nights out. He called up his friends and crash dummies and side chicks when he was buying cars off the showroom floor, straight cash, invested money into businesses—hell, he even started a business with some of those clowns while not once having a conversation about starting one of the many business ideas we had been planning since he got to Texas in 1996. Many of those ideas, those plays Jay-Money and I dreamed up, were what taught me how to write a business plan, how to become a legit businessman. But he never shared them with me. Our relationship sounded like a Jay Z album. The first with R. Kelly.

"It ain't personal," they sang. "You never know who your true friends until you ah umm/ both got a little bit of money/And if you got money and he ain't got no paper/he still needs you so you'll never know how he really feel about you/when ya'll both got some paper, you'll see."

I stayed in college and kept at the daily grind with my wife, Chiquera. We had worked hard at getting our savings up and had bought a house on that south side of Katy, the nice side. Despite going through three different schools in three years, our twins continued at the top of their class. We also had another addition to the family.

Eventually, Jay came back around to the house. It took a while for it to come out, but I found out Buddy somehow got Jay for \$30,000 and it hurt him more than he was letting on. But Jay seemed to be in a better place. He wanted me to invest with him again. He wanted more than ever to be legit but, as always, I wondered if he had the patience for that life. I knew he didn't; it's just not in him.

He's spent a lifetime piecing together the ultimate personality of a real nigga

from the streets. He's a role model like rappers, drug dealers, and others. His father is the infamous Frank Matthews, the "Black Caesar," a major drug dealer in the '60s and '70s from the East Coast. Jay never told me who his father was, only that he hated his name because he was named after his father.

I never realized until much later, but I had actually met Jay's father at the height of my father's addiction. At the time, my dad was actually looking like he was going to get his life together. He had got a job at his old Catholic school, Holy Angels, as the head basketball coach. I was in the equipment room messing around when I saw my father and a guy in the back and he was giving my father a duffel bag. They didn't see me and after they left I went downstairs to the court where my dad was starting practice. Then the same guy had come into the gym and for some reason he and my dad acted like they hadn't seen each other in a long time. He stopped practice, called me over, and introduced everybody to "Randy." I can only imagine what was in that bag to this day, as it was the last day he would coach at Holy Angels before disappearing again. My dad, or Pepi, was vice president of the fraternity and captain of the basketball team at a D-1 state university in Indiana. He was on top of the world back in the late '70s, but his rise was nowhere near the rise of cocaine, which would eventually take him down. At that time, it was slowly appearing in all the high-end circles and in my town of Gary. Everything got there through Frank. Gary was a black Mecca then, and Pepi was its prince. But not until I saw a documentary about Frank Matthews years later, who we all knew as Randy, did I make the connection. I never told Jay I had seen it. Not even when he decided to tell me about his father after the big \$30,000 loss. His revelation of his father was his attempt to stop chasing his father's ghost ... for a while.

But he's Jay-Money. The following months we didn't see each other much. Although Jay-Money had shown me his true colors, I still could not cut him out of my life. Even worse, I didn't know why, or what the root of this infatuation and idolization was. I had so much. I gave my life to a power greater than myself. I was blessed with my wife and children. They helped change my thinking and gave me a true respect for the things that had real value, like relationships, health, joy, eternal salvation—rather than things I cannot take with me when I die. I started to evolve into a better man.

And then early one morning I got a phone call from a number I didn't recognize.

"Kinfolk, I need to come over, but not in your car," Jay said.

"What?"

"Yeah, Bucky in town. He at the hotel I always used to put him in."

"OK," I replied. Not my problem.

"Kinfolk ... I got a play!"

I hung up the phone and grabbed my keys. We headed to the hotel and scouted it out, identified Bucky's car as he told me and Smoke, his rapping prospect aka crash dummy, what he was going to do and how much money we were going to get.

"After I get my 30 G's, we can split everything down the middle."

I, however, couldn't stop thinking about how he was doing this to our cousin and how he even got to this point in the first place. It was starting to become very clear to me that if given the opportunity, he wouldn't think twice about doing something like this to me. We dropped Smoke off and I knew he had been putting on an act the whole time, pretending like he didn't miss the \$30,000 Bucky had stolen back from him. He was desperate again and growing increasingly angry and frustrated. The play was to wait for Bucky to go meet his new connect and rob him in the parking lot. After serving the dummy bricks, Jay hooked him up with another connect; this one was the same connect Jay had started using instead of D. C., because the new connect had a better price, and he would eventually gain his trust and rob him. Jay was still doing business with this new connect and had to wait for the package to get in before he could rescore. It was the new connect that let him know Bucky was also in town waiting on him and that he probably would be ready Saturday. The problem was that I had planned a weekend with the family in San Antonio. However, I was assured that if something happened, I would still get my cut.

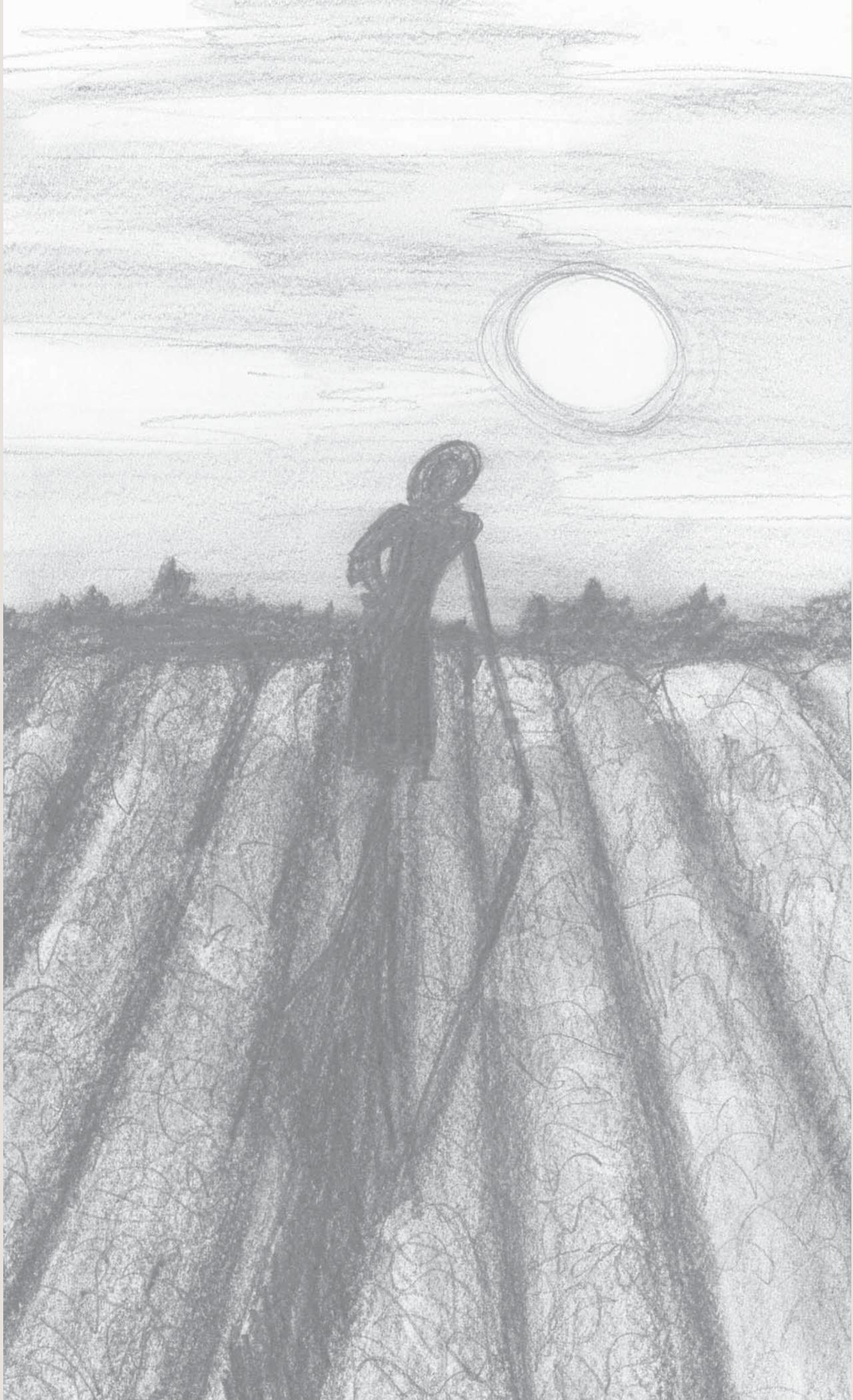
I called and called that weekend to get a status, but no answer. By Sunday, I figured he must have pulled it off and was going to screw me over again since he hadn't returned my calls or texts all weekend. As soon as we got home, I unpacked the SUV and raced over to his house. It was dark outside and all I could see as I approached the house were the red lights from the infrared cameras he had installed but, as I got closer, I could see him talking to his niece in the kitchen. I was always telling him how to close his blinds so he could see out and prevent others from seeing in, but he never caught on I guess. So when I rang the doorbell, he looked toward the window, then went to the room to look at the camera. I started waving and he came out, but only to pace back and forth in the kitchen. So I started knocking. Again he went to the room where he waited for a couple minutes before coming back to the kitchen. I was getting angry. I went to the car and called him, no answer; I texted, nothing. I sat in the car for about five minutes and went back to the door dazed and confused. I started pounding the door continuously as I stared into the camera for what seemed like an hour, and finally the door flew open.

"God damn, K. D., you just gonna make me answer my door? God damn, man, I seen ya text and calls ... I got something going on!"

He continued his verbal attack but I couldn't hear a word. My blood was boiling and my head was about to explode. At that moment I had my greatest moment of clarity in our entire relationship. I didn't care about the money anymore; it became all about respect. All my life I have been blessed and done my best to share those blessings with others. I've always wanted the best for my cousin; I always believed in him and have done everything I can to help him succeed. Yet the feeling has never been mutual and him not answering my calls, texts, and now his door pretty much showed me what he really thought of me. I wanted so badly to punch him in the mouth, knowing his little frail ass would have slid back to the kitchen, to shut him the fuck up but, instead, I realized this is who he is. A small, angry man. I didn't need to hit him; I needed to pray for him and, most importantly, I needed to let him go. I decided right then and there that I couldn't invest any more time

into this one-sided relationship, especially when I have everything I need back home. So, I didn't say anything, I let him get it all out. And in that split second he stopped to reach and slam the door I thought to myself, "Goodbye, Herbert."





# Searching for Sarah Powell

by Mary Pfeiffer



A ten-year-old boy hung back, taking in the scene: a saddled mare standing where her rider had dropped the reins, a mule hitched to a farm wagon, an unfamiliar buggy. He knew them all, the neighbors in the yard. They had ridden or run to help, then found there was nothing to do. Still they lingered, milling around, quietly talking.

“Winds this week sure been fierce,” they said.

“Must have got out of control.”

“And it might have caught her long skirt ....” Mumbled agreement cut off any need to finish the thoughts. They stared at the ground, hands stuffed into pockets, swirling the soft yard dirt with a toe until the silence pleaded for more talk. His father had told him to stay outside, this being no sight for young eyes. But at the words *burned hands couldn't hold scissors and tried to cut fabric away*, he skirted around the crowd, careful so as not to be noticed heading toward the house. They were talking about his great aunt Sarah, the woman who raised his orphaned father, a self-sufficient woman who couldn't be—his mind refused to form the word—dead.

At the back steps, he stopped. Around the remains of a brush fire, sooty clumps disturbed the bare ground then streaked black up the steps to the back door. He spotted his father and a neighbor in the kitchen. With them were the sheriff and coroner who had just come from Pocahontas, the county seat twenty miles away. His father's deep voice was saying that a phone call summoned him after the neighbor stopped by to check, the way folks did for those who were elderly or lived alone. Sarah Powell was both. The voice faltered, “She was my aunt, the woman who raised me.”

The neighbor took up the explanation. He recounted how he'd noted that Sarah Powell's brush heap was burned down to cold ashes. How she didn't answer his call or his knock, and the back door stood partly open but he couldn't see her in the kitchen. How he stepped to the threshold and called again, “Miss Powell,” then changed to “Mrs. Pruitt,” remembering her married name that he never got on the first try. He said he waited, not wanting to intrude on her privacy. When he finally pushed the door enough to see the length of the room, what he saw told him he

needn't have worried about disturbing her. Sarah Powell lay across the bed at the end of the living room in a sprawl of black and bloat too horrible for a person to witness alone. He ran for help.

When the men headed outside to inspect the remains of the brush fire, the boy went into the kitchen. A drawer was open and a pair of scissors lay on the floor, these also marked with black. He took in the sooty streaks trailing across the floor and onto the hooked rug beside the bed. In spite of what he'd just overheard, he expected to see his great aunt looking like she was asleep, like the man at the one funeral he'd attended. All he saw was her crocheted afghan covering a form on the bed. Not even her face showed. An end of what might have been her skirt, except that it looked scorched and crumbling, stuck out beneath one side. He started toward the front door to escape what he didn't want to see. He says he was staring down to hide the sadness climbing up his throat and that's what caused him to see the doorknob before his hand touched it—the white porcelain with rust-colored stains where her fingers had tried to grip. If the speculators were right and her burned fingers couldn't hold scissors to cut away her flaming skirt, those prints were her final desperate effort to reach help before she died alone.

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That scene, imprinted in my father's head, has replayed like a looping video for the eighty-five years since he was the boy witnessing how his great aunt died. He has told me the story dozens of times. He softens the horror of her dying with stories that go back to her girlhood in the 1800s that cover Sarah from youth to death and entertain like a good book but that show a life of dreadful circumstances. Events in Sarah Jane Powell's life differed in degrees of awfulness, but if you plotted them all on a chart, the connecting line would run mostly on the negative side. Every agreeable occurrence seemed to trigger a worse turn of events. I hear her tale retold until its memorized details crowd my mind, the climax always worth a tight throat, if not a tear or two.

Having recently set his own life story down on paper—the ages and locations of those often-told escapades of his boyhood—my dad realizes there is nothing permanently recorded of his aunt Sarah's life. He says a person deserves to be remembered when they worked harder than should have been asked of them and when their sense of duty and compassion for others cost them the happiness they were due. That chronicling task would seem to fall to him as the last person alive who knew her. But writing such sentient memories that turn mere facts into reality would require dwelling on words wrapped in feelings. His telling is quick; his spoken details flow like rote recitation without circling through his mind to get twisted in emotions. Such writing for Dad might mean having to revisit too much.

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The fourth child and first daughter of Thomas and Eliza Powell, Sarah started life with promising prospects. Her father was a non-slave-owning cotton grower who moved his family to northeastern Arkansas immediately after the passage of the Homestead Act of 1862. He bought land near Pitman's Ferry (Randolph County) at Current River and built, what was for most homesteaders, an imposing house with logs hand-planed into smooth boards for a pair of twenty-foot square

rooms joined by a dog run. Sarah was born in the main room, a combined living room and kitchen heated by the open kitchen hearth. The acreage produced successful cotton crops until Thomas left for duty in the Civil War and eventually died from injuries he nursed beyond the war. Sarah's brothers were too young to fight, but equally too young to till the fields for the family's livelihood, the task that fell to them. One by one as they reached adulthood, they went off to start their own lives, each leaving the farming to the next younger. Finally, Sarah was the only one of the household left who was able to take up the work her brothers left and make a living for the family. Her mother Eliza, afflicted with her family's genetic curse, was slowly but definitely going blind and a waif that had dropped into the Powell women's laps was too young to handle mules and plows and such.

Their once-prosperous farm was turning into a hardship. Although the property was paid off, debt-free meant little when the price of cotton had dropped by nearly 50 percent through the decades following the war's end. Sarah was alone with no stronger man around to tend the fields, to hitch up a mule and guide a plow through cotton fields, to pray away the boll weevils lest they eat the profit meant to support the household of three. While Sarah had youth on her side, she was still a woman, smaller-framed and weaker than God intended for the work of running a farm.

At an age when young girls started to wear their skirts down and their hair up and blush from the attention of young men, she had to become manager of the farm and caretaker of her mother. Sarah tied on a bonnet to shade her skin, pulled work gloves over hands more accustomed to stirring biscuits, and hitched the plow behind the family mule. Single-handedly she managed chickens, cows, a garden, and acres of cotton and sorghum. Mid-Aprils she sowed sorghum acreage with seeds saved from the previous year's crop. Early mornings through July, she hoed weeds from between plants and rows. Late September was the time to begin hand-stripping and cutting the ten-foot sorghum stalks with a machete. By October or November, she had delivered the crop to the mill to have the canes ground into the syrup that would sweeten their confections through the year, paying on the halves—the mill taking half of the produce as payment.

Responsibility was using up Sarah's marrying years.

In that rural Arkansas township, Sarah's selflessness in caring for her mother, her proficiency in household tasks, and her fitness at tackling outdoor chores surely attracted young men looking for a wife to join them in farming. Added to that was the likelihood that she stood in line to inherit her mother's land with its log house twice the size required by homesteading laws. But we know of only one suitor, a man who would become the Pitman, Arkansas, doctor as soon as he earned one of the first medical licenses from Arkansas Industrial University at Little Rock. J. B. Shemwell courted Sarah and proposed marriage. Sarah left no diary detailing sweetheart conversations or the form of his proposal, no letters bemoaning the miles separating farm from school, no peeks into the girlish dreams of betrothal in the 1880s—but what happened next was so unexpected that following generations repeated it until it was memorized family legend. At some point during the betrothal, Sarah added a necessary condition to her acceptance. Eliza's diminishing eyesight made it necessary for Sarah to bring her

widowed mother into the new home. In whatever way that message was conveyed, its reception was disastrous. Mr. Shemwell declined to take a bride with added baggage, citing lack of resources as he set up a new practice. His refusal doomed Sarah to a life as dismal as her portrait that has hung in the family home for two generations.

My dad, as a boy, must have listened to every bit of whispered gossip, memorized it, and added it to his own observations of the woman he knew. The rejecting doctor eventually brought a bride back to the small Randolph County community—to be expected, I thought—and Dad says, “built her a fine yellow board house” just down the road from Sarah’s log cabin. For the rest of her life, Sarah had to pass that house every time she went into town.

Talking of Sarah’s story moved me from mere listener to curious enough to make some cursory search efforts through directories of doctors in Arkansas. I couldn’t find the man in Dad’s stories and abandoned it as a futile task. Then I casually told the betrothal–rejection–betrayal story to a friend—was I catching Dad’s enthusiasm?—with a genealogy hobby. To my surprise, within a few days, she handed me proof, beyond the stories, of an actual Dr. Shemwell. I took smug satisfaction in noting that he didn’t marry until age thirty-three, a decade to find a replacement for Sarah.

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#### **Arkansas, County Marriages Index, 1837–1957**

Name: James B Shemwell  
Age: 33  
Residence: Little Black, Randolph, Arkansas  
Spouse’s Name: Luella Bell  
Spouse’s Age: 19  
Marriage Date: 1 Jan 1890

#### **U.S., Find A Grave Index, 1600s–Current**

Name: Dr. James Bunchanan [sic] Shemwell  
Birth Date: 5 Oct 1856  
Death Date: 23 Oct 1906  
Death Place: Arkansas, USA  
Cemetery: Mount Pleasant Cemetery,  
Randolph County, Arkansas  
Spouse: Luella Shemwell

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That census record changed “Aunt Sarah the tragic heroine” to “Sarah Powell, real victim of challenging hardships.” I began to wonder if some action might have diverted the calamities that beset her. Maybe if Sarah hadn’t been so shy—

the shyest person in the township, Dad says—instead of ducking her head into her bonnet when attention turned her way, she could have spoken up for herself. She might have urged the medical student to reconsider taking in a mother-in-law. Dependent women of that day necessarily lived with another family member. She might have appealed to the three brothers, who seem to have abandoned their responsibilities, to support their widowed mother. Instead, in her early twenties, she quietly turned from young betrothed girl to confirmed spinster. If neighbors saw her leaning on her hoe, they assumed she rested from fatigue, not heartache. If she whacked the carpets with extra vengeance on rug cleaning days, no one reported it. Plowing, planting, plowing, planting. Her life ground forward with unreasonable demands.

Decades beyond her life, her stories rolled into my earliest memories to become the lore I carried like my family name. For all of my growing-up years this great aunt Sarah, in the form of a portrait, kept track of the comings and goings at my grandparents' house. She held a position that let her overhear nightly prayers. Out of the corner of her eye, she checked who came straight into the bedroom through the carport instead of walking around to the front door. She observed my regularly cutting through that side entrance headed to my grandmother's kitchen. I hurried past her, stealing quick glances, not connecting the stern face to a real woman lauded by the two generations above me for taking in my orphaned grandfather. When I occasionally studied her staring down from her permanent position over my grandparents' bed—straight mouth below straight brows, hair pulled into the severe coil of the day—I judged her face unattractive and wondered why she didn't smile.

I couldn't reconcile the photograph on the wall with the live person of my father's stories. The woman who rescued and raised an orphaned toddler was just one more gray-toned ancestor gone before my time. The gap between the motherless tyke and the grown-up who became my grandfather was too wide a stretch. It didn't help that my grandfather never spoke of her. But maybe growing up under the influence of that exceedingly shy woman, he never learned the small talk to use in revisiting long-gone days.

The grandfather I knew was about important civic responsibilities. He was busy with the family store, with serving up a sermon should the pastor suddenly take ill, with counseling couples who thought their marriage problems "too sinful" to take to a minister. He was Mister Ennis to most in the community, Herbert only to closest friends.

After my first child was born, after I saw my stoic grandfather regularly take her on his knee and delight her with the deep bass notes of his "Froggy Went A-Courtin'," after my sister pointed out that he had neither bounced nor entertained any previous grandchild or great-grandchild, and after she declared the likely reason for his attention to this child, I recognized that, either accidentally or by subconscious coincidence, I had made my child Aunt Sarah's namesake. I don't remember consciously choosing the name because of this ancestor of mine, but her pictorial presence in my grandparents' home and dad's stories of the never-give-up-no-matter-how-hard-the-trials woman must have planted the name in my mind as one to be admired. My grandfather likely

assumed I passed the name on to my daughter to honor a heroic woman. Or he may have been reminded of games played with his aunt Sarah that we aren't privy to. I do know that my choosing that name, like my dad's witnessing her death scene, linked me forever to this woman. After Dad, I will be the last who knows the pieces about Aunt Sarah that make up the romantic tragedy within our family history. I developed a nagging curiosity to know everything about her.

In spite of repeated stories of the hardworking woman Dad knew, she remained a dark portrait like the pictures of dead presidents in my schoolbooks, her early years the facts and figures of a history lesson. She was born when Civil War fighting in Arkansas was at its most intense. The four battles over control of Pitman's Ferry, the principal crossing route between Missouri and Arkansas, were so near the Powell acreage that the toddler would have cut her teeth within hearing distance of the gunfire. If her mother lullabied her with either "Yankee Doodle

or "Dixie," she would had to have whispered the tunes because neighbors carried opposing allegiances. Both this historical war image and snapshots I found in an ancient family album, showing a tall woman in long plain skirts, standing near a fence, always alone, seemed far removed from the active woman who planted and reaped and, surely, grieved.

Finally, evidence for me that she was more than an ill-fated character came when we gathered to bury my grandfather in Mount Pleasant Cemetery outside the town of Pitman. I spotted Sarah Powell carved on a headstone. Back at home, 300 miles later, I regretted making no copy of the data. By the time we returned to that tiny cemetery for my grandmother's services, twenty-three years had passed and I had become determined to pursue Sarah's whole story, to fill in the unknown spaces. I let freezing winds eat through my Texas-thin jacket while I recorded the inscriptions on the tombstones for Sarah, for her mother Eliza, and for the first homeless child the Powell women raised, Liza Powell Ennis.

I had no idea what I could uncover beyond those dates when my subject's voice had been stilled for so many years. But I forked over the membership fee to Ancestry.com on the chance that in some birth, marriage, death or census record I might find more.

Sarah's unchanging life merited only once-a-decade census recordings. Not so for the third grave marker I found. Liza turned up in the Powell household, according to earliest records, at age four—with birth or parentage remaining a mystery so far. She grew up as a "little sister" in Sarah's shadow. Young Liza became blind Eliza's eyes, relieving Sarah's daily burden of worry about leaving her mother alone in a house where cooking was done at an open fireplace. By the time Sarah had plowed her disappointment, heartache, and possibly her bitterness under several seasons of cotton and sorghum crops, Liza had honed her domestic skills at Eliza's knee, put up her hair, worn her first long skirts, and won a marriage proposal. His name was Riley Ennis. Even grainy, near-century-old photographs can't hide his handsome good looks. Eliza's and Sarah's blessings are not recorded, but the marriage is.

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### **Arkansas, County Marriages Index, 1837–1957**

Name: Liza Powell  
Gender: Female  
Age: 15  
Residence: Little Black, Randolph, Arkansas  
Spouse's Name: J R Ennis  
Spouse's Gender: Male  
Spouse's Age: 21  
Spouse's Residence: Little Black, Randolph, Arkansas  
Marriage Date: 5 Mar 1891

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Married only eight years and with two children, Liza suddenly took ill and died. What caused her death was lost. There are no family Bibles to record a death in childbirth; 1899 wasn't a year for killing flu. She left a daughter, Leona, and my grandfather, two-year-old James Herbert. Barely a toddler, my grandfather couldn't have known what caused his mother's death unless told when he was older and my father doesn't recall ever hearing the cause. I don't wonder at that omission. The generations of my family as far back as I can trace followed a stoical *best you never mention it; put it behind you and move on philosophy*.

Family memories focus on the moving on, on what happened to the children. Riley declared himself too distraught to cope with small children. He paid a neighboring family for their care, handed Leona and James Herbert over to them, and headed for the Oklahoma territory. He did not return to be buried beside Liza among the Powells or near his children. Ancestry.com records match what I had already copied from Liza's gravestone.

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### **U.S., Find A Grave Index, 1600s–Current**

Name: Liza Powell Ennis  
Birth Date: 1875  
Death Date: 1899  
Cemetery: Mount Pleasant Cemetery  
Burial Place: Randolph County, Arkansas, USA  
Spouse: Riley Ennis  
Children: Leona Ennis  
James Herbert Ennis

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Sometime after Liza's death, word came to Sarah that the children were not being well cared for. She might have stewed several days and fought frustration,

but in the end Sarah Powell couldn't allow another to have less, live in a poorer situation, or suffer while she had the capacity to provide—even when it meant extra work. Settling her mother with food that wouldn't necessitate Eliza's going near the open hearth, Sarah hitched up a buggy and drove the nearly thirty miles to check out the rumors for herself. She returned home with Leona and James Herbert. Not unlike the circumstances that robbed her of a sharing spouse, uninvited events now put her in the business of mothering someone else's children.

Again, census records confirm the story of Sarah taking in the two orphans. The record also gives me information I wasn't looking for. At the turn of the century, Eliza is still listed as head of house in spite of her blindness and, by 1900, two of Sarah's brothers have died—but that is searching for another day, another story.

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### 1900 United States Federal Census

Household Members:

<i>Name</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Relation to Head of House</i>
Elisa A Powell	67	Head of household
Marital Status: Widowed		
Number of living children: 2		
How many children born: 6		
Sarah J Powell	37	daughter
Leona A Ennis	7	niece
Jas H Ennis	4	nephew

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When Leona neared age seven, a relative in the neighboring township approached Sarah, saying she would like to raise Leona. She suggested that with her home being somewhat affluent, she and her husband could provide for the girl in ways that Sarah would never be able to. Sarah must have compared her own log house, her linsey-woolsey skirt and her field-reddened hands to the proffered town house and bought dresses. She knew letting Leona go was the right thing—for Leona's sake.

If Mount Pleasant Church members felt that they had at last prayed their neighbor out of the misfortunes and hardships that had beset her, they stopped too soon. While the line on Sarah's life chart seemed to edge upward with seemingly positive and peaceful times, experience might have told all who knew her that it couldn't last. Folks visiting in next-door Clay County began to return with suspicious accounts of Leona's adopted family life in the Martin Waddle home. It appeared Leona was adopted, not to be a part of the family as a cousin or adopted daughter, but as a hired girl. By the time the rumors numbered enough to ring true, Leona had freed herself by marrying. Once away from the Waddles, she confirmed the rumors. Mrs. Waddle used Leona as a housemaid in her boarding house, treating her harshly. Folks said that when Sarah realized her poor

judgment had caused the child suffering, she went through a time of poor health, of pain sharp enough to make her chest tighten. No wonder Sarah became upset. Beginning as a child of seven and continuing until she married at seventeen, Leona waited on a family of four plus four boarders. The 1910 census verified those accounts.

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### 1910 United States Federal Census

Main Street, Carpenter, Clay, Arkansas

Household Members:

<i>Name</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Relation to Head of House</i>
Martin V Waddle	37	head of household
Matilda A Waddle	37	wife
Krata Waddle	10	daughter
Buren Waddle	7	son
Leona A Ennis	17	hired housemaid
Marital Status:		Single
Occupation:		Working Out
Attended School:		Yes
Can Read:		Yes
Can Write:		Yes
Rex Redwine	20	boarder
Edgar G Schmidt	20	boarder
Robt E Roggs	22	boarder
Frank Wilson	19	boarder

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Sarah was finally relieved of all caretaking burdens when her mother died. Eliza's death left her unencumbered but, at sixty-one, also alone for the first time. Leona and James Herbert had both established their own families by then. Sarah was by herself in a house far too big for one person. Thomas Powell had built it for a family of six plus whatever wayfarers might need shelter: a huge pair of squares in between an open dog run wide enough for a room; a connecting pillared front porch; mud plaster covering chinks between the logs for insulation. One side was separated into two unheated bedrooms. The other wing combined living room and kitchen with a fireplace at the kitchen end for cooking. It was all Sarah's. She could pace empty room to empty room.

Considering difficult and lonely years stretching ahead of her, she may not have noticed a widower moving into the community. Whether John Pruitt spotted the tall, slender woman walking to town, tasted one of her pies at a church supper—women in our family three generations later still are known for pie baking—or

heard of her through local gossip isn't recorded. Maybe her quiet shyness called her to his attention. Perhaps he happened to pass her on her way to the general store and offered her a ride in his automobile. Or drove her home on a rainy day. It is certain that the courtship was brief, and this time Sarah was free of responsibilities. The date was 1924; Sarah Powell was 63.

They invited Leona and James Herbert and their families to the wedding; Leona coming from the few miles away she lived, Herbert's family traveling back home from Illinois. After all, they knew of Sarah's hardships, her marrying must have seemed like a happy ending. My father describes the scene, always chuckling and mimicking Sarah's voice at the last part, "They married at Sarah's home, John and Sarah exchanging vows in front of the fireplace, the family circled behind them and Sarah wearing white flowers in her hair." Happiness, though, didn't wipe away shyness. "When the preacher said to John that he could kiss his bride, Sarah—Sarah Pruitt now—ducked her head and gasped, 'Oh, John, not in front of all these people.'"

Finally, Sarah Powell was registered in records other than censuses.

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### **Birth, Marriage, & Death - Arkansas Marriages, 1779–1992**

Marriage: D. J. Pruitt

Sarah J. Powell

Randolph County, Arkansas

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John's Model T, one of the few automobiles in the township, fascinated Sarah. She urged him to teach her to drive. On her first excursion into town, when the checker players outside the general store called to her and waved, she became excited and crashed into a gas pump. Neither pump nor car was damaged, but Sarah was so humiliated she vowed never to drive again. She loved the automobile, though, and John drove her everywhere—for the three more years that he lived. Afterward, the car sat to the side of the house until Sarah declared that automobiles weren't made for chickens to roost in. She returned to the driver's seat. Dad describes her driving style as center-of-the-road. If oncoming traffic didn't move aside, Sarah zigzagged wildly, narrowly missing bridge rails and ditches. Townspeople took to calling her Wild Sarah—out of her hearing. At Mount Pleasant, they left a wide spot far from trees and buggies for her to park, an accommodation necessary for fewer years than anyone could have imagined.

My dad's story of the brush fire catching Sarah's skirt on fire is vivid enough not to want further evidence. Nor did I expect to find any. While such a tragedy would have been a news item, all past issues of the *Pocahontas Star Herald*, the local paper, were destroyed in a fire. However, someone posted an old copy online where it surfaced in my queries.

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### **Pocahontas Star Herald, May 1, 1930**

[A large number of people] attended the funeral of Mrs. Sarah Powell Pruitt, at

Pitman, Saturday. Mrs. Pruitt was over seventy years of age and lived alone. She was found dead in bed by a neighbor and upon investigation it was found that she had been severely burned several days before and had probably passed away 2 or 3 days before being found, no one having seen her since last Monday.

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After the shock wore off and they had observed a proper period of respect, people said they weren't surprised at what happened to Sarah Jane Powell. Saddened. But not surprised. Some said it wasn't fair, all of the hardships God had imposed on her. Others likened her to Proverbs' Virtuous Woman: rising early, working willingly, reaching out to others. Certainly her own works praised her. The last bit of her story I found in margin notes of a family album: *Saturday shoppers heard church bells ringing that morning [of the funeral] and stopped right where they were on the sidewalk. They knew the bells were for that plucky woman everyone had heard of who was all hard luck.*





# Mourning a Mother Still Here

by Melissa Stoeltje



My mother is lost. The woman who has spent the better part of her adult life driving around the bustling metropolis of her birth, a place she knows as well as the ancient spice rack perched on her kitchen counter, is hopelessly, irretrievably lost.

Idling on some side street, far from the place she's supposed to be, she has called my sister Martha with panic in her voice, asking what she should do. Martha, in turn, calls me.

"What should I tell her?" Martha says, her own voice tremulous. "Should I tell her to just go home?"

We're all scheduled to converge within minutes at my niece's high school, where she will appear in a rendition of *James and the Giant Peach*. It's the kind of event my mother, at eighty-eight, still relishes. She's a doting grandmother of six, effusive with praise, liberal with hugs. All of her grandkids are brilliant, amazing, talented in the extreme.

But right now she's lost, caught in a fog of disorientation, a miasma that has marooned her more and more as of late. It got dark, my mother explained to Martha. There was traffic. She became confused. Really, she doesn't know how it happened.

"Just go home," my sister tells her. "We will try again tomorrow night, at the command performance. I'll pick you up."

And so *The Night Mom Got Lost* is added to the growing drumbeat of worry—the bills my mother forgot to pay, the conversations she repeats, the bracelet she misplaced, a loss that turned into an ugly accusation against her housekeeper, who ended up quitting. I have enough friends with older parents to know that this is how it happens—the natural parental slide into senescence, a journey that my two sisters and I, as grown children, are beholden to shepherd and accommodate. Nothing out of order here. Parents grow old. Parents lose their faculties—sometimes dramatically, with police sirens or highway billboard alerts attached. Sometimes, like with my mother, in a slyer, trickier drip-drip-drip accretion of deficits, the kind of loss that can be explained away by fatigue or distraction or circumstances. Until the day comes when it can't.

Parents, there's no getting around it, eventually die.

Except. Except I never imagined any of this would happen to my own mother. It sounds deluded, I know, the rankest form of denial. But you don't know Virginia—the woman who has always stood as an outsized figure in my life, in ways both good and bad.

Travel with me back to my childhood, circa age six: I climb up onto a stool next to my mother's easel in her bedroom. It's where she works most nights, doing freelance art for local department stores in order to supplement the meager child support my father sends. A temperamental artist who sometimes liked to punch my mother in the face, he'd told the judge he needed most of his money for art supplies. (Jack leaves the family before I reach kindergarten, never to return.) The easel is slanted and has tiny chicken feet marks of brown, gray, and black paint skittering around its margins. Hunched over the easel, her frame illuminated by the light of a single overhead lamp, Virginia dips the end of a long, slim brush into the small glass jar of India ink. The ink smells chemical, delicious. With deft motions, she begins laying down strokes, one by one across the expanse of white onion-skin paper. Dip, dip, stroke, stroke. As if by magic, they begin to appear: High-heeled shoes, sleek handbags, elegant women in boxy suits and pillbox hats. Marvels of shade and edge, these objects materialize purely under the power of my mother's brush, lacking form and shape until she calls them into existence. My mother is a sorceress.

At some point in my early childhood, I must have loved her in a clean, unclouded way, the pure adoration little kids hold for their parents. A birthday card I make for her, childish script in Crayola-bright colors that she stows away in her keepsake box, reads, "I love you more than Honey West." It refers to the blond, gun-toting female star of a popular '60s detective show that glimmers in our living room once a week, a brave woman with whom I am besotted. On the card, I draw a picture of my mother, adding a small mole above her upper lip, Honey's signature beauty mark.

But then I grow older, and my feelings for my mother become more complicated. When I was ten, she abandoned her nighttime easel to venture into the world of full-time work, taking on the role of advertising manager at a department store. This wasn't as high-toned as it sounds: She worked long hours for a slave-driving male boss, earning a modest salary. Money was a constant source of tension in our home. Many days, my mother trudged up our driveway, the sun having already set, exhaustion radiating off her like a poisonous fog, her mouth set in a grim line. She was a smart, talented woman but woefully deficient in the inner coping skills required to raise three children on her own, an arduous task even with the cheap help of live-in housekeepers from Mexico. She sat down to dinner after a hard day at the office, twisted tight and ready to pounce at the slightest provocation, such as a glass of spilled iced tea or dropped fork.

"Would you watch it!" she yelled.

One of my earliest memories is my mother's angry face scowling down at me because I've gotten into her purse and torn something up. Tampons, I think.

Until she remarries when I'm seventeen, my mother manages the whole show

on her own, somehow providing my sisters and me with all the accouterments of a middle-class upbringing: Piano lessons and ballet lessons and horseback riding lessons and swimming lessons and summer trips to the beach and new clothes every fall and *Seventeen* magazine and special cakes on our birthdays and orthodontia and church camp and now-I-lay-me-down-to-sleep and toys under the tree at Christmas and cherry Cokes at the diner after church. We live in the same house for the entirety of my childhood, with regular bedtimes and Sunday pancakes and Saturday morning cartoons and lime sherbet at Dairy Queen after visits to our grandmother's house and Carol Burnett and *Hawaii Five-O* and Johnny Carson and the soft drone of the dishwasher carrying me off to sleep every night. Throughout it all, Virginia, an attractive divorcee, kept her libido stored in a jar, pickled in amber, shoved to the back of a high shelf. There would be no string of boyfriends, no serial stepfathers, no awkward silences with sheepish men in our morning kitchen. Besides work and church, my two sisters and I comprised the whole of my mother's universe. Only one time that I can recall did she use this devotion as a weapon. She and I stand in what used to be called the maid's room but was now the ironing room, since we're all older and the days of the maids are over. I'm a sullen teenager. We've been fighting—we fight a lot—and we're trying to find the best way to wound one another. I say something puckish, I can't remember what. My mother goes in for the kill, saying my sisters and I are lucky because she gave up the glamorous life and comported herself as a nun all these years, just for us.

"I could have been a real go-go gal, a party girl," she says, her face leering, her pelvis swiveling in a stripper's move. And I'm shocked into silence, not just because of the frank sexual nature of her moves but because she's confirmed something I've suspected all along: I'm a burden to her, an inconvenience. I take up too much space.

My mother's anger was the all-encompassing canopy I lived under. It could come crashing down on my head when I made her mad or it could float high above, seemingly innocuous and distant but never completely gone, always fluttering, a vague threat. I can't remember how old I am when I realize I have two mothers: The one who loves me when I don't upset her and the one who hates me when I do. I'm riding my banana bike in the ditch by our house—up the embankment I go, then down, up, then down—when this epiphany strikes, one of those moments children can sometimes experience, when a truth about the adult world suddenly comes into view but you can't grasp the whole of it, so you just assume it's something you're doing wrong.

As all parents are to their children, my mother, with her cutting words, her viper looks, her boiling exasperation, was the yard stick by which I measured myself, a barometer that told me who I was and what I was worth. It's her voice that I internalized, the infallible message perhaps not explicitly stated but potent all the same, drilled down into my very DNA: You're not good enough. You fall short.

She brought out the frayed leather belt for the most serious infractions, like talking back. There was a weird, almost frat house-ritual quality to it: You marched behind her to the pink-tiled bathroom, because there was no getting out of it. Then you pulled down your pants, your underwear. You leaned over the bathtub rim,

which was cold against your belly, your bare ass pointed sky-ward. Then came the lashings. I don't remember them as being horrifically painful. No need for bandages or peroxide. It was more the humiliation of it. Which was the point, I guess.

My mother told us she had to be strict, being both mother and father.

But there are enough warm memories of my mother to gum up the purity of my resentment. Hot chicken soup when I am ill, a cool wash cloth on my forehead. A comforting hug after a bad dream. Tiny capsule memories filigreed with tenderness: I am in second, maybe third grade. My mother's Chevrolet station wagon idles at the curb during pick-up time after school at Wilshire Elementary. As I walk toward the car, I see her leaning forward in the driver's seat, watching me, a smile like warm honey on her face. I stand up taller, hold my books a little higher, add a jaunty spring in my step. As I slide into the front seat she says: I am so proud of you. You look so grown up. I don't know why this memory stands out. Was it because such instances of approval were rare? I know there were other times, usually based around appearance: You're so cute. Look at you in that new outfit, you're adorable.

More than my two sisters, I set her off, it seemed, especially as I ventured into adolescence. We shared the same taut nature, my mother and I, two high-strung race horses, two puzzle pieces that were so much alike but could never click together. When I was older, she told me that my father Jack proclaimed me his "favorite" the day they brought me home from that hospital, owing to the fact I looked just like him, even as an infant. I've often wondered: What was it like, mothering the child whose face so closely resembled that of the man she'd come to detest?

As I grew older, I paid my mother back in spades for what I saw as her cruelty to me, by way of a teenhood speckled with booze and drugs and general acting-out. Every whipping, every verbal lashing came back to her tit-for-tat—school suspensions, curfew breaking, running away—although at the time I wasn't conscious of the psychic forces fueling my rebellion.

And then came the second half of my mother's life, from her fifties through her early eighties, when she transformed into a tsunami-strength force of nature in the wider world, a woman to be contended with. After that disastrous first marriage to a violent man, in the midst of a second, doomed one to an alcoholic scientist, she came into her own, embracing feminism in the full-throttle way only someone who had been told to be quiet and coy all her life could do. She'd been the dutiful eldest daughter in her own family, the obedient one who followed all the rules, colored within the lines, quit college for a time to care for her diabetic father. But when she married my stepfather, and was finally relieved of having to financially carry a household, all that changed. She quit her detested job at the department store. The plan was for her to get another job, but no offers came her way. One night she and my stepfather were discussing the women's movement. Though a hopeless binge drinker, he was a progressive man, something of a feminist. (It would be great if people were either all bad or all good; life would be so much less complicated.) He asked her where she landed philosophically on the continuum, from the hairy-legged radical feminists all the way up to ultra-conservative Phyllis Schlafly. My

mother replied she was somewhere in the middle. This conversation sparked what would be the consuming mission of the second half of her life: Becoming a women's advocate—a "Middle Woman"—in the still-patriarchal backwaters of San Antonio.

Like other women of her generation who came late to the female liberation party, this taste of freedom was heady for my mother, intoxicating. Virginia ran with it and never looked back. But far more than her sisters-in-arms, my mother's transformation happened on the public stage. She took all that pent up anger, all those swallowed words, and swung into action, founding women's groups where before there were none—a woman's chamber of commerce, a nonprofit focused on creating female leaders. She helped launch college scholarships for single working mothers. She went around town committing random acts of feminist advocacy, leaping tall buildings in a single bound.

Our provincial backwater of a city didn't know what hit it.

From podiums and panel tables, my mother proclaimed her story of being afraid and doing it anyway. To a growing cadre of adoring female followers she banged forth the message: If you can dream it, you can do it—a Norman Vincent Peale in high heels. At the height of her advocacy career, a national TV morning news show did a segment on her mission, following her around town with a camera crew. Virginia even told her story to a rapt audience at the United Nations Conference on Women in Beijing, China, in the '90s. So consequential was her work that her papers were put in an archive at the University of Texas at San Antonio.

Over the years the approval poured in—the plaques, the plaudits, the cavalcade of praise. My mother soaked up every minute of it, every camera flash, every magazine profile. Soon the bookshelf in her study was crowded with glossy photo-ops showing her shaking hands with an assortment of "she-roes"—Barbara Jordan, Texas Gov. Ann Richards and, of course, Hillary.

In all the pictures, my mother is dressed in what I came to call her full peacock mode—bright colors, jumbo jewelry, her long black hair caught up in a bun, her dramatic eyebrows painted in an arch, her forehead edged with fringe—she calls them her "Mamie Eisenhower" bangs. One image is forever emblazoned in my memory: My mother standing on a stage, a bouquet of roses in her arms and a fake-diamond tiara on her head.

Although it took me years to see it, my mother's desire for public affirmation, her seemingly unquenchable quest for outside validation, was a funhouse mirror reflection of my own need, my own craving for recognition, awards, applause. Was it just a coincidence that I became a writer, a newspaper reporter forever in the chase of the next byline, the next high-profile, talked-about story?

Virginia eventually wrote and self-published her memoirs—timid church mouse becomes fearless powerhouse—which she sold at women's events, carting the books around in the trunk of her car. Gov. Richards, for whom my mother campaigned ceaselessly, penned the foreword.

"(Virginia's) life is the story of how a woman becomes politically active,"

Richards wrote. “To every woman who reads this book, follow her advice: Take charge of your own life. The miracles that happen will be the ones you bring about yourself.”

As my mother’s metamorphosis unfolded, I watched at a distance and sometimes cringed—why couldn’t she take it down a notch, fade into the wallpaper from time to time? Why couldn’t she behave like other mothers? I peered from the sidelines beset by a stew of emotions—part pride, part envy, part bemusement, the ancient resentments burbling. I watched her ladle the self-esteem onto to her female disciples and inwardly griped: Where was mine growing up? Where was my tireless cheerleader?

Over the years, as her public persona grew brighter and more widespread, my sisters and I were beholden to attend the various galas and award ceremonies where my mother was feted for all her hard work in making life better for women. At these events, I’d stand by the canapé table, glass of wine in hand and watch my mother’s female disciples cluster around her adoringly. Sometimes one would detach and approach me, eyes glassy with the fervor of a true believer.

“Your mother is just amazing,” she says.

“Yes, she certainly is,” I say, my mouth half-filled with brie.

“I can’t imagine what it must be to have her for a mother. It must be amazing.”

“Yes, it is.”

“You’re so lucky.”

I swallow. “I am.”

I often left these events swaddled with confusion, burdened with a sense of my own pettiness: If everyone feels this way about my mother, what’s wrong with me that I don’t?

But then the years piled on and my mother softened with age, mellowed like a ripe pear or the deep-red Merlot she loves to sip. This softening coincided with my long overdue twelve-step recovery work for alcoholism, a chunk of which centers on forgiveness and exploring your own part in hurts of the past. Bit by bit, the heat drained from my vestigial anger, the roiling resentments gone smooth as a placid morning lake.

The symmetry seemed stunning, almost cosmic: My mother ceased being a target just as I was running out of arrows.

At the start of this softening, my mother and I had a conversation that, although seemingly insignificant on its surface, would wind up having a titanic effect on me. We’d had lunch together at a fancy Italian restaurant earlier in the day, to mark the one-year anniversary of my new sobriety. My Alcoholics Anonymous sponsor also was in attendance—my AA mother Cathy breaking bread with my biological mother Virginia. Cathy, a vibrant woman in her 60s, was the one who led me through the transformative experience of working the twelve steps, acting in essence as a surrogate parent who “loved me until I could love myself,” as the AA saying goes. My mother had long been a member of Al-Anon, the support group for people with alcoholic loved ones, which she joined because of my

stepfather's drinking.

Virginia called later that evening, to dish about our Italian luncheon.

"I adore Cathy!" she says. "And, you know, the work you two are doing together makes me want to get a new Al-Anon sponsor. I haven't seen my old sponsor in a long time. I want a new sponsor! And I think I'm going to start sponsoring other women too."

"That's a great idea, Mom."

"I've done it before, you know. Sponsored women. But I just had to do it over the phone, because I'm so busy."

I pause.

"Yeah, I think it's probably hard to sponsor someone over the phone," I say. I don't want to sound critical.

"Well, you two have inspired me!"

"That's great!" I pause again. "Cathy really liked you too."

We chat some more about the lunch and then, without warning, my mother swerves, takes a detour into the past.

"You know, I maybe did some crappy things to you girls when you were kids, but I did the best I could with what I had," she says.

"Yes, Mother, you did. The best you could."

"I clothed you and fed you."

"Yes, you did."

"I got you orthodontia."

"You did."

"It was just so hard sometimes, doing it all on my own."

"I know. I can't imagine what that must have been like for you."

I pause once more. Take a deep breath. My heart starts to thud, as it always does whenever I venture into the darker precincts of my childhood with my mother—something I rarely do.

"You know, Mom, when I was a kid, when I was teenager and rebelled and did all those bad things, it wasn't because I was a bad kid. I think I was just an angry kid. A scared kid."

She doesn't say "I understand" or "Yes, you weren't a bad kid." But she's not talking over me for once, the way she does whenever I bring up our history. It's almost like she's listening.

In her silence, in her lack of argumentative comeback, it's almost as if my mother is validating the idea that I wasn't a bad seed from the beginning. This exchange, small as it is, feels revolutionary.

And then the years unspool, and as my mother begins to lose her grip on short-term memory, she transforms into a veritable nurturing machine, unable to say a

critical word about anyone, the unconditionally loving parent I'd longed for from the start. Unmoored from time and the burdens of the past, my mother begins to inhabit something like an ever-present now, and in the space of that now she is unable to transmit nothing but happiness and light. And in the wonder of that new dispensation, I've been able to travel back to the pure feelings I had for her as a child, when I crawled up on a stool at night and watched as she leaned over her easel and created whole worlds out of paper and ink. This devotion has translated into action. Now that it's hard for my mother to get around with her cane, to do certain things, I've been able to step in and do some of them for her—bring her groceries, take her to her doctor's appointments. My husband Mark and I treat her to theater shows, nice meals in trendy restaurants, outings she couldn't afford or undertake on her own. These evenings bring her an almost-childlike delight and fill me with a joy I can't fully explain. I'm mothering my own mother in the way I wanted to be mothered—a Buddhist kōan that has engendered a kind of healing between us that I neither expected nor anticipated.

But the stepchild of love is worry. She's getting lost in her car—my mother, the inveterate driver—and this indicates something dramatic is happening.

There've been subtler precursors. Before, where my mother's voice, her laugh, would ring the loudest at our high-decibel family get-togethers, now she's content to sit quietly on the couch, tittering at the punchlines of others instead of delivering her own. Repeating "What did he say?" at regular intervals, not wanting to miss a beat, even though some part of her must surely know things have changed.

Are changing.

My two sisters and I huddle in the kitchen or have tense Monday-morning phone conversations from work: What should we do? Is it time to do something? But what? What if she leaves the stove on? What if she gets lost and someone hurts her? Should we take her keys? That would surely destroy her—to take away her autonomy, her cherished weekday routine of lunches and meetings, the spiderweb remnant of a once filled-to-bursting life.

There's three of us, my sisters and I—no one has to bear the sole burden of what's happening to Virginia—but already tension is creeping into some of these conversations: Whose turn is it to check on her this week? Why didn't you just buy her some more toilet paper when you saw she was out, instead of depending on her own memory to procure some? Seeing other families deal with aging parents being slowly swallowed by dementia, I know these tensions can bloom into outright warfare and I'm hoping my sisters and I can avoid this fate.

Mostly, I just want my mother to go back to being the person she was.

They say that when someone close to us dies, those things that used to irritate us most about them become endearments in the rear view mirror—the carelessly tossed tennis shoes, the unclosed kitchen cabinets—quirks rendered into treasured totems. I think I'm experiencing a premature version of that with my mother. I'm mourning a mother still here. What I wouldn't give to watch her pontificating from the podium once more, a long-nailed finger punctuating the air with some feminist point, a feeling my chagrined thirtysomething self could never have understood.

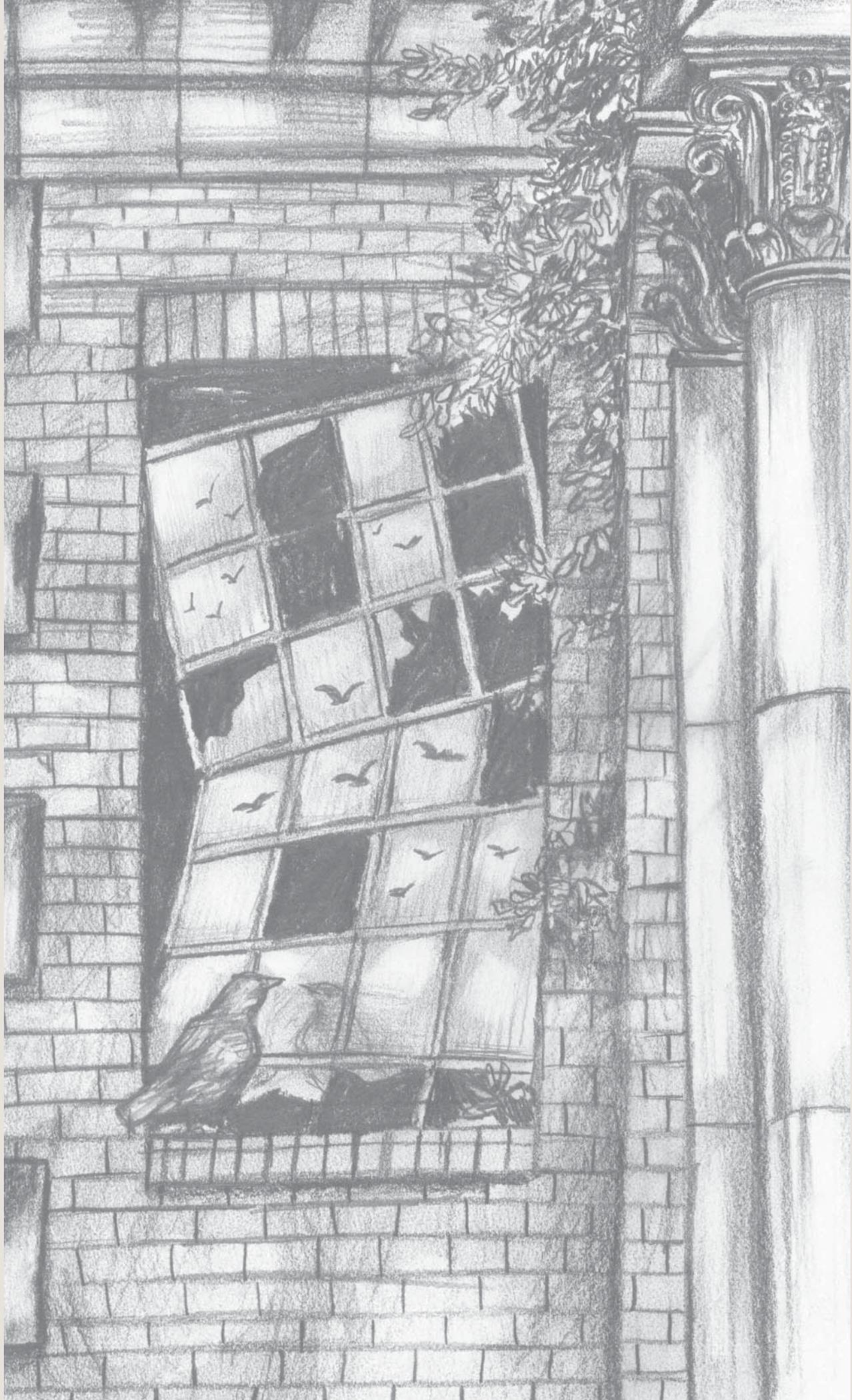
I know what all this is truly about. It's about my mother's chair sitting empty one day, just as my own chair will sit empty after that. As will my husband's, and my son's, hopefully at some exceedingly dim point in the future—a tag-team litany of loss that we as mere humans are powerless to halt.

And so we lay down contingency plans, put our fingers in the dike to forestall the coming wave. My super-organized sister now pays my mother's bills. Together, she and I recently cleared out my mother's overstocked kitchen cupboard of long-expired cans, although she refused to let us throw them away, made us store them in a cardboard box instead, gripped by some innate fear of scarcity. I talk my mother into a hearing aid, which she promptly loses—on purpose, I think. We hire a new housekeeper. We squire my mother to nighttime events. Anything to keep her in the house she loves, my childhood home. Anything to preserve what's left of that old fierceness, even if it's just a temporary amber.

When we learned that taking out the trash had become an ordeal for her—my mother stolidly making her way across her giant backyard, cane in one hand, plastic bag in the other—my husband volunteered to stop by twice a week to perform that duty. At first she said no, then reluctantly conceded.

“That just makes me feel so helpless,” my mother complained.

I know exactly what she means.



# Milledgeville, a Bird Sanctuary

by Sue Whatley



If you've ever watched the sky, you're likely to have noticed birds circling—some to track their pray, some so deeply invested in susurrations that they seem to share one mind and one breath of wind. And some birds—searching as we all do for the way home—circle an area to orientate themselves for navigation purposes.

What if I make you a promise right off? I will give you the history lesson, and the tour guide spiel, if you let me remember. I will draw you a picture and give you a reason to make the city of Milledgeville, Georgia, your destination, but you will have to be patient. In the avian way, at times my story will circle, dip, and rise on the drafts of ephemeral memories. At other times, it might trudge along the land, with its short wings and bulky body, large and lumbering, equipped with the genetic potential, but not airborne like the rest of its kind.

In these small rural towns of the South, you are the epicenter. In a Hastings, Nebraska, a Shaftsbury, Vermont, in a Coquille, Oregon—you are a point of reference from which one heads north. But here in the land of verbena and red clay, castor oil and Catawba trees, kudzu and steeples, you can cast a trot line and the sinker will arc into the air, suspending the molecules of your memories to play their histories before you incessantly. I *will* tell you of this town, but before I do, I make this claim: the more you know, the less you believe. This city of Milledgeville is not, nor has it ever been, my home. And yet, no other place has structured my life in such a way, no other siren has called me into its wellspring toward these sharp and unexpected rocks.

All roads keep leading back to this place.

In a letter to a friend, Flannery O'Connor referred to the town as "Milledgeville, Bird Sanctuary." If you drive in from the southeast, Highway 24, after taking the many short cuts (fondly called the "cutoffs"—as if it were some great urban expanse), you'll cross the river just off the bridge and see the city limit sign with Flannery's words plastered in iridescent white against Girl Scout green. **Milledgeville, Bird Sanctuary**—sneaked in when she finally became the most famous tourist attraction of the town.

Perhaps she named it so because of her love for raising peafowl. She made the *Pathe News* at the ripe old age of six when she trained a pet bantam hen to walk

backwards. Or perhaps the nickname was derived from the multitudes of bird species in the area—pristine rural land, thousands of acres of water to draw every Ducks Unlimited supporter for a thousand miles. Or perhaps she had other ideas.

You'll first cross the Oconee River, seen by the Creeks—Georgia's original natives—as two rivers, the upper part (called Etoho), stretching from the headlands in Hall County to the area where the dam now sits, five or six miles northwest of Milledgeville. The lower part, Ithlobee, runs freely below the dam, though not as freely as I remember in earlier days. The bridge you'll cross before entering the town now proffers below its drought-induced trickle of water, huge, multicolored boulders—somewhat anomalous in this red clay terrain. Nevertheless, the water travels on for 143 miles before joining the Ocmulgee to form the Altamaha. In 2002, this is the most endangered river in the United States, owing to the loss of water flow from Georgia's many reservoirs and power plants. The river drains over 5,000 square miles and houses at least two endangered species of fish. Its watershed has supplied many generations of rural farmers. In this diluvial plain, my life washes up on shore.

The shore of the lake.

The watershed of the university.

The beaches of the hospital, with its “No Swimming” signs.

There I lie, drowning with questions, needing a kind of identity CPR, which my very fine public Ivy education fails to afford me. It is true—though I would not have even known the questions had I not found that antebellum beacon, 30 miles from home. Highway 24 turns into Hancock Street as you enter town; look to the south and salute the Georgia Military Academy; to the right, you'll pass Sacred Heart Catholic Church and the mock front stores; circle the block and you'll find the Old Governor's Mansion; come back around and you'll see the South rise again, the Mary Vinson Library, the Old Court House on the campus square, the lawn sprawling with green grass, where the Southern girls paraded their heritage, and sometimes dresses: Georgia College and University, née Georgia College for Women, née Georgia Normal & Industrial College for Women. These are the notable areas, the proper town with its many brick pathways which disconnect from the unbricked life within—O'Connor and her improper fiction; my friend, the child model who was sexually abused by her employers; the friend of a friend who fell from the power plant tower; my family's residential lot on Lake Sinclair, which is now tied up in a property dispute; the Central State Hospital; even the drowned husband of an acquaintance, or the fruit bat which set off the radar—none of these woven into the public fabric of the city, only the private memory of my memory, my history, not *the* history. In *that* history, thankfully, there will be conferences and symposiums on O'Connor, but will there be ceremonies about the mental institution when the unmarked graves are finally named? Will there ever be enough white crosses left to mark the spot near Black Springs Church, where my father—held in place by the metal of van and car—stared out into a tobacco field, forgiving the young drug-impaired woman who hit him, even as he tried to suck in the last few breaths of his life.

I remember my last year of college, sitting in the front row of my modern fiction

class—with Dr. M—one month into the Freudian repercussions of everything literary. I remember reading Hemingway and Faulkner, Steinbeck and Stein—not a shocking list—and I remember being educated into anger that junior year, unexpressed and unremediated. I married that spring, over the break, able at last to do the almost financially feasible thing. Upon return, the class convened, and the first question was directed at me.

“Surely, you can shed some light on this subject,” the professor said, walking toward my desk.

“You mean about Hemingway?” I said, straightening in my chair.

“No, about Brett Ashley, Jake’s girlfriend.”

“She’s unhappy,” I said.

He moved closer to me, stood in front of my desk, leaned down, a foot from my face, and I pushed my back hard into my chair. He pushed in closer still, his torso lapping over my desktop, as close to me as he could get, one hand briefly on the desk to brace himself. I could smell him, the rank but faint cherry sweetness of his pipe tobacco, even the pungency of his raw silk tie. I could smell the animal appetite of his Freudian theory.

“YES,” he yelled, “but why is she unhappy? Why, Why, Why, Why?” He screamed as he thrust his pelvis forward. He didn’t wait for me to answer. “I’ll tell you why. Because she is starved for sex. Starved and promiscuous at the same time. She can’t get enough of it.” He pulled away, finished, and didn’t glance back to see if I’d looked up from my focus spot on the wall.

“She’s banging everyone she can and she still can’t be satisfied. And I thought you, a newly married woman, might be able to shed a little light on that matter.”

The class was no longer existent to me; I was so mortified that I felt I had disappeared from the room as well. “No, sir. I can’t,” I whispered in my mind.

A day or two later, several students went to the dean and reported Dr. M—as mine wasn’t an isolated incident. It would never have occurred to me to do that. But one of the girls who did was an acquaintance of mine and she invited me to go to her house on the lake and have lunch. What a beautiful home she had, living there with her mother and brother. She was iconic to me, Twiggy-like, and she mentioned that she had been a model for six or seven years. That the money had helped to buy their home.

“You shouldn’t take that crap off Dr. M—you know.” Back then and in my neck of the woods, “crap” was a bad word.

“What do you mean?” I asked, preferring not to remember or think about him. But she insisted.

“You know.”

“OK, but I couldn’t do what you did. What if he found out?”

“What if he didn’t? He’d keep on doing it.”

“But I’m not strong that way,” I said. “How did you know you could fight something like that?”

“From being raped.”

I was more shocked than I thought I could be.

“It starts with the kind of harassment he uses in class,” she said.

“But how? When?” I was turning to monosyllabic communication.

“When I was modeling; when my mom thought it was safe enough to leave me and go do errands.”

I was a married woman in my last year of college and I didn’t even know when I was being sexually harassed. I surely didn’t know how high the cost of a house on the lake could be or how they made the payments after the modeling stopped.

But onto this history I promised.

Milledgeville, commissioned by the state of Georgia to replace Louisville as the state capitol, did just that in 1804. Sherman marched through and spared the city but, despite that favor, reconstruction began to pour salt on the Southern wound. The city was destitute and, in 1868, when Governor Charles Jenkins fled the state, the acting military governor transferred political power to Atlanta. Slowly, because the state did maintain some of Milledgeville’s established facilities, the city began to stabilize.

One of those facilities left to reconstruct was the state mental hospital (*Asylum Eclectica*, Payne, Satter). [Note: All references to the Central State Hospital are composites of the three sources, two of which are no longer available for consideration.] Thirty years before, in 1837, a law had been enacted to establish a state lunatic asylum. Fifty-seven and a half acres of land were purchased from J. Thomas & R. K. Hines to erect the first buildings. It had been completed in October 1842 and opened for patients on December 15, 1842. The first patient was identified as “Tilman B., brought from Macon, tied to a wagon.” He died six months later. Known originally as the State Lunatic, Idiot and Epileptic Asylum, the hospital later became the State Asylum for the Insane, then the Georgia State Sanitarium, the Milledgeville State Hospital and, finally, Central State Hospital. CSH has a long and illustrious history whose riches I would like to reveal, but my knowledge of this institution is incomplete and now, after reading the history and looking at pictures, I cannot tell which things my memory has provided and which were confirmed or which were supplied. I grapple with the claims of some of these facts—even the common belief that Central State Hospital was the largest mental institution in the world. But I do know one thing: It was larger than most people wanted it to be.

I recently read an essay by one of my students— “One Nation Under the Influence”—in which he claimed that America’s greatest problem is the “pharmacologizing of the nation” (to use his phrase). His argument was that everyone is medicated—though legally, of course—and eventually, no one will escape the therapy. Immediately, I think of the alternative: depression, mania, sleeplessness to the point of dysfunction; delusions of angels and mobsters holding hands as they float down from their cumulus puffs to deliver a message to my brother. Rooms with pads and bars; then later straps and a series of 27 electrotherapy interventions. The image of the Central State Hospital,

Milledgeville, Georgia, seems only a slightly less progressive version of our Prozac nation. I think about how many years the hospital was merely a residential holding tank established in acts of mercy but, with the resident count rising, particularly after the Civil War, the many veterans of Mind Wars stood no chance of home rehabilitation, for there was no home to which they might return.

Your curiosity about this place may lead you, as it did me, to the Mary Vincent Memorial Library. *The Mary Vinson*, wife of Representative Carl Vinson, who served in the House from 1914 to 1965, one of the longest records of service in the state—26 consecutive terms. You may find yourself in the records vault and the census of the hospital's first year. Three pages of the 1850 census list 42 patients, many from Georgia, but a few from elsewhere—as far away as Ireland. In some cases, the patient's occupation is listed—laborer, farmer, sailor, stonemason, teacher, shoemaker, merchant, lawyer, clerk. One young woman is listed as “epileptic, Levina Green, restored.” Perhaps the wife of the doctor?

The first name on the list is Thomas Green, the superintendent and founder—the census includes all who live on the grounds. Green is one of 15 names that does not contain a diagnosis, the others listed as attendants, two matrons, two stewards, and another doctor. One of the residents is listed as “attorney.” I looked back at his name, thinking maybe he was staff as well, but no, he is listed as insane and his name is John Bird. He was the first of two John Birds listed, he, 68, the second, 42—both from Georgia. Father and son? In addition to the Birds, with an “i,” there are also three Fowlers from Georgia and one William Gaddis—whose genealogy might be worth tracing. Most are listed as insane; eight are listed as epileptic and 10 are listed as “idiotic.” I stare at the labels, amazed at how strange the word “insane” is, as if it is misspelled, or foreign, like a word from another language of whose phonemes I am not familiar.

Most of the patients have normal-sounding names—Lucinda Carr, Patrick Hurley, John Davis and William Crow—and most range in age from 19 to 60, though there are two in their mid to late 60s. A 17-year-old; a young man of 15; little Lucinda Carr, only 10; and Samuel Edmunds, without a label, 3 months old and listed perhaps underneath his mother, Caroline Edmunds, 45, insane. By the time you reach the 1860 census, the names become initials and their marital status becomes of greater importance than their origins. The stigma of mental illness and need for privacy is clearly a deepening concern for Dr. Green, according to the census taker, who indicates that the doctor “refuse[d] to give more than the initial letters of the names of the patients.” Perhaps, despite O'Connor's witty claim, we in the South do not put our insane on the front porch swing. After a few years, there are more attendants—several children on the premises, including another infant and several young children, all belonging to the attendants. And the sanitarium is integrated, even before the war.

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I once traveled back to Georgia with my new husband and I drove him through what was left of the active hospital. He had asked me about the place, having seen it referenced in O'Connor's letters. Men were hanging out the windows, hooting, yelling, one man's voice distinct—“Throw me a rope.” They hadn't torn all the buildings down, at least not when we were there in 2003. Everything was

newly painted white and the remaining open buildings housed only the criminally insane. Back when I visited weekly, the buildings were color-coded and only one was white then: White (Walker) Hall, the building which represented the path to the outside. Rehab. For my brother.

When I was in college, there was the running joke. *Did they send you to Milledgeville? Yes—for four years. Are you a looney bird or a cuckoo? When did they let you out? Released in '78, or '82, whatever the diploma read.* Hard to laugh at the underbelly, though, when you've been there, and traveling the same streets on which a right will take you to a university, a left to the mental hospital.

Equally historic and in need of reconstruction, the governor's mansion should be on your list. The governor's mansion—just as the state hospital—didn't sit idle for long. In 1889, the Georgia Normal and Industrial College was chartered and, in 1891, the college began holding classes both in the mansion and in Penitentiary Square, where Sherman had held the confederate prisoners. In 1917, it became a four-year degree granting institution and, in 1922, Georgia College for Women. The name has changed back and forth and the college has become not only coed but “Georgia's Public Liberal Arts University.” Until recently, the university funded the restoration of the governor's mansion and the top floor reciprocally housed the president of the university. One history leads to another.

I toured the mansion recently and was surprised to see the “fainting” couch and the kissing couch gone. Those two pieces seemed so emblematic—a time when furniture was built for fainting! And the kissing couch, an S-shaped seat on which its occupants faced opposite walls, but whose lips and shoulders might touch to heighten the engineered restriction of passion. Those pieces told me more about Victorians than my history books. Yet they were replaced, I'm sure, by some well-meaning curator whose new choice of settees was George W. Crawford's wedding gift to his wife or the bedroom furniture of Culver Kidd's kids.

All flights lead away, circle and return here. Look just over the shrubbery and we might sneak into the Mary Vinson Library back door, her front door standing sentinel-like across the street from campus. As children, my brother and I sat in the historical documents room, pled into service for my father's passion—genealogy—perusing death records or land grants, copying names that had no meaning for us, but periodically we were rewarded when my father's face lit up. “What?” he might say. Or “I knew it!” We could sense when the genealogical lecture was working its way toward us. So we copied at an even faster pace. If we finished the copying that he wanted—before his eyes lit up and his head began to spin—we sometimes escaped.

“Can I go read now?”

He'd nod, and Laura Ingalls Wilder or Nancy Drew were payment for a job well done. It was chancy, but for a girl whose home housed only five books of fiction and a *Golden Book of Knowledge* set, the times when I could lose myself in those shelves were delicious. At home, I hid from my mother, ferreted out places in closets and read my school library books with a flashlight.

There I go again, reaching into my past, when I'm supposed to be handing out history, the facts and the figures of the runway crowd, why you need to stop here

on the way to Savannah—or on the way up from Disney World, why you might detour a bit and see nearby Eatonton, home of Alice Walker and Joel Chandler Harris.

I did not live in Milledgeville; I commuted the 31 miles each way to save money. My commuting partners changed, particularly after I broke up with my boyfriend—or rather, he broke up with me, fearing I might end up, like my brother, in the less glamorous antebellum side of the city. Sometimes I rode with one close friend, often with more, one semester with a youth minister who never failed to be late picking us up in his royal blue Mustang at 25 minutes 'til nine. Thirty-one miles, four stop signs on the way and four red lights in town, and we usually made it to class on time at nine. I only rode with him one semester, my faith not being as strong as his. I went to school there for three years, graduated, and have found my way back on a regular basis ever since.

Once, when my brother was in the state hospital and ready to leave for a weekend visit, I took my mother and little sister on the commute. I left them at McDonald's and went off to class. Later, after picking up my brother from the hospital, we started back and I drove off the road on one of those winding curves. I think I fell asleep but I couldn't remember after I righted the car. I felt the bump, bump, bump; looked up and saw that the Buick LeSabre was in the ravine, a culvert under a driveway, looming at me slightly ahead. And then, the car was back on the road, slowing to a stop and my mother was screaming, "What did you think you were doing?" I finally edged the car into a red clay parking area beside an old country church and shook and cried until my brother patted my shoulder and convinced me to drive on home. It now occurs to me that I wasn't more than 10 miles from where my father and brother, years later, were in the wreck that stole my father from us. Sometimes patting is not enough.

My brother and I both eventually flew the Milledgeville coop but one of us remembers a diploma, the other a cage, the doors rusted open and clanging against the brick.

Almost every time I return to Milledgeville, I visit O'Connor's burial plot in the city cemetery; sometimes on her grave you find a coin or two, a rock, acorns, squirrels. I keep planning to take one of the buckeyes that my father gave me "for luck," but I never remember. At three o'clock on summer afternoons, the shadows of the steeples of the First Baptist and Flagg Chapel churches vie for the intersection of O'Connor's grave name. Sacred Heart, her own church, sits sullen, blocks away.

There were other birds in this sanctuary. I remember seeing them on the Georgia College campus. My best friend and I were sitting out under one of the huge live oaks lining the south side of the campus. She was not in college there; instead she was in a free licensed vocational nursing program but off for the day, so she drove over to spend the afternoon at a "real campus." No blanket—we just sat right on the ground, partially grassy, sat in our bell bottom jeans, as if we were growing straight out of the earth and ate our smushed sandwiches and talked about boys and what we wanted to buy when we finally had jobs and could do so.

We didn't talk about my brother, just a few blocks away; which building across

town he was in, what stage of the rehabilitation he was in or about the strange world on the other side of town. We just looked up, toward the huge Corinthian columns which I could by then classify thanks to art appreciation, and I didn't even think to mention the hammered copper wall hanging that he had given me on my last visit there, compliments of his art appreciation therapy. We just talked, as poor young college coeds will, of the beautiful freedom that awaited us when the forms were filed and all the boxes were checked.

I always remember the spring on campus. Azaleas surrounded every building and dogwoods and cherry trees fulfilled the expectations of an antebellum college. That snappy spring afternoon, I learned something about my friend. She had watched Hitchcock's movie *The Birds*, but she had done more than that. She had entered its metaphorical space. And when the Sanford Hall pigeons, sensing the oncoming warmth of the afternoon approaching, floated over the steps and sidewalks, dipping under some of the low hanging branches of the oaks—well, *they* too entered Hitchcock's metaphorical space.

“Oh my God,” she screamed, de-rooting herself from the grass and soil and lunging for the nearest basement door, one slightly ajar, the hinge pin having broken off. “The BIRDS, the BIRDS,” I heard her scream as she disappeared into the building.

Bird sanctuary. Our feathered friends needed one from the excesses of man's imagination.

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Famous people have trod the path I am offering up to you. I've already mentioned Joel Chandler Harris, Alice Walker—within 15 miles. And Louise Irwin, who designed the official Georgia plates, meticulously sketching out Oglethorpe's cummerbund and five o'clock shadow—but of course that name may mean nothing to you. Names whose fame now eludes them but their own families know. They can hold the picture, point you to the “once was.”

Often my travels took me through the area whenever one of the family had a serious health concern. I even remember childhood visits to the city with my grandparents. We stopped at a gas station near enough to the college to see the old courthouse that sits on the east corner of the campus. When I look back in my mind to those times, I remember how bright-eyed I was. The visits with my grandparents were short but my thinking became theirs: Milledgeville was exotic, a place to go. I stared from the back seat of their Chevy and watched the bustle of people move to and fro, caught in their legal embroilments and now, in my mind, they are the sheriffs and the Thomases in O'Connor's “The Comforts of Home” or the men in the barber shop in “The Partridge Festival.” The college students—Hulgas or Mary Graces—whose souls had been laid waste by their PhDs in nihilism.

Our towns fail us. Sometimes they take us in, loving us so much and drawing us to them, caging us as they do. We take the components of their mechanism and look for the sum. But sum totals don't exist here. The lake or the hospital or the friend who was raped sit to themselves, lights beckoning. But where these pieces of history fit into a larger, more concrete world, I cannot say. The psychology

professors whose building actually sat closest to the hospital did experiments in class: How long would students sit silently in a classroom before someone would speak to answer the posited questions? What percent of students would be motivated to learn material when prompted by the reward of ice cream? What happened when that transitory extrinsic melted before the quiz could be finished?

I sat in those classes, wondering about this writer whose final collection of short stories had posthumously won the National Book Award more than 10 years before; her manuscripts had already been donated to the college library but there were no courses in which to completely engage her work. One professor, just beginning her scholarship, taught a few stories in her introduction to literature class. The library housed O'Connor's four books of fiction, like any other, between Frank O'Connor and O. Henry, one copy of each. Not so much as a peacock feather in my course on modern fiction.

O'Connor may have written the town, but it took a long time for the town to write O'Connor. A few years ago, when I traveled back for the O'Connor conference, the banners for the conference sat discreetly, almost indiscernible in lower left windows. Oh, they weren't poster boards or crayon colors—money had been spent—but their size indicated just how much the place would give. Many of the lectures were in the museum and the rest in the one auditorium in the new liberal arts building. The intimacy was compelling and yet, I wondered why there had never been a statue or memorial done on campus. She had gone to school there, starting at age 15, editing the college yearbook and magazines, taking a degree before going on to Iowa. Each year her stature grows but then so does our forgetfulness.

I sat in political science classes or sociology class, listening to lectures about demographics and populations or how Carter didn't stand a snowball's chance in hell of winning but the world was so small then. Oh, I knew how large it really was—had lived in Labrador and half the states in the United States. I was even born on Guam. Even so, the world was only as big as I could spit and the lessons of my texts worked only as a means to an end. What was fictional—Daisy Buchanan or Quentin Compson, Emma Bovary or Candide—well, theirs were the conversations in my mind. One warm spring, a girl wore overalls and nothing else to class—no shoes, no undergarments or shirt. She was escorted from class by administrators, as campus police would have been deemed redundant.

Sometimes when I am visiting my family, we'll head to Milledgeville to go bowling; I use the trip as an excuse to dip in to the library for a precious second or two. When handling the manuscripts, I wear white gloves which remind me of little girls' Easter attire when I was a child or the Pledge commercials and the dust test. I wonder if there's dust on her drafts of "Everything that Rises" but I see them in plastic coverings and I know the answer.

I made so many trips to the Social Security office there that I should have been on the payroll. One crystal clear memory of asking the Social Security clerk a question: *So you're saying that BECAUSE my brother doesn't receive enough Social Security benefits to pay one third of the household expenses, he will be denied those benefits?* She looked at me pretending she understood and embraced the logic of her own narrative summary. When I met her gaze, unashamed of my intellect or

my indignation, she lowered her eyes. She had very long eyelashes and when she looked at me again, she said, “Close the door. I’m going to tell you what you have to do.”

I spent weeks there, working with one of the librarians in an effort to update the official bibliographic work on O’Connor. I returned many times, to pick up materials, discuss the work we were doing. Once when I dropped in to see my colleague, they told me he was out and would be for several weeks. Later, when we did catch each other, he explained that his sister had died unexpectedly; he discussed her illness—bipolar disorder—how she had been on medication but, just before her death, she had quit taking it. In a manic state, she ran out of the house, flew off the bottom step of the yard straight into the street, and was struck and killed by a truck. His response, though clearly filled with deep grief, was that somehow it felt like a relief. I sensed his shame, didn’t think there were any words that I could offer—especially seeing how I knew the shame all too well myself.

In Milledgeville, I filled prescriptions that could not be had in our hometown. Zyprexa, another wonder drug following the Clozapine miracles; another calm wave of months. Another liver enzyme report and another psychopharmacological eeny-meeny-miny-moe.

I remember the small gray sparrows on the lawn of Andalusia, O’Connor’s farmhouse after she and her mother moved from the house next to the governor’s mansion. Gold beaks pecking away at the hors d’oeuvres crumbs. I went with a high school group in the mid ’70s, and Regina, Flannery’s mother, came to the door, waving at us, regally—as her name would imply. We saw the flock of peacocks, a few of which are surviving still, I think. They were richly feathered, healthy then, though their literary leader had been dead 10 years or so. They didn’t seem to mind, so long as tours of teenyboppers paid enough to keep them plump and housed. I couldn’t see a feather anywhere on the property; it didn’t seem there had ever been one, the ground pristine and wracked and silent. Not even a footprint left of the literary train that had gathered there—Porter, Elizabeth Bishop, Robert and Sally Fitzgerald, or the second and third generations of pilgrims who had followed to catch her genius in the wind.

Even then, this town was pulling me toward it, whispering its voice in my youthful ears; even then, destinies had their immutable skeletons, though flesh and promise made it seem otherwise.

O’Connor once said that she watched her peafowl so closely that she came to the conclusion that the female—quiet, uncolored, and unadorned as it was—was really the more beautiful gender of the two. From that cue, the soft-spoken Southern feminist in me killed my inner bitch goddess.

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Recently, I sat with my brother, sipping a glass of tea sweetened with artificial sweetener. I stirred a long time, practicing my theory that if you do so, the suspended particles must melt. But that takes time and most people don’t have the patience. He asked me why I did that—stirred so long—and I explained. He thought that having the excess sweetener down at the bottom of the glass was like a reward – for having finished the drink.

“But isn’t it bitter to begin with? And too sweet at the end?” I said.

“Isn’t life?” he said.

And I wondered if there was really anything wrong with living life that way. Bearing the burden so one can have the ecstasy, however momentary. Who am I to say my suspended but moderate approach is best?

Nevertheless, he wears his label like a tattoo. Early on, the doctors labeled it manic depression and my father exhausted his only savings one summer by putting my brother in a private hospital where, unfortunately, he was more or less just quarantined. When that label didn’t work, they tried another and another. Schizophrenia. Schizo-affective disorder. More doctors. And when the money ran out, Milledgeville was the only alternative.

We were asked to come to Central State Hospital when, after a year or so on one medication, a mass began to grow in his left breast. It was strange thinking that my brother had a breast. I mean, technically, I knew that he did, but it didn’t seem possible. I remember wondering if he had tumors in both breasts, would he have to wear a bra? We drove together as a family—even my younger sister, who couldn’t have been more than 4 years old. We waited in the designated area, as we always did when we went to see him. Through one set of bars and past the second set, we could see the patients shuffling, a woman here talking to a doll; a man with his pajamas on backwards, a bedroom slipper on his hand; someone crying, animal-like, in a corner we couldn’t see. We waited longer than we ever had, believing we were going to be taken back to see him and then the time passed for the surgery and then more and more, until my father banged on the bars and made an attendant come.

*Someone will come and talk to you soon.*

Another hour or two. More banging. We didn’t know anything. We discussed going to ask some official person but the odd thing about Central State is that it wasn’t central. We didn’t know where to go, whom to ask. Lunch and dinner passed us by and my mother was threatening to walk somewhere to get my sister something to eat, who was crying ferociously by then. My father banged on the bars again. This time a different attendant came out.

*Can you tell me anything about my son?*

*Yes, sir, his surgery was fine; they removed the tumor. You’ll know in a few weeks if it was malignant.*

*Can we see him?*

*No, he’ll be sedated for several days.*

My father scooped up my sister and we made our way down the hall with its gray linoleum and down the gray concrete steps to the gray evening.

It seems so easy. Just lock ’em up. You could stop all these tragedies. Lock ’em up with Sylvia Plath and the rest of those confessionals.

Once, my brother looked up into the sky and told me: *That’s where I’m from. I can feel where I came from. If I tried hard enough, I could fly. I know that, but you don’t and some day I’ll show you.*

I wish I had said, I believe you. Perhaps there is still time. Perhaps he will believe me.

I'm giving you the bird's eye view. Circle and you will see the dam and the power plant supplying electricity for all of the Oconee River region. The brother of a friend of mine watched a man fall off, a man he had worked with on top of the tower every day for 18 months. Watched his face when he slipped from the side without enough fraction of a second to form the word "help." Floating away from the lights on the building façade and toward a darkness of earth below.

In a sense you could say we—my brother and sister and I—own the land where he fell. We jointly own a frontage lot on that lake—for a few more months, anyway. We share the taxable responsibility of the abutment where the power plant sits. Even if we did not actually own that spot of land, we join the responsibility of users of the power that the plant produced. The property's hot but our deed is crummy and now there's the embezzlement of the trust fund issue. But these are things you don't need to know, if you're just traveling there for the fun and history. These little stories that just keep eating up my travel narrative.

Circle and you will see Andalusia.

Circle and you will see Georgia College and State University.

Circle and find the Georgia Military Academy.

Circle and peer into history—the old governor's mansion.

Circle and you will see Central State Hospital.

The very first visit we made to see my brother, there was a woman who stood in the room with a small plastic doll clutched tight. I was frightened then, the way she looked at me with that half-smile of pride—"My baby," she said, and wanted us to affirm its beauty.

*Uh huh*, my father said, comforting her, as if he had known her for years.

Her dress was cotton with pink printed roses, I remember. Someone gave me a baby blanket years later with that same pattern and I took it back to the store, unable to look at those roses and the trailing vines that connected them without thinking of that woman's dress. She still scares me.

That visit, my brother came to us, looking at us, then back over his shoulder, as if he would be punished for talking to us.

"My family is coming to see me; I can't talk to ya'll very long. But I need to tell you what they did. They put me here and I need to tell someone to get me out. But you can't tell them; if they find out, they won't let me get out."

I looked at my mother. She looked as if she thought it was funny.

"It's us, Bud. It's us. We came to see you, to make sure you were doing all right."

He looked at me then, took his glasses off, looked at me again, and started crying.

"Why did you do that to me? Why Daddy?" he sobbed. "I promise I'll be good. I was just trying to tell people the world was coming to an end and it is, but no one

would believe me and it is coming to an end, but you don't believe me either. Why did you do that to me?"

He began to walk away. We didn't know whether to follow him or not. The attendant motioned for us to go behind him. But the woman with the doll moved into our path.

"My baby," she said.

We tried to go around her but she was insistent. She grabbed my father's arm. A few of the other patients began to yell at her and the attendant came over to release her grip. By then, my brother was gone down the hall. We didn't know where. My father went to look for him, but my mother informed him that she and I were going to the car.

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Six million of us a year are treated for mental illness; suicide is the third leading cause of death for 15- to 24-year-olds; and men 85 years and older have suicide rates six times higher than the national average. The Central State Hospital Cemetery project is being headed up by former patients.

*It could have been us, one of them said.*

One of the 25,000 patients buried in unmarked graves on the grounds.

You can take this tour but it must be yours. You are on the wing and currents of air can lift you from this gravitational pull toward an unsought narrative or biography. You must resist the predisposal of your story and those would-be morbid authors of your own storyboard. Milledgeville, just as your own town, is beckoning and lying while it does so. Dust off your feet; lick your finger. There are ways to use the direction of the wind.

I look in the mirror and I can see that in this lengthy trip, I am growing older. A few of my high school friends have died of age-related diseases, one recently of a heart attack. There—of course—in reality we must live. But occasionally on an early cold morning, sun rising, frost on the dry, yellow grass and the rare silence of a mechanized world, I have a fleeting and odd sensation. I am growing older but that it isn't permanent, that one day, soon, I'll wake up and the lines around my eyes and the heaviness in my veins will suddenly disappear. I'll wake up and time will have been a different sort of bedfellow, the vision I have for the future, more like what I felt in those 12- and 13-year-old moments when we waited for the bus at my grandparents'. For a few seconds, I turn and stare out the morning window, feeling the power that comes with possibility. Then the woodpecker comes out of the thicket, looking for the pecan tree I cut down and, angry that the best worms are gone, pecks his message into the pine: waaaaakeee up, waaaaakeee up.

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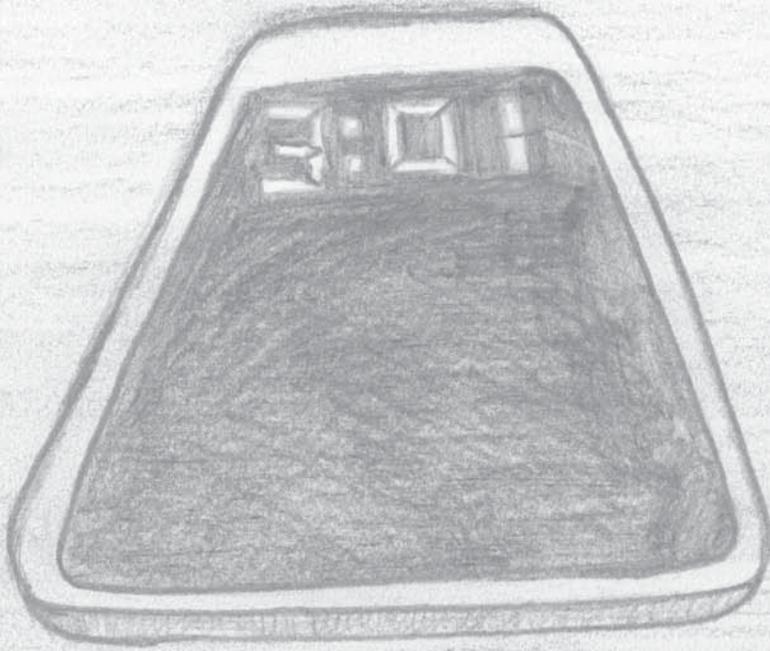
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# Tornado

by Seema Yasmin



## I.

When I came back from Africa, my house was gone.

I knew it wouldn't be there. From a safe distance, nearly 6,000 miles east of Texas, I had tracked its final moments.

When the windows exploded. When the roof ripped off. When the bricks blew away. Google Maps, the National Weather Service, and Twitter helped me piece together a timeline of the destruction as I paced up and down my hotel room on the west coast of Africa.

The Internet told the story of the tornado that destroyed my house. What it could not tell me was if the people inside my house had survived. If my husband, my mother, and my dog were alive.

## II.

My mother has had three lives.

The first: She is a six-year-old in a village called Motavaracha in northwestern India. She wears a red velvet dress and a shiny black bob cut that she pins away from her face with two golden barrettes. While her friends run in circles, kicking up whirls of red dust in their bare feet, she wears leather slippers, hand-embroidered with thread the color of saffron.

But the games must halt for a moment. My mother has an announcement to make.

"I'm moving to England," she declares, her hand in the air, commanding the children to stop playing and listen. "I have a tiara to wear on the airplane."

The children squint in the sun.

"When are you going?" a boy asks.

"The day before Eid. They eat chocolate on Eid day in England," she says, her hands on her hips. "Did you know that?"

The boy shrugs.

"OK, chase me now!" she squeals and the games resume in a cloud of dust and giggles.

My mother tells every villager who will listen to a six-year-old that she is going to England. Her father is there. He answered the call of the Empire when she promised a British passport in return for working jobs that the British refused. Her father is a bus conductor, she tells the mullah, the chaiwala, the candy man who spins shapes out of a ball of pink sugar as big as her head.

“When are you going to England?” the candy man asks, stretching the sugar into threads as fine as lace. He slips a candy necklace over her head.

“I am going to England the day before Eid,” she says.

It is chomahoo, monsoon season in Motavaracha. Pummeled by the relentless rains, the sodden earth wafts a sweet scent of cloves and eucalyptus into the air. My mother crouches in the doorway of her house clutching a glass jar, listening to the fat frogs croak their monsoon song.

She waits for the rains to let up so she can pull back the wet green grass in search of *lal gai*, the red, velvety bugs that dot the long reeds. Then she plunges into the tall grass, her tongue poking into her cheek as she scours the foliage. She plucks the bugs off the grass, dropping them into the jar until it is full. Then she runs to the end of the road to the old woman who turns bugs into medicine.

“The oil from these creatures can make a lame man walk and a limp man ... never mind,” the medicine woman cackles, wiggling her pinky finger in the air. She empties the jar into a basket lined with white muslin and presses a square, silver coin into my mother’s palm.

“I will spend this in England!” the little girl tells the medicine woman. “I am going to England before Eid!” Her fist tightly squeezing the silver coin, she runs all the way home.

Now it is the first day of Ramadhan. My mother has begged her mother to let her fast from sunrise to sunset, like a grown-up. In the midday heat, she swings from the railings at the front of the house and watches as the men walk to the mosque for noon prayers.

“Hey, Miss!” a bearded man yells. “When are you going to England?”

“The day before Eid!” she yells.

The man chuckles. “I’ll pray for you, little girl!”

Then it is the last day of Ramadan, the day before Eid. The village is buzzing with the sounds of Eid preparations. Sweet pastries are fried; silk skirts are ironed. My mother sits quietly in a sleeveless marigold dress, watching her mother drape the sofas in orange and turquoise special-event *chadors* for visitors to sit on the next day.

“When are you going to England?”

She knows a hundred visitors will ask this question tomorrow as they squish their fat behinds into the *chador* and stuff their mouths with shiny *jalebi*. But she is one step ahead of them. She is rehearsing her response.

My mother tugs at her dress and smooths her hair.

“I am going to England when God wants me to go,” she whispers.

In her second life, my mother is a teenager in Nuneaton, a gray, industrial town in the middle of England. She is seven months pregnant and working in a factory. Aged sixteen, she left high school and had an arranged marriage to a man from India. He is from the town that neighbored the village she longed to escape.

Her husband is new to England; my mother has been there almost twelve years. She tells him that she wants to go to university.

“Over my dead body,” he says.

She gets a second job when he stops working. Exhausted, her belly aching from the weight of a five-pound fetus, she collapses one evening when she arrives home from work. Her husband steps over her crumpled body to reach the telephone.

“Your daughter is on the floor,” she hears him say. “Come and pick her up.”

Four years pass through a steady stream of sedatives and string beans. She asks her husband what he wants for their daughter. She will be an obedient wife and a proficient cook, he says. She will have an arranged marriage and serve her husband.

My mother has a different plan. She reads books while she kneads the chapati dough. She slips away to evening classes after she clocks out from the factory. She collects recommendation letters. She adds two extra supplications to the five obligatory prayers she says each day.

She asks again for permission to go to university, only this time she holds an acceptance letter in her hand. Her husband again says no. So one morning, my mother slips out of the house and takes a three-hour train ride to the university. I am five years old. She takes me with her.

In her third life, a library replaces the kitchen, a desk replaces the stove. In this life, she reads in public, eats fish and chips for dinner, soaks lentils for my lunch in a kitchen next to eighteen-year-olds heating ramen noodles.

In this incarnation, she graduates from university and moves to London. She waves her daughter off to medical school then packs her bags and heads to New York City to become a graduate student and then a professor.

This avatar is a powerful woman with an apartment in Manhattan and, later, a condo in Washington, DC. She has an executive assistant, a Pilates trainer and a French tutor. She is a free woman. Free to follow her daughter to Texas.

It is this life, her third life, that nearly kills my mother.

### III.

The life of a Texas tornado begins on a balmy Bermuda beach. Hot air rises over the bodies of sunbathers and floats west over the wide Sargasso Sea. Damp and thick, it drifts across Georgia and Alabama then Mississippi and Louisiana before it settles over Dallas, a heavy fugue of steam.

Icy wind from Canada roars south to Texas and wraps the Caribbean air in a

cold embrace. The winds dance as they collide then peel into layers of hot and cold.

The layers spin like circling figure skaters in a multistory ice rink. The dance, at first graceful, grows frenzied. The skaters crash and crumple. Cold air collapses, folding around hot currents drifting upward, the two streams intertwined like angry serpents.

The serpents grow longer until their tongues taste the ground. Feeding on dirt and debris, their bellies swell so they are no longer two coils but a unified gyre, a gray umbilical cord connecting heaven and earth.

The tornado born of these serpents arrived at 6:45 p.m., the day after Christmas in Sunnyvale, a small town in eastern Dallas County.

Thirteen miles to the north, my mother was sprinkling crushed pistachios onto a chocolate cake. My husband was sitting upstairs on the deck, his T-shirt stuck to his clammy skin. The dog was swatting mosquitoes with her tail.

I was sipping club soda in the rooftop bar of a Liberian hotel. It was close to midnight and I was thinking about how to tell my companion, a freelance journalist from Australia, that I was tired and needed to sleep.

“Clair, I should go,” I say. “I have to get up early to spend the day with an Ebola survivor.” My assignment for *Scientific American* was to report on the Liberians who had fought Ebola and won.

“Go!” Clair said, taking a sip of red wine. “I’ll finish this and head home.”

I pushed back my seat and stood for a second, unsure whether to hug her goodbye. We had met a week earlier, the day I landed in Monrovia. That night, we had shared a meal of fish stew and rice on the beach. This was only our second time meeting. Too soon for a hug, I decided.

“See you before I leave next week?” I said.

“Yeah, man, for sure.”

I walked down two flights of stairs, adjusted the thermostat in my room, and slipped on pajamas. My phone buzzed on the bedside table. It was my mother texting me photos of a cake she had baked to take to a party in Highland Park.

“Do you think I should slice the cake or take it whole?” Mum said.

I flipped from the cake to Twitter where friends were sharing messages about a tornado watch near Dallas. The watch turned into a warning. TORNADO SPOTTED IN SUNNYVALE. TAKE COVER, GARLAND AND ROWLETT. The photo with the tweet showed a black and purple funnel cloud.

I took a screenshot and texted my mother and husband. “Have you guys seen this?”

“No,” they texted back. “But it’s suddenly very windy. We’re going to stay home.”

“You need to shelter-in-place,” I said. “Do you know where to hide?”

They didn’t text back.

Two minutes passed.

“Hello?”

Four minutes.

“Mum, are you in the pantry?”

“Hello? Guys?”

Five minutes.

I sat upright in bed. I got out of bed. I paced the hotel room. I pulled my hair into a ponytail. I pulled my hair loose from the ponytail. I kept calling my mother and my husband but neither answered their phones.

I shivered in the warm hotel room. A midnight blue cashmere sweater hung in the closet. Mum had insisted I pack it in case the Liberian nights were cool. It belonged to her and it still smelled of her. I buried my face in the scent of Clarins face cream.

I logged in to our Wi-Fi home camera account, the one we use to spy on the dog when we are out. The app rewound to its last recorded scenes, filmed five minutes earlier at 6:58 p.m., Dallas time.

Mum is in the kitchen arranging a cake on a plate. Her hair is freshly styled for the party, the ends flicked out. The dog is curled into the corner of the sofa, her white fur blending into the white upholstery. She is a pathetic sight, a muscular white pit bull quivering among a pile of cushions, eyes squeezed shut. My husband is crouching next to her, pressing his forehead into her cheek, his big palms stroking her back up and down.

Good, I think. They're fine. They are just not answering their phones. I sit back on my bed and watch as the dog starts to calm down, her muscles relaxing beneath my husband's hands.

Then she sits up straight. My husband lifts his head. My mother looks up from the cake. The house turns black.

#### IV.

I squeezed Clair tightly and asked her to squeeze me back.

“If you hug me hard it will stimulate my parasympathetic nervous system and lower my heart rate,” I said, justifying the embrace.

She obliged and then one-upped my request. “How about I make you a cup of tea?” she said. To a British person, putting on the kettle is like calling in the cavalry.

While she steeped the tea bag, I kept calling my mum and husband. It was 2 a.m. in Liberia and 9 p.m. in Dallas. They still weren't responding to my voicemails and text messages.

Friends in Dallas and DC had little time for my concern. They forced multiple platitudes into short texts and emails.

“Of course they haven't been hurt in the tornado,” one friend said in an email.

“They’ve probably lost power.”

Another texted: “Calm down, sweetie. What are the odds that your house would take a direct hit from a tornado?”

The odds are 1 in 4.5 million. I was more likely to lose my mother to leprosy than to have her swept away by strong winds. But I had lured her to spend six months with us in Texas. If she was dead it was because of me.

I settled into Clair’s couch with the tea in my hand but each time I closed my eyes, I imagined my mum and my husband, their dusty faces poking out from beneath a pile of rubble, the dog nowhere to be seen.

“My mum’s had such a shitty life,” I said, opening my eyes and looking at Clair. “Her dad left India under the guise of settling down in England and calling his kids over. But he was having such a fab time that he left his family in the village.”

In the end it was my great-aunt who filled out the paperwork, got passports for the family, and sent them on a rickshaw to the airport.

Clair offered no platitudes, only tea and chocolate and a fully charged iPhone. “Use it,” she said, thrusting the phone into my hands. “If your mum’s not answering, call your neighbors.”

My house sits in a loop of a dozen homes next to a lake. For our neighbors, this is their dream retirement location. For my husband and me, the four-bedroomed mansion in the suburbs was our first chance to play at being grown-ups.

With no kids and one dog, we rattled around the nearly five-thousand-square-foot lake house feeling like we had made it. We were two kids from the inner city, one raised in government housing, now living in a house straight out of a rap video.

The house was a lot like my husband: sturdy and reliable, modern but with deep roots. We had picked it in a hurry. On a trip from New York City, we scoured a few dozen Dallas homes within days, settling on the one that had closets as big as our entire Harlem apartment.

Now I pictured it as a pile of sticks and stones. If the neighbors with their middle-aged reliability weren’t answering their phones, then the whole neighborhood must be devastated, I thought.

I put Clair’s phone on the armrest and held my face in my hands. “It’s no use, no one is answering,” I said.

It was almost 3 a.m. in Liberia and 10 p.m. in Dallas. Online reports told me the tornado had touched ground three hours earlier. As I refreshed the page on news websites, updated reports said parts of my area were inaccessible to emergency responders. Trees were down; electricity was out.

Clair and I sat in silence except for the dim hum of the generator. Then her phone rang. We didn’t recognize the number. But somebody was calling from America.

V.

When I came back from Africa, home was the Holiday Inn on Harry Hines Boulevard in downtown Dallas. I dragged my suitcase down a corridor with gray walls and stopped at a gray door. I knocked and waited. The door opened and my mother stood in the doorway, my husband and the dog behind her. She took my suitcase, held my hand, and pulled me in.

# Autbor's

The Authors



## Meta G. Carstarphen

### *Can I Get a Witness?*

Meta G. Carstarphen is a Gaylord professor at the University of Oklahoma in journalism and mass communication, with research interests in media history, and race/gender/class inclusivity. She teaches in the strategic communication area of the Gaylord College. Writing has always captivated her and she has earned recognition for her research, literary and feature journalism writing. She lives across the Red River in Oklahoma with her husband, two sons, a cat and dog.  
*Twitter: @DrMCar*

#### **Story Behind the Story**

It is a surreal experience to have the thing that you study, have lectured about, have written about become a living close encounter. That was the underlying motivation for this essay. Sure, I had published an essay years ago about my own brief encounter during a police stop, but times have changed. Headline after headline detailing violent and fatal confrontations between African Americans and police moved me, as I tried to imagine how I might feel if such an incident had happened to me. And then, it almost did. Still, I have been trained to keep the personal separate from the professional in my life, so I never spoke of what happened outside of family. Colleagues George Yancy and Lupe Davidson asked me to write about the experience of being the mother of a “black” son and this experience rose up from memory and refused to leave until I had written about it. I tackled it for an academic book and, in this even more personal account, I submitted to the 2016 Mayborn conference. Some memories are meant to be shared.



## Frank L. Christlieb

### *Digging Up, Digging Deep*

Born in Huntington, W.Va., I moved to Houston with my adoptive family as a baby in 1961. After graduating from Conroe High in 1978, I studied at Texas A&M University, receiving a bachelor of arts in journalism in 1983. I spent four years as a sports writer at *The Odessa American*, then moved on in 1987 to the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*. In 13 years there, I worked as a sports, news and features copy editor, assistant metro editor, and did some sports writing and book reviews before leaving in early 2000 to become a copy editor at *The Dallas Morning News*. I've had a few bylines in *The News* and have been honored as the paper's Copy Editor of the Year twice since 2010.

#### **Story Behind the Story**

After finding my birth family in 2005, my intense desire to dig up every possible nugget about my biological parents turned into an obsession. It also turned into a starting-stopping-starting-stopping project to write a book about the journey. That still hasn't happened, but there's still time.

A piece I wrote about my birth mother Betty that turned into a front-page essay in *The Dallas Morning News* on Mother's Day 2011. Once I'd written that one, I wanted and needed to write about my birth father Bob.

The story of Bob's life and demise, and how his alcoholism tore his/my family apart, was so compelling that I knew I'd be writing a detailed piece about him before the book ever came to fruition.

Several weeks before the Mayborn deadline, I got serious, organized and focused. I told my brother Crys and sister Terry of my plans, and of my need for them to read the piece after I'd finished, and they were supportive to the end.

Asking them to relive the painful memories was something I felt guilty about, but I needed to be sure that my story was accurate and that they were comfortable with every last detail in it. It was and they were, and for that, I'm eternally grateful and dedicate this narrative about our shared father to both of them.



## Leta Cunningham

### *My Mother's Bread*

Leta Cunningham is an undergraduate student at the University of North Texas, studying English with a concentration in creative writing. At the time of publication, she will be finishing her senior year of college and preparing to pursue an MFA in creative writing, concentrating in creative nonfiction. During her collegic career, she has worked for *The American Literary Review* and *The North Texas Review*, and is the social media specialist for *American Microreviews and Interviews* and a nonfiction reader for *Hippocampus Magazine*. Leta lives in Denton with her dog Sammi, who faithfully naps at her feet anytime she writes. This is her first publication.

#### **Story Behind the Story**

I initially began writing “My Mother’s Bread” as a way to work through my experience with anorexia and my journey through recovery over the last few years. I ended up turning in an early draft for an assignment in my creative nonfiction class with Shannon Abbott at UNT and then began reworking it for months until it eventually became the base of a collection of essays I’m writing for my Honors College thesis, titled Unwell.

I hope to use my writing to help educate and spread awareness about eating disorders in a way that also provokes empathy and understanding in my readers. I also hope to show those struggling with similar illnesses that there is a way out, and that recovery is possible.



## Leeanne Hay

### *The Children Left Behind*

Leeanne Rebic Hay is a graduate of Villanova University with a BA in History and minors in Sociology and Criminal Justice. She is also a graduate of the University of Texas at El Paso, in the paralegal certificate program.

Traveling for both work and personal enrichment, she has been east of the United States as far as St. Petersburg, Russia (while it was still Leningrad), as far west as Kyoto, Japan, and also lived in France for a year.

Leeanne has been published in *The Dallas Morning News*, Cleveland Business Connects magazine, PULSE/Playbill – The Dallas Symphony Orchestra magazine and a variety of corporate and web-based publications.

#### **Story Behind the Story**

I am a full time business professional and a part-time freelance writer. Three years ago, the company I had been working for closed. While still looking for a new position and happily writing more often, I learned about the drug overdose death of a 45-year-old former employee of that company.

I went online to find his obituary to send my condolences to his family. What I read in the obit stunned me. He had been pre-deceased by his wife. Immediately, I searched for her obituary and found that she had died less than 24 hours prior to him at age 43. They had two kids under 18. I wondered what was going to happen to these children left behind.

I contacted a police department information officer that I knew was not involved in the cases to get information about how police deal with cases that involve prescription drug overdose deaths and the children of the victims that they encounter. I was also invited to an event with presentations by law enforcement targeted at raising awareness of illegal drug use in families.

After nine months of research and interviews, the story I had was one that has neither been told nor measured for the societal impact of the children who are the victims of their parents' prescription drug abuse and death.



## Philip Kelly

### *Birdsong*

I grew up on the lovely island of Oahu, in Hawaii. We had a mango tree and a papaya tree in our backyard.

I went to college on the mainland, and with jobs at that time at a premium, I joined a friend in painting an oceanfront home in Newport Beach. Then we painted the one next door. Forty years later, I am still moving down the oceanfront painting the house next door. It has been my ticket to creating beauty and traveling the world. I am also a writer. I have been published four times in *The Sun Magazine*. My piece “Painting the Summer Palace of the Queen” won a 2013 Pushcart Prize.

I am, between coats of paint, writing a book on my years as a painter. There will be patrons in it. There will be my search for a muse. There will be dogs, many dogs; pooches who stretched themselves out on walkways and lawns watching me sand and caulk, waiting for that scratch and pet.

#### **Story Behind the Story**

Oh, she was hell on wheels, Mom was!

When she was a cigarette girl in the Copley Plaza Hotel in Boston, her nickname was Slugger. It seems one day a very important man, a congressman from Vermont, touched my mother in an inappropriate spot. She flung her basket of cigarettes and cigars at the ducking, balding man and, when he came up, punched his nose. Slugger.

My mother was the first woman I knew. She was beautiful, willful and unafraid.

She loved to read. She never missed *Washington Week* and dreamed of seeing every exotic place in the world. Knowing her as that first woman made me know that every woman had beauty, curiosity and courage within her.

I had the great privilege of being with my mother as she grew old. I saw that the body may crumble, may inch towards an airy and fragile carriage, but the spirit, the great spark that lives within still shines bright, bright as the brightest star.



## Casey Manuel

### *Jay-Money*

Casey Manuel was born in Gary, Indiana. He spent his childhood and adolescent years in Houston, Texas, before moving to the Dallas/Fort Worth area. A chef by trade, Casey was reintroduced to his first love, writing, after attending a one-day “Writers on the Go” event sponsored by the University of North Texas. As a result, he began working on his personal essay “J Money” and eventually, for the first time ever, entered a writing competition. This was the first step in following his lifelong dream of being a published author.

#### **Story Behind the Story**

Growing up in a single-parent household really wasn’t so bad. My sister and I always had a roof over our head, clothes on our back, shoes on our feet and food on the table. In addition to my mother being an excellent provider, my grandparents, specifically my grandmother, went above and beyond providing more than many children receive from their own fathers. Both sides of my family equipped us with values, morals, a good work ethic and faith to succeed in life. However, it takes a man to raise one and in my father’s absence, like many young men, I turned to my environment for role models.

Many of my role models, friends and closest family were heavily involved in the streets and, as time went on, I believed that was the only success I could achieve. After spending years immersed in the street life, I met the most amazing woman who opened my eyes to my ability and potential. Still burdened by the skeletons I collected in the streets over the years, I struggled to be a better man than the one my father was to us. It was through the love, patience and kindness of my future wife, inspiration of my children, as well as my desire to be a better man that I began the transformation into the man I was made to be. It has been a long journey. People have been left behind and many others have joined. Nonetheless, this journey is far from over. This is just one story of the many that have molded me into the man I am today.



## Mary Pfeiffer

### *Searching for Sarah Powell*

Mary Pfeiffer grew up hearing stories about the generations of her family that came before her, including the double-great aunt Sarah chronicled for this competition and an aunt Lucille, who was included in an earlier *Ten Spurs* volume.

The only one of her several siblings who fell out of their hometown nest, landing in Texas four decades ago, she still returns frequently to her Missouri home where the storytelling continues. The family cat's burial, a mournful event for the then elementary-aged siblings, becomes comic relief in their account of the dog digging up his feline friend three times. No matter which sibling, spouse or parent starts the narrative, someone else recalls details to embellish the character, the setting or the happening itself, making for memorable tales in the family circle.

#### **Story Behind the Story**

When I was growing up, vacations meant driving 300 miles to Arkansas. Both of my parents were raised there and it seemed we were related to everyone across three counties. For a week every summer, my parents caught up and reminisced with their aunts and uncles while I matched those ancient (I thought) relatives to the people of the stories I'd heard. We always had one meal at Aunt Leona's — the orphan whose benefactor turned her into a child housemaid. Fluttery as a tiny bird, and hesitant to make decisions, she was such a complete opposite of my grandfather, James Herbert who was near six feet of strength and confidence — I couldn't picture them as brother and sister. Our holiday for a family of six meant economizing, and we did that by lodging in a house my father and grandfather built within sight of where Great Aunt Sarah was born and died. At that time, the log house Thomas Powell built on his homestead in the 1860s still stood, vacant and imposingly big. I collected the details of that place and of my extended family without purpose then, not knowing that they would one day become fodder for stories.



## Melissa Stoeltje

### *Mourning a Mother Still Here*

Melissa Fletcher Stoeltje is a long-time Texas newspaper reporter. In her 30-plus years in the industry, she's worked at the *San Antonio Light*, the *Houston Chronicle* and currently at the *San Antonio-Express-News*, where she covers social services. Her work has also appeared in *Texas Monthly* and the *New York Times* "Couch" column. She is currently at work on a memoir about the role of fear in addiction.

#### **Story Behind the Story**

In writing "Mourning a Mother Still Here," I wanted to capture the complicated relationship I have with my larger-than-life mother, but also show how that fraught bond was positively affected and even healed by my mother's slow slide into dementia. I also wanted to explore the idea that we don't always appreciate people we love until that person has faded or died, and how we might want them back wholesale, in all their irritating glory, but only after it's too late.



## Sue Whatley

### *Milledgeville, a Bird Sanctuary*

Sue Whatley lives in Nacogdoches, Texas, where she teaches English at Stephen F. Austin University. Many of her early years were spent traveling, compliments of the U.S. Air Force and her father's military career. As a young child, she loved books, but owned few – as weight limits for the many moves designated the “luxuries” and the “necessities.” She decided that her adult life would involve owning as many books as possible. Sue's master's degree in rhetoric/composition and creative writing, and her Ph.D. in American literature, have allowed her to spend years reading and engaging the work of many of her favorite authors, most especially early 20th century Southerners. Her dissertation focused on the cultural issue of mother blame in the work of Flannery O'Connor and that topic remains one of her fields of study.

She has also researched the Texas New London School Explosion and has been working on a novel/nonfiction treatment of that tragic event. Additionally, she writes poetry and is completing a book-length manuscript of poems that capture the rare and almost imperceptible moments of grace in the lives of “average” people. She is married with three children and three grandchildren – all of whom are perfect.

#### **Story Behind the Story**

The story behind the writing of “Milledgeville, Bird Sanctuary” is almost self-explanatory, as it is a story about stories, about the act of writing a story which refuses to be just “one:” It will not be a certain genre – not a travel narrative nor a memoir, not one focused narrative about a family struggle nor a “coming of age” expression. As the story unfolded, it also wandered and paths connected many unlikely threads – or they *seemed* to connect. The early product reminded me of old cartoon skits in which a woman puts too much detergent into the washing machine; the suds begin to overflow the lid and run down the washer onto the floor, finally even flowing beyond the capacity of the laundry room.



## Seema Yasmin

### *Tornado*

I worked as a doctor in England before moving to America when I was 29 to serve as an officer in the Epidemic Intelligence Service. I had the pleasure of investigating outbreaks of flesh-eating bacteria and paralysis among other strange plagues. Then I trained to be a journalist and was hired by *The Dallas Morning News*. At no point during my recruitment did editor Bob Mong mention that Dallas is hit by tornadoes.

#### **Story Behind the Story**

When I landed my dream job I told my aunt the good news: “I am moving to America to fight epidemics,” I said.

“You’re telling me that when people run away from a place where there is an epidemic, you will run to that place?”

“Exactly!” I cheered.

I’m still questioning my need to confront the contagions that threaten to wipe us out. But my draw to deadly diseases may have saved my life. While I was in Liberia reporting on Ebola, my house in Dallas was hit by an EF-4 tornado. My family was inside.

Had I not been in Liberia, I would have been reading a book in my favorite spot at home: a cozy sofa on the second floor mezzanine. It was the first area to be swept away by the tornado.



The Staff

Staff

**Michael J. Mooney** | *Editor*

Michael J. Mooney is the co-director of the annual Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Conference, and a member of the conference advisory board. He is the author of *The Life and Legend of Chris Kyle*, and he contributes to ESPN the Magazine, Rolling Stone, Outside, SUCCESS, Texas Monthly, and Popular Mechanics. His stories have appeared in multiple editions of *The Best American Sports Writing* and *The Best American Crime Reporting*. He lives in Dallas with his fiancée, Tara.

**Neil Foote** | *Associate Editor*

Neil Foote, co-director of the Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Conference, is currently a principal lecturer at UNT's Mayborn School of Journalism. He teaches classes in digital and social media for journalists, multimedia storytelling, business journalism, and media management. He also is a contributor to the textbook, *Race, Gender, Class, and Media: Studying Mass Communication and Multiculturalism* (Kendal Hunt Publisher, 2011). Foote has worked at The Miami Herald, The Washington Post, The Dallas Morning News, the Belo Corporation, the Tom Joyner Morning Show and ASNE. Foote is chairman of the National Kidney Foundation Serving North Texas, president of the National Black Public Relations Society, Inc., and a past board member of the National Association of Black Journalists.

**JoAnn Livingston** | *Research Assistant*

Jo Ann Livingston is a writer/journalist whose career with Texas-based newspapers included 10 years with the Waxahachie Daily Light, where she was honored as the 2010 Star Reporter for Class A newspapers by the Texas Associated Press Managing Editors. A many times award winner at the local, regional and state level, she received her Master of Journalism degree in 2014 from the Frank W. Mayborn Graduate Institute of Journalism at the University of North Texas. She is currently enrolled as a doctoral student in UNT's Interdisciplinary Information Science program and works as a research assistant for the dean of the Mayborn School of Journalism.

**Kate Green** | *Illustrator*

Kate Green is an illustrator near Austin, TX and member of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. She studied drawing and painting at the University of North Texas. This is her second year illustrating Ten Spurs.

**Jim Dale** | *Conference Manager*

Jim Dale is the Marketing Director for the Mayborn School of Journalism and also Manager of the Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Conference. Prior to joining the Mayborn, where he is completing a Master of Journalism degree, Jim worked in the advertising, public relations and communications consulting fields for a wide range of Fortune 500 clients. Jim is also a freelance writer with articles published in numerous magazines, newspapers and online publications. He is a published author.

**Jake Straka** | *Design & Production*

Jake Straka is an alumn of the Mayborn Graduate Institute of Journalism and now works full-time for the University of North Texas as a communications specialist. He splits his duties between the Mayborn School of Journalism and the Division of Institutional Equity and Diversity handling the design and production of marketing materials as well as updating/managing the content on both of their websites.







***"Sometimes the most important progress doesn't have to do with writing at all, but just with reengaging what drew you to a story in the first place."***

- Literary agent Jim Hornfischer offering a dose of consolation and inspiration to George Getschow, the Mayborn Conference's founder who has been struggling for years to give birth to "Walled Kingdom," an epic tale of plunder, chicanery and greed, with few parallels anywhere.

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