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Shades of Sunflower County

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Shades of Sunflower County

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
English

by

Louann Dorrough
B.A. University of Mississippi, 1978

May, 2014

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Preface

I was inspired to write a memoir in 1995, when I read Mary Karr's *The Liars' Club*. She remembered entire conversations from her childhood. How did she do that? I wanted to know more.

Karr offers a clue in her introduction. She writes:

Not long before my Mother died, the tile guy redoing her kitchen pried from the wall a tile with an unlikely hole in it. ... Mother squinted up, slid her glasses down her patrician-looking nose and said, very blasé, "No, that's where I shot at Larry." She wheeled to point at another wall, adding, "Over there's where I shot at your daddy." (13)

Karr's description is simple and elegant. Her verbs put me in the kitchen with her, and her quotes reveal her mother's character. She explains why she chose memoir over fiction: "... when fortune hands you such characters, why bother to make stuff up?"

I, too, am blessed with a family of characters. I open my coming-of-age memoir with a story about my father, who went to Vietnam in 1961, when I was four years old. I always believed that he was a medic in Vietnam, working with the Montagnards in Pleiku. Thirty years later, I dated *Times-Picayune* reporter Jim Varney, a Vietnam history buff who has a master's degree in journalism from Columbia University. When I returned from my father's funeral in Mississippi, I told Varney that "Daddy was a medic in Vietnam in 1961 and 1969." Varney looked at me solemnly and said: "No American in Vietnam in 1961 was a medic." His response startled me. But his facts made me question what my father did for a living.

In the first chapter, I examine how my parents' secrets have affected me. I reconstruct my father's life in Vietnam from black-and-white photographs he took in 1961, and I recall our life

in Berlin in the late 1960s. My mother's bipolar disorder, alcoholism and narcissism affected my development as a child and teenager, but she also suffered from her father's sexual abuse as a child. These secrets, held in my subconscious and freed during therapy, caused the most damage in my adult relationships.

I am writing a cautionary tale for young adults who as children may have experienced the sense of abandonment that adult secretiveness and alcoholism can impose. In subsequent chapters I evaluate how these experiences affected my decisions, especially about relationships. The theme of my memoir is illusion: how I have learned to live with the mystery of my father's absences; why I am still drawn to men who are wounded by life; and how I've learned to negotiate reality while still enjoying the magic associated with falling in love.

The title is *Shades of Sunflower County*. Because of my contact with my ancestors, I am using Dante Alighieri's definition of shade, the spirit or ghost of a dead person who guides one through the underworld. In *The Divine Comedy*, Dante writes of his encounter with the Roman poet Statius in Purgatory: "He bent down to embrace my Teacher's feet / But Virgil said, 'Brother, it's just no use. / You are a shade and it's a shade you meet.' / And Statius, rising, said, 'My one excuse / Is my great love for you, its burning heat. / I clean forgot, because I felt so much / That shades are here to see, but not to touch.'" (21) I'm also using the literal definition of shade, "comparative darkness and coolness caused by shelter from direct sunlight," as a metaphor for the mental darkness of some residents of Sunflower County, which is where my hometown of Ruleville is. I am also "throwing shade," or showing my displeasure, about difficult people.

My paternal grandfather, Charles Monroe (Fisty) Dorrough Sr., was mayor of Ruleville, Mississippi, in the 1960s, during the height of the civil rights movement. In 1961, the year my

father was in Vietnam, I lived in Ruleville with my mother and younger brother. I offer my impressions from that time, speaking as a 56-year-old woman, in the second chapter. My point of view is shaped by my life in New Orleans for the past 28 years. New Orleans' diverse culture is vastly different from the plantation towns in the Mississippi Delta. I also benefited from diversity training in 1992 at *The Times-Picayune*, followed by 12 years of psychotherapy.

As a college freshman in 1975, I negotiated the sorority culture at the University of Mississippi and the segment of the Old South it represents. I was an outsider at Ole Miss because I was raised on Army bases and was taught to think independently. In the third chapter, I show my emotional and psychological growth as I discover that the insular world of Kappa Kappa Gamma is not for me.

The summer after I de-pledged the sorority, I fell in love with Newt Walker. We were an attraction of opposites, and the fourth chapter is about our relationship. I describe how I connected with his Mississippi grandfather but could not connect with his wealthy family in Dallas. In 1985, when I moved to New Orleans, I fell in love with a young reporter at the paper. In the fifth chapter, I examine our off-and-on relationship that was colored by alcohol, drugs and other women. My point of view is that of a woman who is 28 years older, and aware of her mistakes. I have changed the names of many people, including him.

On page 53, I write: "As a member of an Irish-American family from the Mississippi Delta, I never shy away from telling a good story, especially if it involves embarrassing details about myself. That's what makes a good story in the Delta. Sometimes the exhilaration of performance eclipses rational thought, such as self-protection and discretion." I use a conversational tone because I am revealing my thoughts and feelings as if I were having an extended conversation with a friend. I am influenced by Karr's 2009 memoir, *Lit*, in which she

explores her battle with substance abuse while recalling her relationships with her family members, husbands and boyfriends.

I have worked on all five chapters in creative nonfiction workshops at the University of New Orleans. Miles Harvey guided the revision of the chapter on my grandfather; Sonja Livingston, the revisions of my chapters on the sorority and my college boyfriend; and Sarah DeBacher, the revisions of my chapters on my father and Rose. Harvey and DeBacher were on my thesis committee; Dr. Randy Bates led the committee.

Dr. John Hazlett of UNO taught me the finer points of American autobiography, particularly the dynamics of *Bildungsroman*, with its focus on the psychological and moral growth of the character. He also introduced me to writing as therapy. I learned something from all of the twentieth-century autobiographies we read in class, but Mary McCarthy stands out. She writes with humor and finesse in *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, but she also uses penetrating psychological analysis in recalling her narcissistic, secretive grandmother.

Chapter 1: My Family's Secret War

I was dreaming about hot air balloons when he died. I was at my friend Julie's house in Falls Church, Virginia, where I was fleeing the reality of my emaciated father in Mississippi. I awoke at 5 and couldn't go back to sleep. I learned later that he had died at that exact moment.

Daddy was 59 when he died of pancreatic cancer, the result of too many cigarettes, too much sour mash, and not enough sweetness in his life. He never had been sick, not even a cold. His skin started to turn yellow in August 1990. Within six months, he was dead.

The first person I called was my brother, Bob, who lived in Washington, D.C. I was 33 and Bob was 31. We knew Daddy's condition had worsened, but his death still was a shock. About 8 a.m., Bob groggily answered the phone.

"Daddy died this morning," I said.

Bob inherited our father's laconic response to bad news. "Well, I guess we'd better drive to Mississippi," he said. It was Saturday, and the funeral was Monday. Our parents' hometown of Ruleville was fifteen hours away.

"I'll pick you up about noon," Bob said. "We need to drive all night."

I tried to talk him into flying.

"No," he said. "I'll do all the driving. You can sleep if you want to. I need the time to think."

It was snowing by the time we got to Nashville. At the top of a hill, we pulled in to a rest stop and got out of the car. We threw back our heads and opened our arms wide to feel the icy crystals. The first snow always made us happy.

"Do you want me to drive?" I asked.

"No, I'm OK," Bob said. "I'll get some coffee if I feel tired."

I settled into the passenger seat of my brother's rented four-door sedan as he drove west.

"I think Dad worked for the CIA," Bob said.

"What?"

"I think he worked for the CIA when he was in Vietnam and Berlin."

I knew it could be possible, but I second-guessed my younger brother as a divine right.

"Bob, that's ridiculous."

"Why is it ridiculous? He was in Vietnam in 1961 when there were only advisers and in Berlin after the wall went up."

"Why would a hospital medic from a small Mississippi town be in the CIA?" I asked.

"Exactly," he said. "No one would suspect him."

I let this information sink in. I still doubted that our father worked as a secret agent, but I knew that my brother was a good analyst.

"Bob, why are you bringing this up now?"

"I've thought about it for a while," he said. "I just wanted to tell you."

"Well," I said, "this is a fine time to bring it up. It's not like we can ask him."

"He wouldn't tell us anyway," Bob said.

He was right. If Daddy had worked for the CIA, he never would have told us. Keeping secrets is part of the job. The agency's psychological tests ensure that. The government only recruits people who can hold their own counsel in situations involving national security.

I was motivated to look into this in 2013 while writing an essay for a nonfiction class at the University of New Orleans. According to *Unlikely Warriors: The Army Security Agency's Secret War in Vietnam 1961-1973*, President Kennedy established a top-secret program to

improve the communications intelligence of the South Vietnamese Army after he took office in January 1961.

“There was to be no public acknowledgement of any part of the program,” write Lonnie Long and Gary Blackburn, the authors of *Unlikely Warriors*.

In profiling their first subject, Tom Davis of Livingston, Tennessee, they write: “Tom was perfect for ASA. He had attended college and had grown up in a small Southern town where most everyone knew him. A small-town background made it easier for the FBI to complete its extensive background checks, and within a few months, he received his top-level security clearance.”

Daddy had the same background. If he secretly worked for the Army Security Agency in Vietnam and Berlin—which seems likely when I read accounts of the American presence in both places in the 1960s—we were given few clues as children.

In 1991, the year that my father died, I was dating Jim Varney, a reporter who was a Vietnam War buff. After the funeral, when I told him that my father was a medic in Vietnam, Varney looked at me solemnly and said: “No American in Vietnam in 1961 was a medic.”

So my brother *was* right: There was more to my father’s story. As his children, we were left to connect the dots. And I have been connecting the dots to get a clearer picture of my family ever since.

My attraction to alcoholic womanizers in my 20s, 30s and 40s can be traced to my paternal ancestry of handsome Irish men who love to drink whiskey and have sex with women. The paternal side is still attractive, because there always was fun attached to the behavior, but I no longer feel compelled to experience it firsthand.

I can spot the good-time guys right away. When my gaze lands on a gifted storyteller, I smile and recognize my attraction. If his behavior becomes more manic with every drink, I recognize him as the perfect combination of all my parents' positive and negative traits. I am able to walk away, knowing that I don't need that painful lesson again.

I am still attracted to men who exhibit a responsible nature combined with an artistic soul. On the outside, my father was a romantic hero. People compared him to actor James Stewart, known for his drawl and down-to-earth personality. They loved Daddy's storytelling ability and sense of fun. But he also was sensitive and needed time to be alone every day.

Throughout his life, he carried the wound of being a disappointment to his parents. His older brother, Sonny, had served in the Navy during World War II. Daddy spent those years playing football in high school and being the life of the party. When he failed English as a high school junior, his teacher assigned him books to read over the summer to raise his grade.

"I don't have time for that," Daddy told his classmates.

They thought he was the essence of cool in his leather jacket and pompadour. His parents, Fisty and Lou, did not agree. To instill a sense of discipline, they sent him to Chamberlain-Hunt Academy, a military school in Port Gibson, Mississippi.

Daddy's time at boarding school lasted one day. After his father dropped him off, Daddy said he "beat Fisty back home by hitchhiking."

His parents later celebrated his rebellious nature. He turned around his grades and graduated with his class from Ruleville High School.

On the first anniversary of my father's death, I went to see *Fried Green Tomatoes* with my friend, Rob Cannatella. We knew it would be a fun movie about Southern women, but we did

not know that one of the characters would die of cancer. I was overwhelmed. I could not stop crying. I went through my stack of napkins that we got with our popcorn and then I went through Rob's stack. At one point, as I was sobbing, Rob whispered: "You need a Valium."

I needed more than a tranquilizer. I needed professional help. I never had dealt with my lingering anger over my alcoholic, bipolar mother who terrorized me with her demands and mood swings. And I wasn't conscious of my ambivalent feelings about my father, who was at once my conquering hero and the ne'er-do-well who abandoned me when I needed him most.

I learned during psychotherapy that my mother's bipolar disorder, combined with her daily diet of rum and Cokes, created a textbook example of bad parenting. But her narcissism has had the most lingering effect. To Mom, our childish feelings and needs did not matter; only our appearance was important because we were a reflection of her.

I lived with her and Bob in Ruleville in 1961, when Daddy went to Vietnam. Small-town society dictated that we attend church every Sunday, so on Saturday nights she twisted my thin, platinum-blond hair in wire mesh rollers and secured them tightly with bobby pins. I cried that I couldn't sleep with the wire spikes poking my head, but my mother refused to take them out. "You are too tender headed," she said.

At age 56, I still work to identify and honor my feelings.

"A child can experience her feelings only when there is somebody there who accepts her fully, understands her, and supports her," writes Alice Miller in *The Drama of the Gifted Child*.

I never received acceptance or understanding from my family because I was so alien. I made acute observations that particularly upset my mother, who spent most of her days drinking Coca-Cola, smoking cigarettes, playing bridge and watching television.

One summer afternoon, two-year-old Bob tripped on our back steps and gashed his forehead. Blood streamed down his face, and he ran at me, crying. I was four. He looked like a monster, so I ran away, screaming, too. When she heard the commotion, Mom came out and wanted to know why I had run away, why I had not taken care of my little brother. As the shock wore off, I glared at her and said: “What have you been doing?”

My mother’s unconscious competition with me stemmed from her own childhood, when she and her older sister vied for their alcoholic father’s affections. The situation intensified when they were teenagers, when he made drunken visits to their bedrooms.

After groping them in their beds in the middle of the night, my grandfather lashed out at them in the morning when he saw their sullen faces. My mother and her sister teetered between a simmering rage and a yearning for connection with their father. Both had problems expressing their anger appropriately.

My grandmother ignored the sexual abuse because she did not want to have sex with her husband. My mother and aunt suffered emotionally as well as physically and psychologically because they could not talk about it with their mother, who died at 50 during gall bladder surgery. Within six months, my grandfather remarried her best friend, Gertrude, a bank secretary, in 1952. The next year, my mother married my father when she was 19.

My grandfather owned the Delta Oil Company, a butane dealer in north Sunflower County. Farmers and rural residents depended on his company’s trucks to deliver the fuel they needed to heat their homes and run their tractors and cotton pickers. He made a lot of money, which he invested in the stock market. His relations with my mother and aunt grew chilly during the 1960s, when Gertrude intruded on their phone calls. He kept his power over his daughters by sending large checks and advising them which stocks to buy.

After his death in 1977, his estate was supposed to be split four ways, among my mother, aunt and Gertrude's two children. One of the vice presidents at the Bank of Ruleville called Aunt Jane to say that Gertrude was spending the estate's money on new Mercedes for her grandchildren and European vacations for her children. By the time my mother and aunt hired attorneys to stop the drain, they received only \$37,000 each.

At age five, I was dropped off with Bob at this same grandfather's house. My parents wanted to go to St. Louis with my paternal grandparents, Fisty and Lou, to see the Cardinals play baseball.

My grandfather's King Edward cigar smoke filled the rooms of his mid-century modern house. I hid in one of the guest rooms to avoid the pungent, sickly sweet fog. Gertrude tried to coax me out by promising to buy me paper dolls at the drug store.

When my parents returned from their weekend trip, they gathered with my grandfather and Gertrude for cocktails. The adults laughed at me as I gazed through the picture window and told stories about the cowboys and Indians, kings and queens I saw rolling by. Three-year-old Bob cried because he could not see them.

My mother was both proud and envious of my imagination and storytelling ability. Making my brother cry was another issue. She stubbed out her Salem cigarette, took a swig of her frozen lime daiquiri and slammed down the crystal highball glass on an antique side table.

Grabbing me by the arm, she pulled me into the long hallway that led to the bedrooms.

"You aren't as smart as you think you are," she hissed.

My mother inherited her father's mood swings, alcoholism, addiction to nicotine, and sociopathic need to control others with bouts of terrorism.

I realized during therapy that my strong intuition protected me from my grandfather's sexual abuse. I didn't want to be near him at any point. I didn't even like hugging him. But my sixth sense could not protect me from the emotional and verbal abuse of his two daughters.

I have my father's rebellious nature and my mother's ability to cut people with words. I looked at her and snarled: "Don't you ever leave me here again."

I felt triumphant as my mother let go of my arm. Shock spread across her face.

As a child and teenager, I felt emotionally close to my father even though he was physically absent in 1961 and 1969. As a result, I struggle with my attraction to men who seem to have it all together but who are emotionally unavailable. If I sense that they are wounded, the attraction increases.

This is the fantasy: If I love them as much as I loved my father, we both will be healed.

I have a photo of my father and me in 1960, four months before Defense Secretary Robert McNamara approved the secret war in Vietnam. We are sitting in my maternal grandfather's house on Christmas Day. Daddy is resting his left leg on the curved silk arm of a Duncan Phyfe sofa, his right foot matching the angle of the sofa's claw. He is wearing striped pajama bottoms, a houndstooth robe and matching sweater slippers. His head is lowered, revealing his flat top, and I am wearing white tights, leather booties, and a white quilted robe.

He is embracing me, and his eyes look sad. I lean back, my head resting between his shoulder and neck, and my face is glowing. I am thrilled to be in my Daddy's arms. I am three years old.

Four years later, on Big Chief paper with Crayola crayons, I drew a prince with a crew cut coming down the "staires" of a pink palace. He wonders: "Where is she." In the palace's

basement, a fuchsia-haired “Cinderela” is wearing a “raged dress”—a furious swirl of purple, green, orange, fuchsia and brown—and pink “raged shoes.” By her side are a “pumkin,” two enormous brown mice and two brown rats with tails like squirrels. Her response: “Oh my.”

I had the same reaction, “oh my,” while living with my mother and brother in a small apartment in Ruleville in 1961. My prince with the crew cut had disappeared, and no one talked about it.

It would have helped if my mother or grandparents or aunt and uncle or cousins had talked to me about our feelings. Or even admitted that we had them. If we did not talk about bad things—like Daddy living halfway around the world—they weren’t happening. If I displayed emotional distress, I was taken to the store for a new doll.

No wonder I am attracted to men who do not honor my feelings. Children can’t develop their true selves when their feelings are not acknowledged. In my mid-50s I felt like I had discovered my authentic self, but I still was unconscious about my attraction to narcissistic men who ignored or discounted my feelings.

My father never developed his true self, either. After high school, he served in the Navy during the Korean War. In 1953, he was 22 when he married my mother, who was 19, and accepted an Army ROTC scholarship to the University of Mississippi. He had to get a scholarship because his parents had exhausted their savings by putting his older brother through medical school. He accommodated himself to his parents’ needs.

On the morning he died, my dream of hot air balloons could have been his own unrealized dreams. When we lived at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, in the 1970s, he said he wanted to live in nearby Holden Beach in the summer and Key West, Florida, in the winter. His lifelong

sense of responsibility prevented that from happening. He and my mother returned to Mississippi when he retired from the military. Until he died, he worked as a hospital administrator, painfully aware that he was the sole support for my increasingly debilitated mother.

His desire for a beachy lifestyle radiates in the black-and-white photographs of him as a sailor in San Diego in 1952 and an Army lieutenant in Vietnam in 1961. There is a wide expanse of white sand and palm trees at Qui Nhon, and a swimming party on a dock at Ben Ho Lake.

Many of the Vietnam photos, taken with his Pentax 35-millimeter camera, reveal his playful side. There is a yellow Labrador puppy named Ralph. There is a smiling girl named Bom, who probably was a maid. There is Daddy, wearing only a pair of shorts, propped up in bed reading a sheaf of teletype paper with single-spaced all-capital letters. The caption: “Bob Crimm’s apt. Saigon.”

Other photos are more ominous. “Viet Cong prisoners” are paraded down a street in Pleiku. Three Vietnamese men in civilian clothes, one wearing a suit and another smoking a cigarette, stare intensely as they sit on a couch across a room from three American men in civilian clothes and crew cuts, all smoking, too. The caption: “Cress Lewis’ going away party, Qui Nhon.”

Back in Pleiku, there is Daddy in his fatigues, belt buckle shined with Brasso, combat boots glossed with Kiwi. He is “at ease,” his legs forming an isosceles triangle supporting his confident stance. His arms are folded behind him and he wears a sly smile. The caption, in his all-caps military handwriting, is “PLEIKU HOSPITAL STAFF.” The seven men standing beside him are young Vietnamese in khaki uniforms. Harry Bolter stands in the center, the only other

American, in civilian clothes. Bolter served in the 1950s at the Army hospital in Landstuhl, Germany. We moved there in 1965.

There is another photo of a man in a dark suit and tie in the lounge at Pleiku. It is Colonel Wilbur Wilson. In 1961, Wilson was “a senior advisor in the corps region that encompassed the mountains of the Central Highlands and several coastal provinces of Central Vietnam,” writes Neil Sheehan in *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*. Pleiku is in the Central Highlands and Qui Nhon is on the coast, three hours east of Pleiku.

In 1962, Sheehan writes: “Vann proposed another advisor for [General Huynh Van] Cao ... ‘I suggest that your efforts this spring will be materially improved if Colonel Wilbur Wilson becomes the Senior Advisor to General Cao,’ Vann wrote. ‘Colonel Wilson’s experience and personality are tailored to bring out the best in General Cao, and the Delta area offers the best opportunity to break the back of the Viet Cong.’”

Daddy gave us three clues about Vietnam: He was a caddie for a general in Saigon. He worked at a hospital in Pleiku. And he was fond of the Montagnards, the Degar mountain people of the Central Highlands.

As a combat medic, he probably *was* training his South Vietnamese counterparts. Did he caddy for General Cao? What about breaking the back of the Viet Cong?

“As the Vietnam War began to loom on the horizon, both South Vietnamese and American policy makers sought to begin training troops from minority groups in the Vietnamese populace,” writes Colonel Francis J. Kelly in *Vietnam Studies, U.S. Army Special Forces, 1961-1971*. “These newly trained Degar were seen as a potential ally in the Central Highlands area to stop Viet Cong activity in the region ...”

The day of Daddy's funeral, cars lined up on the highway to pull into Lehrton Cemetery in Ruleville, a plantation town about two hours south of Memphis.

There were many tributes. "He was one of my funniest buddies back at Ruleville High School in the good ole days," said George Robertson, an illustrator who now lives in Chicago. "He always had a smile on his face and a hilarious joke to tell everyone."

Was that part of the ruse? Daddy *did* have a fun-loving personality, but he also had a serious side. We lived in Landstuhl for a year before moving to Berlin. Was the link to Harry Bolter a coincidence?

When family members came to visit in Berlin, they always asked us if we felt "safe" living there. Of course we did. West Berlin was a cosmopolitan city with a low crime rate. As a 10-year-old, I took the subway downtown to go shopping at the Ka De We department store and have hamburgers at Wimpy's with friends.

The only time I felt any heaviness was when we took relatives to see the Wall. Standing in wooden observation towers on the western side, we could not see much activity in East Berlin. It was gray and dead. The only movement occurred in the guard towers.

The museum at Checkpoint Charlie piqued our childish interest in the macabre with its stories of people hiding in cars and swimming through barbed wire to escape East Berlin.

Still, I always wanted to check it out for myself.

Daddy worked at the American hospital in West Berlin and took regular shopping trips with our mother to East Berlin. When she came back with Czechoslovakian wine glasses for her parties, I asked her to take me out of school so I could go shopping too.

One day, she brought me a Lithuanian zither, a flat, stringed instrument. I wanted an autoharp, not a zither. I needed buttons to play my favorite songs from school. I was sure I could find one if only they would take me.

We spent our family vacations at military recreation areas in Garmisch and Berchtesgaden, in the mountains of southern Germany. We usually took the train from Berlin. As we traveled through East Germany, we handed our passports to the Russian and East German officers who checked each compartment.

In the summer of 1968, Uncle Sonny and Aunt Sister visited us from Mississippi, and we took them to Bavaria. All six of us piled in to our 1965 white Volkswagen station wagon. Our luggage was tied to the roof, and Bob and I crouched on a pallet in the back of the car.

I usually suffered motion sickness from reading a book, but on that trip, I was nauseated from the cigarette smoke of the four chattering adults. At one point Sonny noticed that the Germans were laughing at us as they passed us on the autobahn. Daddy and Sonny were curious, so they asked a fellow motorist about it at a rest stop.

“Your mud flaps are dragging on the highway,” the man said.

Daddy and Sonny always got a kick out of people’s perceptions of Mississippians as redneck and backward. As an 11-year-old, I was mortified.

We dropped off Sonny and Sister in Salzburg, Austria, where they rented a car to continue their trip through the Alps to Italy. Our VW was much lighter on the return trip across West Germany. It was dark when we arrived in the East German village of Marienborn, where there was a border crossing on the autobahn to Berlin.

I always thought the border crossings were tedious. Bob and I stared out our backseat windows as the line of cars and trucks crawled to the guard shack. At Marienborn, it took even longer. There wasn't just one guard shack. We had to stop at two or three.

It was about 10 p.m. when we got to the final shack. Daddy reached into the glove box and gave his identification papers to a stern-looking soldier with a rifle slung over his left shoulder. He was no East German soldier. He was Russian, and he was not happy.

He ordered Daddy out of the car. Daddy kept his cool. The young Russian kept insisting, and Daddy kept refusing. Finally, the soldier turned and stormed into the guard shack.

"Get down!" Daddy shouted as he gunned the Volkswagen past the guard rail.

"What are you doing?" my mother asked.

"We are not supposed to get out of the car at checkpoints," Daddy said. "That guy was messing with me."

As Daddy sped along the autobahn, my brother and I peppered him with questions.

"Be quiet!" he shouted. "Why don't you go to sleep? It's your bedtime."

Now I understand why parents keep certain things from their children. Then, I wanted my curiosity satisfied.

Bob and I finally settled down for the last hour of the ride. At Checkpoint Bravo, in the American sector of Berlin, Daddy pulled to the side of the road and got out of the car. Our heads popped up from the backseat. It was midnight, and we wondered what other drama was in store.

A half-hour passed before Daddy returned to the car.

We asked: Is the Russian soldier going to get into trouble? Are you going to get into trouble? Was he going to shoot out our tires? Why did you tell us to get down?

"I had to be debriefed," he said.

He was irritated. It was late. We knew better than to pester Daddy after a long trip. He had a low-simmering temper. We did not want to wake the beast who would take off his belt and spank us when he had had enough of our misbehavior.

Later, when we were teenagers, Bob and I asked Daddy about that night. “The Russian soldier was breaking protocol,” he said. “I was not going to get out of the car.”

My sister, Kate, was born in April 1969, and a month later, my mother had her first nervous breakdown. She blamed it on sleep deprivation from having a newborn at age 35. But it also was due to her acute anxiety over my father returning to Vietnam for a second time. After living in Europe for four years, she did not want to return to a life among small-town gossips in Mississippi.

So we moved to San Antonio, Texas, where Daddy had trained at Brooke Army Medical Center. He returned to Vietnam in the fall, and was stationed at Mobile Army Surgical Hospitals in Long Binh and Da Nang.

As far as I know, he was not participating in any secret missions in 1969.

With my father gone, I was given more responsibility as the oldest child. Mom joined the Vietnam Wives Club so she could keep her mind occupied. I started junior high and Kate was placed in day care. The club also kept the wives busy at night, and my mother called me her “built-in baby sitter.” When I came home from school one Friday, I told Mom that Kate had a fever.

She took Kate to the night clinic at Brooke. A resident examined her and told Mom that Kate had a bad cold. Mom asked about the fever. He told her to give her baths with rubbing alcohol to keep it down.

On Saturday night, we gave Kate alcohol baths every hour. As I held her limp body in my arms, I told Mom that she needed to take her back to the hospital. She kept saying that the doctor had told her it was a bad cold. She was following protocol. If Kate didn't get any better, she would take her in on Monday, when the regular staff would be there. I was scared that Kate would die, but I could not overrule my mother. She was incompetent on many levels, but she was ferocious in her command of the household. And I was too afraid of her rage to be aware of my own anger over the unfairness of it all.

Kate did not improve, and Mom finally took her to the hospital on Monday. When the nurses saw Kate, they took her from my mother and rushed her to the doctor on duty. He ordered a spinal tap. She had meningitis, probably contracted at day care.

They hooked her up to an antibiotic IV. But it was too late. The high fever had destroyed all the nerves in her ears, and she is deaf.

My sister and I talk about the events leading to her hospital stay, and I always choke up when I tell her the story. If I had known, I would have been more insistent. If our mother had known, perhaps she would have done the right thing. Kate later married a man who was born deaf, and they have two healthy children. We now accept that Mom always was out of it and I was only 12.

By Thanksgiving that year, the family in Ruleville kicked into gear. Fisty, Lou, Sonny, Sister and their three boys all came to San Antonio. Daddy had asked his commanding officer in Vietnam if he could return for the family's emergency of Kate being in the hospital and my mother being mentally ill, but the officer refused. Too many people were trying to leave Vietnam

at the time. So Fisty called James O. Eastland of Doddsville, chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Eastland was known nationally for his stance against civil rights, but he was known in Mississippi for his ability to pull strings. He was able to get Daddy home eventually, but it became a permanent stain on his military record. Insubordination toward an officer means no future promotion. Daddy thought it was worth it.

When he returned to San Antonio in the spring of 1970, the movie *M*A*S*H* was playing, and Bob and I went to see it with him. Daddy laughed so hard that I told him: “Stop! You’re embarrassing me!” He couldn’t stop laughing. As we left the theater, he said, “You don’t understand. That’s *exactly* how it was over there.

The day we buried him, there was a cold rain coming from the west. Mom kept up her social façade with the help of tranquilizers. Kate, Bob and I endured the push of the crowd at the Ruleville Methodist Church, the sentimental sermon by the pastor who hardly knew him, and the earthy smell of the freshly dug grave near the Sunflower River.

Our composure broke only once. Four soldiers from the Army National Guard in Memphis lined up in their dress blue uniforms. They pointed their rifles to the sky and let loose with a 21-gun salute.

Daddy would have loved it.

Chapter 2: All Roads Lead to Ruleville

December 20, 1964, dawned cold in New York, with the temperature in the 30s. That afternoon, Fannie Lou Hamer took the stage at Williams Institutional Christian Methodist Episcopal Church in Harlem to introduce the main speaker, Malcolm X. “I exist at 626 East Lafayette Street in Ruleville, Mississippi,” she said. “The reason I say ‘I exist’ [is] because we’re excluded from everything in Mississippi but the tombs and the graves.”

About 1,200 miles away, in Hamer’s hometown of Ruleville, my family was preparing for Christmas. My grandfather, Fisty, had been mayor of the small plantation town for eleven years, and my uncle, Sonny, was one of the town’s two doctors. As leaders in the white community, they espoused the racism that excluded all black people, including Hamer, from the largesse we experienced at Christmas.

None of this was apparent to me as a seven-year-old in 1964. We followed our Christmas traditions the same way we did every year. On Christmas Eve, we went to Sonny and Sister’s ranch-style house in the country, about half a mile from downtown. If Fisty was upset that four days earlier, Malcolm X had said in Harlem, “In Mississippi we need a Mau Mau” to fight for justice, he didn’t show it.

As we paraded through my uncle’s back door, Louis Armstrong’s 1955 recording of “Christmas in New Orleans” played on the stereo as Sonny flooded the doorway with the bright light from his Bell & Howell 16-millimeter movie camera. My 12-year-old cousin, Duff, held open the storm door as Daddy came in first, peering over his tall stack of large Christmas gifts. My grandmother, Lou, laughed as we followed her, single-file, into the house, with Sonny yelling at each of us: “Smile for the camera.”

Appearances were important to us. Fisty wore a charcoal gray suit, white shirt and a red, gray and white striped tie. A silver Cross pen was in his shirt pocket, and his eyes gleamed through his black-framed wayfarer glasses as he watched us unwrap cowboy boots, wristwatches, and the latest game from Hasbro. I wore a red jumper over a long-sleeved white blouse with Peter Pan collar, which matched my white anklet socks under black patent-leather T-strap Mary Jane shoes. A red bow pulled back my long blond hair. My brother wore a white button-down shirt over navy-blue pants and a red belt. Mom, in a blond bouffant, wore an angora cardigan sweater over a gray-green wool skirt. Daddy wore a charcoal gray patterned shirt with the collar open, his customary white T-shirt underneath. Both he and my brother had crew cuts.

In Ruleville, my family lived on a different planet compared to the Hamers in their yellow brick house in the black section of town. They had to endure the indignity of being treated as second-class citizens from the moment they walked out of their house every day. They had to face white men with guns coming to their door in the middle of the night. They had to deal with heart disease and other health problems as the constant anxiety took its toll.

Ruleville, 120 miles south of Memphis, had 2,000 residents, descendants of the 100 or so white pioneers and black sharecroppers who arrived on the Sunflower River in 1880 and moved east in 1897 when the Yazoo Delta railroad arrived. It was a bucolic place for white children in the 1960s, “just like Mayberry,” my cousin, Duff, said when we talked about our childhood.

Since the election of President Obama in 2008, some of the white children of 1960s, including my cousins, have admitted that Ruleville “wasn’t Mayberry for the black folks.” The only time I saw black people on the streets was on Saturday nights, when they gathered on Greasy, our nickname for Front Street, which parallels the railroad. As a child, I was told that

they called it Greasy because black men leaned back in their chairs and stained the outside walls with their pomaded hair.

Billy Marlow, who owns land on the Sunflower River and is my Aunt Sister's cousin, said: "Front Street got its name because it used to be gravel and when automobiles would pass the businesses, they would make it very dusty. The businesses would take their used cooking oil and pour it on the road, making it Greasy Street."

On Saturday nights, the black people of Ruleville listened to music and danced at the Top Ten or the Black Castle, ate supper at Mack's Colored Café, bought groceries and sundries at The Chinaman's Store, and their liquor at the bootlegger's store. Sunflower County was dry in the 1960s, and everyone bought their liquor from the bootlegger, who only sold to people he knew. Customers would come into the store and give their orders. One of his workers would walk to a secure room in the back where the liquor was stored.

As white children, we never walked on Greasy Street. We only saw it from the car, driven by an adult who had run out of liquor. "Lock the doors!" was the command as the teetering adult went into the package store. We watched with wide eyes as well-dressed black people greeted each other. They were fascinating and scary at the same time. We had to watch out for them, Grandma said. When I asked why, she said, "Because I said so." Never liking that answer, I pushed for a better one. "Because they might snatch you up."

Grandma always was afraid of black people. Nothing ever had happened to her. She simply followed the teachings of the town's white men, who were cognizant of the constant threat of black men's revolt because of their own cruelty and violence toward them. I never had felt danger when I was around black people in Ruleville. But I had seen *The Wizard of Oz*, and I

was afraid of Margaret Hamilton, the Evil Witch of the West: “I’ll get you my pretty ... and your little dog, too!”

We walked everywhere in Ruleville: to the swimming pool in the afternoon, to a neighbor’s yard to pick strawberries, to the Methodist church on Sunday. I’d accompany Grandma as she walked the two blocks to Roy Barner’s grocery store or the Rexall drugstore. As we passed the Ruleville café and pool hall, old white men greeted us as they leaned their ladder-back chairs against the wall. One old man grabbed me and pressed his pocket change into my hand so I could go to the Ben Franklin store to buy penny candy. The overwhelming fright of a stranger grabbing me, followed by excitement that he was treating me to candy, was a not-so-subtle reminder of who was in control. White women and children didn’t have anything to fear as much as black people, but we were reminded daily of the power structure in our little town.

During the summer of 1969, when my father was serving his second tour in Vietnam and my mother was hospitalized in San Antonio with her first nervous breakdown, I watched reruns of *The Andy Griffith Show* every day at 11 a.m., broadcast from Memphis, with cousins Marlow, Duff and John Robert. We laughed at the exaggerated antics of Deputy Barney Fife, and agreed that Fisty had a similar temperament to the kind and wise Sheriff Andy Taylor.

I had become used to the pain of my father being absent for a year. At age four, I was lonely and confused. At 12, I prayed every night for his safe return. I was able to handle the void with appeals to God. But my mother’s mental illness threw us into another vortex.

TV’s version of Mayberry, and the company of my cousins, made me feel safe that summer. The previous spring, I was 11 and Bob was nine when we watched our mother spin out

of control. The night she lost her mind, Bob and I each had a friend in the car on the way to see the circus at the Kongresshalle, the performing arts center in Berlin.

We were chattering in the backseat as Daddy drove downtown from our home in Dahlem.

“Stop it! Stop it! Stop talking!” Mom shouted at us from the front seat.

We paused for a minute and then kept talking.

“Stop it! Stop it! I said stop it!” she shouted again.

Daddy asked her what was wrong.

“Take me back home right now.”

She had not been sleeping ever since our sister, Kate, was born that April. Her behavior had become more manic every day, but we didn’t have a term for it then.

Daddy turned around and dropped her off at our house. As he drove us back to the circus, we finally were quiet. Bob and I felt ashamed that our friends had witnessed such a scene.

Mom knew she was losing her mind. She ran across the street to the house where a psychiatrist lived. He admitted her to the American hospital that night.

She didn’t have a diagnosis of bipolar disorder until many years later. Her psychiatric file was two inches thick before any diagnosis was made. But her psyche broke that night. Once that happens, it is difficult for the person to have a feeling of wholeness.

She stayed in the hospital for several months. The doctors calmed her down with Thorazine, an antipsychotic tranquilizer. She no longer was manic, but she still was angry and bossy. Daddy visited her in the hospital every day.

One Saturday afternoon he asked me to go along with him. Mom was sitting up in bed and furious that we were late.

“I saved my banana pudding for you, and now the bananas are too dark to eat,” she said.

Her mood did not lift. She had an emotional stranglehold on the family, even though she was the weakest link. Our uncertainty about mental illness kept us in her grip. We had to do what she said or experience her wrath. It was a crazy way to live, but we didn't know any better.

Our grandparents and cousins in Ruleville provided shelter that summer. Six-month-old Kate went to live with Uncle Sonny and Aunt Sister and was surrounded with love. Marlow, Duff and John Robert argued over whose turn it was to hold "the kid." Sister set up two baby beds, one in her bedroom and one in the den. Kate received constant attention and adoration, and her easygoing temperament can be traced to the unconditional love she received that summer.

Bob and I stayed with Fisty and Lou. We called Fisty Papa. To us, he was a jolly, sensitive soul. When I was four, he got down on bended knee to sweep me up in his arms. I was the first granddaughter, and he made me feel special. In the mornings, before he left for work, I climbed into his lap to comb the long hair on top of his head that he conditioned with Brylcreem. He took the boys on fishing trips to Lake Benoit, but he got down on the floor with me to balance on cushions and pretend that we were swimming. None of us ever saw him upset over the political changes that were happening.

Each weekday at noon, Papa walked around the block from City Hall to have dinner with the family. In the Delta, dinner is the noon meal that replenishes farmers, and supper is the evening meal of sandwiches and leftovers. Grandma got up early to put fresh green beans and seasoned pork in a pressure cooker to simmer until noon, when we ate fresh tomatoes, cornbread, potato salad, fried chicken, and those dark but delicious beans. Papa loved dill pickles with his meals. I usually sat next to him, and I looked up at him in admiration as we shared his glee over the crunch and tang of Grandma's pickled cucumbers.

In my eyes, he was the hero of our town. On a Saturday in December, a woman who lived in the country called him to say that a possum had gotten stuck in her chimney. Papa took down a shotgun from the rack that held several rifles near the side door of his house. He took ammunition from a drawer and said, “Come on. I’ve got to take care of this.”

When we got to the house, the woman was frightened but happy to see us. Papa walked over to the fireplace, put down his shotgun and peered up the chimney. He asked the woman to take me into the yard. We heard one shot. I asked the woman what it was. She said, “A possum.” I never saw the animal. Papa took it behind the house, into the woods. He shielded it from view, knowing that I cried when animals died on *The Wonderful World of Disney* on Sunday nights.

Papa had learned how to use a rifle at a young age. His father, Thaddeus, abandoned his family—what the black people called the “walking blues,” when a man can’t handle his responsibilities and takes off—in 1909, when Papa was five. As the oldest, Papa worked as a stock clerk in a dry-goods store to support his mother, two-year-old twin sisters, and infant brother.

His mother, Kate Earnest, born in 1885 in Chickasaw, Mississippi, was a proud and regal woman who had enjoyed regular trips to Chicago. She piled her long, thick chestnut hair on top of her head with a bow, had large brown eyes and full lips, and wore high-necked embroidered lace blouses topped by thick velveteen corseted dresses. After her husband deserted the family, she remarried William Cooper of Greenville a year later.

In 1919, when Papa was 15, he was quarterback of the Ruleville High football team. In a photograph, his large brown eyes show a weariness that’s more common to a man 50 years older. The flaps of his leather helmet protect his ears, and his wide shoulders have small pads that are visible under his long-sleeved sweater. His left hand is placed confidently above his left knee as

his right hand is hidden underneath the team's center, who is about to hike the football. His jaw is tighter than the center's, and his full lips show determination. He grew up too fast.

It was a pattern I repeated at ages four and 12, when my father went to Vietnam. I also was given adult responsibilities as a child because my mother needed help. It made me hyper-vigilant about taking care of things and less aware of how this drive might affect me internally. I still struggle with my compulsion to handle all the tasks associated with work or household, and then wonder why my needs aren't being met.

Our self-sufficiency comes through our Irish bloodline. In 1700, my seventh great-grandfather, Abner Dorrough, boarded a sailing ship to James City, Virginia, to escape the English penal laws in Ireland. He was a 20-year-old Catholic, born in Dublin. The Protestant Ascendancy had enacted laws that were similar to the Jim Crow laws of the South: Catholics could not hold public office, own a firearm or serve in the armed forces, be a lawyer or judge, be educated overseas or at Trinity College, buy land, inherit Protestant land, or own a horse that was valued at more than five pounds. Abner left it all behind to sail to the settlement in Virginia. Three years later, he married Mary Dudley of England, and they had ten children.

Papa was named after his grandfather, Charles Alexander Dorrough, who was born in Harris County, Georgia, in 1854 and moved to Webster County, Mississippi, in 1877. Charles Alexander had added an "r" to his last name after a dispute with his brother over slavery. The Dorrough side was for slavery. The Dorrough side eventually moved to Texas. That side of the family boasts jazz pianist Bob Dorrough, author of "Conjunction Junction" and other songs from *Schoolhouse Rock*. On the slavery side, Papa's great-grandfather, William David, was farming 750 acres in Georgia in 1862, when he enlisted as a private at age 43 in the 30th Alabama Infantry Regiment of the Confederate States of America. The regiment fought at Vicksburg and

throughout Georgia, Tennessee and North Carolina. William David and his three half-brothers, Abner, Hugh and Nathaniel, were four of the regiment's 100 men who were still alive when they were discharged in April 1865. He returned to his farm in Georgia, and died in Webster County in 1901, three years before Papa was born.

Sixty years later, my mother, younger brother, Bob, and I moved to Ruleville. Daddy went to Vietnam in 1961, and our family thought we should live near them. My mother had grown up in Ruleville, but it was a dark world to her because of her teenage sexual experiences with her father. She didn't mention this to anyone, of course. She dealt with her feelings by drinking numerous daiquiris or rum and Cokes and then sleeping late.

Angie Martin, who was married to Willie, the first black patrolman hired by Papa, took care of us. In the mornings I stood at the stove next to her as she poured oatmeal from the cardboard cylinder with the smiling face of an old Quaker man with long white hair. She assembled a coral metal TV tray so I could sit on the couch and watch *Captain Kangaroo*, another kind old man. My favorite was Mr. Green Jeans because he handled all the animals.

Plump and middle-aged Angie showed us the love that my mother wasn't capable of showing. She brought affection, regularity and order into a household that sorely needed it, and we adored her.

"C'mon, now, get up," she said. "What are you wearing today?"

At age four, I was happy to choose my own clothes, even if they didn't match.

"What do you want to do today?" she asked as she stirred the oatmeal. I always wanted to go to Laurie Ann's yard next door to pick strawberries.

“We’ll have to ask Miss Laurie Ann if it’s OK,” she said as we crossed the street. Laurie Ann, who was another babysitter, always let me pick berries. Angie brought a colander to gather the berries, and when it was full, we headed back to the kitchen to wash them in the sink.

“Always cut up the berries right after you wash them,” Angie said. “Sprinkle just enough sugar on top so the berries make a nice syrup.”

If we didn’t have any shortcake or whipping cream, Angie and I would head to the grocery store to get them so I could have my favorite dessert.

As a four-year-old, I could not reconcile why the people who showed us love were treated with respect while the people who looked like them were reviled as “niggahs.” I could hear the hateful tone when adults, and sometimes children, talked about black people. It didn’t make any sense to me then, and it still doesn’t.

Bob Moses—“of Harlem and Harvard,” Eleanor Holmes Norton writes—arrived in Ruleville on August 30, 1962. He was director of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee’s Mississippi Project, which aimed to register black people to vote, and Ruleville was a mecca for organizers. The first 18 people from Ruleville’s registration classes were scheduled to register in Indianola the next day, Taylor Branch writes.

One of the registrants was Fannie Lou Hamer, who worked on the plantation of W.D. Marlow, Aunt Sister’s uncle, along the Quiver River east of town. Hamer and the 17 others were not successful in their attempt to register, and she lost her job on Marlow’s plantation. Hamer had worked there as a timekeeper and a sharecropper for 18 years, and her husband, Pap, had worked there for 30 years. Marlow met her as she came back from Indianola.

Hamer recalls the conversation: “He said, ‘We are not ready for this in Mississippi.’ I said, ‘I didn’t register for you. I tried to register for myself.’ He said, ‘We are not going to have this in Mississippi, and you will have to withdraw. I am looking for your answer, yea or nay.’ I just looked. He said, ‘I will give you until tomorrow morning and if you don’t withdraw, you will have to leave. If you do go withdraw, it’s only how I feel. You might still have to leave.’ So I left that same night.”

Marlow’s comment, “You might still have to leave,” reflected the unease among white citizens about threats made by members of the White Citizens’ Council, which was “pursuing the agenda of the Klan with the demeanor of the Rotary Club,” Charles M. Payne writes. Ten days later, on September 10, 1962, “night riders fired shots into two of the three homes providing shelter for volunteers in the SNCC registration campaign” in Ruleville, Branch writes.

“Herman and Hattie Sisson were talking with their granddaughter and a friend, who were spending the night there on their way back to college, when a series of popping noises startled them,” he writes. “‘That sounded like a rifle to me,’ Sisson observed calmly, but in the next instant both college girls tumbled from the couch to the floor, writhing.”

Hattie Sisson later told Branch that the girls were taken to the hospital, and “Mayor Dorrough of Ruleville had arrived and was pacing about, clearly upset, talking incessantly. He ordered his men to take Mrs. Sisson to the hospital for treatment of glass cuts, then looked at the bullet holes.” According to Hattie Sisson, Papa said: “I’m so glad Hattie didn’t get shot.” He then called the sheriff of Sunflower County, and, according to Mrs. Sisson, said: “Bob Moses is the cause of all of it. I knowed something like this was going to happen.”

When Branch’s book, which won the Pulitzer Prize for history, came out in 1988, several co-workers at *The Times-Picayune* said he had written about my grandfather. When I saw Mrs.

Sisson's quote, my first reaction was: Papa didn't talk like that. As I was driving home from dinner with a reporter who had read the book, he said, "Your grandfather comes off as a backwoods segregationist." I knew that Papa was a segregationist, but I was not going to put up with a "backwoods" dig from a reporter who grew up in New York. I slammed my foot on the brake as we were riding through the French Quarter. "You're going to have to get out," I said. "You're not going to talk about my grandfather like that."

I was furious that an outsider could make a harsh judgment about someone I loved. I was ashamed that my grandfather was portrayed as a hick from a Faulkner novel, saying, "I knowed something like this was going to happen." I had to read the passage again to realize that Branch was quoting Mrs. Sisson. But it still stung.

Violence flared again in Ruleville on the night of September 11, 1962, my fifth birthday. My father had returned from Vietnam and we had moved to Security, Colorado, near Fort Carson, southeast of Colorado Springs. That day, Papa had freed Charles Cobb, the SNCC worker whom he had jailed the night before. When Papa had gone to the hospital to see about the college girls, Cobb was taking notes in an address book.

Papa grabbed the address book and told the police officer who took Cobb to jail: "He looks like the type of person who would do this," referring to the shooting. Papa echoed the local sentiment that "communist agitators" were carrying out the violence for publicity. The next day, Moses posted bond for Cobb's release, and it upset the night riders who had taken control of the town. "So intense was the feeling against the voter-registration workers," Mills writes, "that the Ku Klux Klan burned a large cross on the mayor's front lawn, presumably because the movement had gained a foothold in Ruleville despite his hostility."

That night, Papa sounded the alarm at City Hall for volunteer firefighters to come to his house on North Shaw Avenue. A 20-foot cross had been set afire in his driveway and was about to fall on his 1954 Buick Roadmaster. Later that day, my father received a phone call from Papa, who said he had to let the SNCC worker out of jail because he had posted bond.

We were 1,125 miles from Ruleville, but an upset Papa upended our world. He was the jovial, undisputed leader of our family. When we left the previous month for Colorado, he wept as I hugged him goodbye. As we pulled out of the driveway, I asked, “Mama, why is Papa crying?” She said, “Because he doesn’t know when he will see you again.”

Hamer had alerted the world to many of the underworld dealings that had oppressed generations of black people in the Delta. But neither she nor Papa mentioned the biggest secret in town: Roy Bryant, one of the men who tortured Emmett Till and then tied a 75-pound cotton-gin fan around his neck with barbed wire and dumped him into the Tallahatchie River in August 1955, had been living on Don Street in Ruleville since 1972 and operated a small grocery and bar on the highway.

In a 1970 speech in Chicago, Hamer alluded to Till’s murder when she described an incident in February 1963, when there was a knock on her door. She said: “It was two armed cops, flashlights in one hand, guns in the other hand, and they wanted to know what my husband was doing up that time of morning.” One was called “Sundown Kid,” she said, “and he looked it. The other one was S.L. Milam—S.L. Milam might not mean much to some of you, because some of you are too young,” she told the Chicago crowd. “But S.L. Milam was J.W. Milam’s brother, one of the brothers that helped to lynch Emmett Till.”

It is horrifying that the Hamers and the black residents of Ruleville had to endure such terrorism. It was enough that they had to endure the indignity of stepping off the sidewalk when a white person came by, or being called “boy” or “gal” on a daily basis. But to have uneducated white men knocking on their door, with their guns out, in the middle of the night, asking why they were up. No wonder so many people left the Delta and went to Chicago after the flood of 1927. It must have been a relief to live in a place where they didn’t have to be afraid.

I am ashamed that Papa had someone like S.L. Milam on the payroll as a policeman. If I could ask him, Papa probably would say, “He seemed like a nice fellow, and I didn’t have anyone else I could hire.” Most of the workers in the Delta were uneducated. But men like the Milams never should have been put in a position of authority. All white people abused their positions with black people, but men like the Milams took it too far. The only way they felt empowered was to commit violence against others. Papa and the other community leaders who looked away were just as much at fault. The Delta is full of ghost towns because the fabric of the communities was ripped apart by more than 100 years of violence against its own citizens.

I have learned to live with the mystery of my father’s absences, and what he might have been doing in Vietnam in 1961 and Berlin in the late 1960s. But I can’t live with the darkness that surrounds most of the residents of the Delta.

During a visit in 2011, I walked in to the den of Uncle Sonny and Aunt Sister’s house in Ruleville. It was dark, the way it normally is, because the only natural light comes through the patio’s sliding door, which is shaded by heavy curtains. I sensed an energetic darkness as well. My aunt and uncle’s friends were sitting around the round table, and no one greeted me as I arrived. I wondered whether everyone was depressed, but I realized later that they were still judging me for not having a relationship with my mother. I visit my mother, who was placed in

an assisted living center after a stroke, but I am not there as often as my relatives and others want me to be. Harsh judgment against others is the prevailing emotion in the Delta.

Ruleville resident Roy Bryant was the Milams' half-brother. His wife, Carolyn, was in Bryant's Grocery and Meat Market in Money, Mississippi, on August 24, 1955, when Till arrived with his cousins to buy candy. Based on Carolyn Bryant's trial testimony, Hugh Stephen Whitaker writes: "Till entered the front door. Inside was pretty 21-year-old Carolyn Bryant. She was five feet, two inches tall and weighed 103 pounds. Young Till, only 14 years old, was four inches taller and nearly 60 pounds heavier. Till asked Mrs. Bryant for candy, and when she extended her hand for the money, he grabbed it and said, 'How about a date, baby?'"

Of Emmett Till, John Edgar Wideman writes: "The boys in Money's streets are a cluster of down-home country cousins. He sees a stage beckoning on which he can perform ... Like a magician pulling a rabbit from his hat, Emmett Till pulls a white girl from his wallet. Silences everybody. Mesmerizes them with tales of what they're missing, living down here in the Mississippi woods." Till was murdered, Wideman writes, "because he violated taboos governing race relations in 1955 in Money."

In January 1956, *Look* magazine published an interview with Bryant and Milam in which they confessed to the killing. Freelance journalist William Bradford Huie paid Bryant and Milam \$4,000 to tell the story of abducting, beating and shooting Till. Some of Huie's 1955 reporting, which now is criticized as checkbook journalism, in which sources are paid for their stories, is disputed by some of the people who were there, including one of Till's cousins, Simeon Wright, who wrote his own eyewitness account in 2010.

“I think [Emmett] wanted to get a laugh out of us or something,” Wright told *Chicago* magazine. “He was always joking around, and it was hard to tell when he was serious.”

Christopher Benson of *Chicago* writes: “The Mississippi Delta region was at the epicenter of an eruption, where ‘the Ku Klux Klan and night riders were part of our daily lives,’ Wright recalls in the book. All this was on Wright’s mind when he heard that whistle.”

Most observers agree that *Look*’s details of the kidnapping and murder are true. This part resonates for me: “When her husband was away, Carolyn Bryant never slept in the store, never stayed there alone after dark. Moreover, in the Delta, no white woman ever travels country roads after dark unattended by a man.” Because of the cyclical nature of violence, white women and children had reasons to be afraid. No one ever said we were afraid because of the violence perpetrated by white men. It was subconscious, and therefore more powerful.

According to Whitaker, Carolyn Bryant and her sister-in-law were determined not to tell their husbands about Till. Two days later, Bryant returned from Texas, and “a ‘Judas nigger’ told him what the ‘talk’ was,” Whitaker writes, referring to the term coined by Dr. T.R.M. Howard, a black activist from Mound Bayou who addressed Till fundraising rallies. “Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam were ‘poor whites’ or ‘rednecks,’ who were, by their own admission, ‘determined to resist the revolt of colored men against white rule.’”

Huie, the journalist who interviewed them in 1955, appears in a videotaped interview in which he says: “But J.W. Milam looked up at me, and he says, ‘Well, when he told me about this white girl he had, my friend, well, that’s what this war’s about down here now, that’s what we got to fight to protect.’” To the very end, Wideman writes, “Emmett Till didn’t believe the crackers would kill him. He was fourteen from Chicago. He’d hurt no one. These strange, funny-

looking white men were a nightmare he'd awaken from sooner or later. Milam found the boy's lack of fear shocking."

Bryant and Milam both had trouble finding work after they were acquitted of the murder. Their country stores, which "catered almost exclusively to Negroes," were closed after boycotts, Whitaker writes. "Bryant and his family, finding themselves not accepted in the Delta, moved to an east Texas town in which they were still living in 1962. ... Milam found farming difficult. Many Negroes refused to work for him; he had to hire white men at higher pay. ... He turned to bootlegging." Bryant and Carolyn divorced in 1979.

In 2009 the CBS news show *Sixty Minutes* tried to interview Carolyn, who was living in Greenville, Mississippi. According to a transcript of the *Sixty Minutes* episode: "Carolyn is a focus of the Justice Department's new investigation, suspected of having assisted her husband and Milam in the abduction of Till."

Roy Bryant "went partially blind from his earlier welding work and operated a store in Ruleville," according to an FBI report. He married for a second time in 1980, and agreed to a 1985 interview with *The Clarion-Ledger* of Jackson. The reporters only say he has a store in the Delta: "His domain now is a converted gas station with a wooden floor. The store is cluttered with the mainstays of small-town living: canned goods, snacks, cigarettes and one beer cooler. As in 1955, Bryant today relies on credit purchases and a black clientele." During the interview, Bryant chain smoked cigarettes behind the counter while a spotted cat slept nearby on a pile of grocery sacks. "It is a family type of place," he said. "We serve plate lunches and sandwiches and that type of stuff (publicity about the Till slaying) just wouldn't help."□

My Aunt Sister, Delores Marlow Dorrough, who is in her 80s, said in 2012 that whenever anyone asked Bryant about the murder, he said nonchalantly: "Yeah, I killed a niggah."

Catherine Connell, who met friends for drinks at the Bryant grocery in the 1980s, said: “She was always nice,” referring to Bryant’s second wife. “But he was moody. He was strange.”

According to the FBI, Bryant was convicted in 1984 and 1988 of food stamp fraud. In 1991, when *The Times-Picayune* in New Orleans was working on a project about race, I told reporter Coleman Warner, a fellow Mississippian, about Bryant living in Ruleville. Mom had told me that Bryant had gone blind and was operating a produce stand on the highway. The newspaper’s editors weren’t interested.

Christian Science Monitor Radio reporter Plater Robinson of New Orleans traveled to Ruleville that year, and Bryant allowed an interview. Bryant denied involvement in the murder of Till, as he had with the Jackson reporters. When Robinson pressed him with details from the case, Bryant said: “I didn’t make a damn dime” from the *Look* magazine article. He still nursed a grudge that his half-brother, J.W. Milam, had pocketed the \$4,000. Bryant died of cancer on September 1, 1994. He is buried in Lehrton Cemetery on the Sunflower River, near the original site of Ruleville.

Throughout the 1960s, Hamer and Papa had a quarrelsome relationship that morphed into mutual respect by the time they both died in 1977. In a 1970 speech in Chicago, Hamer said: “As I told them in Mississippi, you know, when I was talking about school situations, the mayor asked me, ‘Now look, Fannie Lou, do you really want your kids to go to school with mine?’ I said, ‘Look, fellow, you’re not afraid of your kids going to school with mine. You’re afraid of your wife’s kids going to school with mine, because you got them in every damn school in the state.’” By insinuating that Papa had fathered numerous illegitimate children throughout Mississippi, Hamer was trying to get under his skin. White men in power did father generations

of children, white and black, in the South. As far as I know, Papa was the father of two white boys, my father and uncle, and a daughter who died in infancy.

Papa chuckled while telling us stories about Hamer in the summer of 1969 during our noon meal at the round oak table in the kitchen of the house he had renovated down the block from City Hall on North Chester Avenue. His humor covered up the corrosive racism that undermined everyone in Ruleville.

When Papa started working as a stock clerk in a dry goods store at age five after his father had deserted the family, he looked up to the men who came to the store. In a 1911 photograph, he straddles half of a wooden barrel on the porch of the brick store. His younger brother, Challus, is barefoot. They are both wearing news caps; Papa has his cap on backwards. He looks confident in his starched shirt with white collar, his left hand on the work belt around his waist. A tall, thin man with a handlebar moustache, suspenders and hat is standing behind a barrel on the left, holding a small burlap sack.

The overseers on nearby plantations probably gave Papa the idea that their world would be upended by a race war. I heard Papa mention this a couple of times, usually in response to one of his grandchildren saying something about the ugly situation in Ruleville.

My oldest cousin, Marlow, brought the family's chatter to a halt one summer afternoon in 1969 as we were eating the noon meal. His father, Sonny, had dropped the n-word, as he often did in casual conversation. Marlow, 18, had had enough.

"Do you think you can use another word?" he said. "I'm sick of hearing that one."

My grandparents and aunt and uncle went into shock. Silence prevailed.

Duff, John Robert and I smiled at each other. We were proud of Marlow for standing up to his Daddy. Of course, it didn't change anything. Sonny still uses the n-word, and he doesn't

care who hears it. In 2011, when Duff was in the hospital in Jackson, Sonny used it to refer to one of the nurses who had left the room. One of Duff's guests gasped, and Marlow and I hung our heads in embarrassment.

"You would think he would realize that we're not living in the nineteenth century," Marlow whispered to me.

Duff also rocked the family's racism when we were young. After his maternal grandfather died in the late 1970s, Duff moved into a sharecropper shack on his land near the Sunflower River. In the summer Duff dressed in shorts and cowboy boots because of the mud created by rainstorms. When the boots started separating from their soles, he reattached them with duct tape. Sister begged him to go shopping with her in Memphis so she could replace his boots. He didn't want to do that. He liked the way they fit.

Duff had gained fame in the 1980s as the guitarist and one of the singers in The Tangents, a rock-n-roll band that played regularly in Jackson, Bay St. Louis and Oxford. At one of Sonny and Sister's Christmas parties, which had turned into community events, one of Sister's friends said something to him about his boots.

"Oh yeah, I wear niggah boots," he said. "I live in a niggah house, I dress like a niggah, I sing like a niggah. I must be a niggah."

The crowd fell silent. His brothers and I were jubilant. We loved it when one of us took a stand against their hatred.

Papa never witnessed the race war he always feared, but he finally embraced Hamer's legacy. In March 1970, the city of Ruleville proclaimed Fannie Lou Hamer Day in honor of her work to register black voters.

Papa wrote her a letter: “You have put up a valiant fight for those things you truly believe in, and you have obtained results that you should be recognized for. The results of your battles are now a matter of public record, and more benefits are coming each year. If more Americans gave of themselves as you have for the things they believe in, ours would be a better nation.”

I am proud of him for evolving to that point before he died. In recognizing Hamer’s efforts, he realized that my seventh great-grandfather’s promise of America in 1700 should be shared by all of its citizens.

Hamer gave her last speech in January 1976 in Madison, Wisconsin. “She had been in and out of the hospital since 1972, when she was first admitted for nervous exhaustion,” Maegan Brooks and Davis Houck write. “Her list of illnesses multiplied—she was suffering from exhaustion, hypertension, diabetes, bouts of grave depression, and breast cancer.”

Papa died on January 5, 1977, of a massive heart attack while fishing alone on Lake Whittington in Benoit. He fell from his aluminum skiff and was found floating in the water by other fishermen. He was 72. That same month, Hamer was admitted to the hospital in Mound Bayou. Her heart failed on March 14, 1977. She was 59.

Chapter 3: An Outsider at Ole Miss

As a high school junior in Fayetteville, North Carolina, I had decisions to make, and my father, a career Army officer, usually made them for me. When I was offered a chance for a scholarship to Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire in 1971, he refused to sign the parental consent form. His reason: “You are too young to go to prep school at 14.”

My best friend, Darlene Fine, became one of the first girls admitted to Exeter, while I became secretary of the Keyettes at Terry Sanford Senior High School. I devoured Darlene’s long letters about learning to play ice hockey and rowing crew, discussing literature in classrooms that featured round tables, and drinking vodka and smoking weed in nearby woods. Her proudest achievement: Being crowned Queen of the Butt Room, the smoking lounge in the basement of her co-ed dormitory. Naturally, she experienced sex at a young age, too, and somehow my father had divined all this.

Daddy and I generally got along. He accepted that I was more liberal than he was, and he gave me the *Life* magazine in 1969 with Woodstock on the cover because he knew I was interested in what the teenagers were doing. For my 13th birthday in 1970, he gave me the *Woodstock* album. When I found the “Fish Cheer,” the opening to Country Joe McDonald’s anti-Vietnam song, I couldn’t resist playing it for him.

When he came home from work that day, he was wearing his khaki uniform and officer’s hat with gold braid on the brim. I asked him to come in my bedroom to hear the cheer that began: “Give me an F,” and then spelling out a pejorative that wasn’t common in those days.

Daddy stood at attention the whole time. He did not respond. He walked into his bedroom to change clothes.

I got more of a rise out of him that evening when we discussed the Vietnam War at dinner. Every evening on the television news, we heard how many people had died that day in the war. It became monotonous, but I wanted to tell him how important it was for us to get out of that country. He said it was important for us to finish the job.

We went around and around about Vietnam, but our most heated argument occurred after he berated my brother Bob for the length of his hair. Bob just took the condemnation. I couldn't stand it any longer, so I said, "Leave him alone. It's his hair."

Daddy said, "As long as he's in my house, he has to obey my rules."

"That's so ridiculous," I said.

"Go to your room!" he said.

That always was a relief to me. My bedroom was my haven from my mother's moods, my father's commands and my brother's nosiness. I had taken my bed and box springs off the frame so I could have a "hippie" bed on the floor, where I read and listened to records.

Because of my SAT scores as a junior, I was offered a scholarship to Randolph Macon Woman's College in Lynchburg, Virginia. My mother was excited because it was the oldest Methodist-run college in the country. I asked the college registrar for more information, and when I found out that I could major in horseback riding, I decided that I needed a more traditional curriculum.

I wanted to go to UNC or Duke. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill was the go-to university for most of my classmates. Terry Sanford, the namesake of our school and governor from 1961 through 1965, had funneled the state's tobacco money into the public schools, particularly higher education. UNC boasted renowned programs in English and foreign

languages, but it declared me an out-of-state resident because I lived at Fort Bragg, which it deemed federal property.

I took a day off from Terry Sanford and my father drove me to Chapel Hill to declare our residency. The hearing committee rejected my father's evidence that we had lived in North Carolina for four years and paid sales tax. It didn't matter. He didn't own real estate. On the ride back to Fort Bragg, we discussed my options. I had been accepted to Duke, but the tuition was \$6,000 a year. "If I'm going to pay for it," Daddy said, "you're going to Ole Miss." For him, Ole Miss was home. Both he and his brother went there. Why would I want to go anywhere else?

For a time I entertained the fantasy of declaring myself financially emancipated from my parents; I imagined I could wait tables in Chapel Hill or Durham and receive aid from UNC or Duke. It didn't take me long to figure out which way I would go. I visited my cousins in Oxford, Mississippi, to see if I would like Ole Miss.

The campus of the University of Mississippi is easy on the eyes. The 1920s architects built Greek revival and neoclassical buildings around a 10-acre grove of oak, elm and magnolia trees. The school was chartered in 1844 and prides itself on admitting women in 1882 and hiring a female faculty member in 1885. Its website no longer boasts of closing in 1861, when the entire student body enlisted in Company A of the 11th Mississippi Infantry. The regiment was nicknamed the University Greys and "suffered 100 percent casualties at Gettysburg," historian David Sansing writes. Oxford now is celebrated as the home of William Faulkner, and the school mascot has been transformed from Colonel Rebel to a Mississippi black bear.

In the spring of 1975, my mother's cousin, Betty Sue Moore, picked me up at Oxford's small airport. Betty Sue was the oldest of the cousins and was tall and pretty, with long, thick brown hair.

"You're going out for rush, aren't you?" she said, more a command than a question.

"Uh, what's rush?" It sounded vaguely fun.

"You have to join a sorority!" she said. "You know, I was a Chi O, and I can write you a letter of recommendation."

I already felt nauseated from the long ride in the propeller commuter plane from New Orleans. "I think I need to lie down," I said.

"OK," she said, "but Jim is going to take you on a tour of the campus tomorrow."

Chi Omega is one of the oldest sororities at Ole Miss, founded in 1899. Betty Sue was a member at the University of Arkansas, which started the sorority in 1895. It is also one of the most exclusive. Betty Sue was a shoo-in in the early 1950s, when she left Greenwood, Mississippi, to go away to school. As the only child of the owner of the Lawrence Printing Company, she had the right credentials: a father with money. During rush, in which pledges travel from house to house, answering the same questions—such as, "What does your Daddy do?"—I learned that if I were to be accepted into Chi O, I would have to stop saying that my Daddy was in the Army. That wasn't chic. Girls from the Mississippi Delta, whose fathers farmed for a living, said their fathers were planters, ensuring the sorority that large checks would be coming their way. There was a certain vocabulary that was required for acceptance, and I was not savvy to it.

In the 1970s, if you wanted to be editor of *The Daily Mississippian*, you had to receive backing from the fraternities and sororities. As a 17-year-old incoming freshman, I had no

knowledge of how to negotiate the system. But I had confidence in my abilities, earned the hard way, by moving every two to four years as an Army brat.

I felt strange while answering questions about my childhood while sitting on silk sofas in the beige carpeted front parlors of the Greek revival houses on Sorority Row. By the end of the week, I had decided that the girls of Kappa Delta were the friendliest, but I knew a girl from my parents' hometown of Ruleville in Kappa Kappa Gamma, the "smart girls' sorority," according to fellow rushees. So I pledged Kappa.

The officers of Kappa wasted little time in welcoming the 1975 rush class to its house, a red-brick two-story house centered by six white Doric columns and featuring large wings on both sides. I was happy to see Charlotte Green, a fellow rushee from Gulfport I had met during summer school at Ole Miss. Charlotte was a born believer, wearing a gold Kappa key along with a gold crucifix around her neck. When she got nervous or excited, she ran the two charms back and forth along the 18-inch gold chain she even wore to bed.

While I started Ole Miss early to get away from my mother, Charlotte was in summer school to be with her boyfriend, Larry McCullough, a student from Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Their fathers were in business together, and Larry and Charlotte's romance blossomed once they were away from their conservative families. Larry pledged Sigma Nu, the football players' fraternity that prides itself on members Archie, Cooper and Eli Manning. As sorority pledges, Charlotte and I were required to attend all the fraternity swaps, and I was relieved to find out that we would see a familiar face at Sigma Nu.

The Sigma Nu house in the 1970s was a low-slung mid-century modern house with a swimming pool in back. As we entered their main party room, the fraternity's older members sized us up slowly, gazing at our faces and then our bodies. We nervously stood in the paneled

room until we sensed that the older sorority members were moving toward the beer keg.

Charlotte and I found Larry in the pool room with the other pledges.

Larry introduced me to a fellow pledge and asked how I was doing.

I immediately went into women's lib mode: "I feel like a piece of meat," I said as the two boys laughed.

"C'mon, Louann, have a beer," Larry said. "It's only a swap."

Charlotte kissed Larry hello and chimed in: "Don't take it so seriously. Let's have some fun."

We took our red Solo cups of beer outside to the pool and talked about our classes. Larry and most of the other boys were majoring in business and planned to go to law school.

"All I have to do is avoid statistics," Larry said. "I was going to be pre-med, but I couldn't hack organic chemistry."

For Ole Miss undergraduates, making money and driving a nice car were the prerequisites for a good life.

I wasn't prepared for starting an adult life. I had lost my virginity the previous summer, when I started Ole Miss. In the mid-1970s, the second wave of the feminist movement, my friends and I agreed that virginity was passé. We were newly liberated women! We could get free birth-control pills at the university infirmary.

My dorm roommate, Kathy Doyle, worked at the Pizza Hut on Jackson Avenue, and one of the cooks was Peyton LaRoque, an older fraternity boy from Laurel, Mississippi. The waitresses and cooks usually got together at someone's house after work on Saturdays, and I soon started a flirtation with Peyton. In what I thought was a liberated move, I told him that I was determined to lose my virginity that summer. He wasted no time in seducing me.

Peyton lived alone in the attic of a small house on Fraternity Row that was fashioned after an English Tudor house. He had the room to himself because the slant of the roof made it too difficult to walk around without ducking. His double bed and box springs were on the floor below his only window, which looked over the university tennis courts. It was about 2 a.m. when we entered his room, which was lit by a lamp on a desk that was pushed against one wall. There was a red Pendleton blanket on top of his bed, and as we started making out and fell to the bed, I pulled back the blanket because it was itchy.

“Ooh, you’re a good kisser,” he said as he pulled my polo shirt over my head and unbuttoned my jeans. It hurt when he first tried to penetrate me, but I felt fortunate that I was with an older man, who knew what to do. It was somewhat pleasurable, but I didn’t have the experience to compare it to anything else. My dating in high school had been sporadic, and losing my virginity definitely was not a priority when I still was living with my parents.

Afterward, when I was lying in bed with him, processing the feelings and hormones that were washing over me, he said, “I’ve never had a virgin before.”

My disgust immediately registered on my face.

He said, “What? I’m just being honest.”

I got out of bed and put on my clothes.

“C’mon,” he said, “don’t be mad. Why don’t you stay the night?”

I told him I needed to get back to the dorm, and he agreed to drive me back. He started dating an older friend within a month.

This was the first time, other than when I felt abandoned when my father went to Vietnam, that my romantic idealism crashed into hard reality. My parents had not prepared me for my first sexual experience because they were too embarrassed to talk about it. My mother

said, “Boys only want one thing,” which made me roll my eyes. When she forbade me to go over to a friend’s house during junior high because my friend had three older brothers, I wept out of frustration that she didn’t think I was smart enough to deal with that. She later told her friends that she didn’t discuss sex with me because I was too emotional.

My father gave me the same advice when my high school friends and I discovered that we could buy sloe gin fizzes at a junior officers’ club on Fort Bragg. “You’ve got to watch out for those guys,” he said. “They only want one thing.”

Self-help books were not prevalent in the 1970s. The concept of self-esteem was a mystery. As a young woman entering college, if I had been told, “Protect your feelings and self-esteem,” I would have needed an explanation: A healthy self-esteem is based on your accomplishments and your ability to honor your feelings. Your hormones are running high, and so are the ones of the young men you will meet. Get to know a person before you have sex with him. Don’t be afraid to talk about your feelings. Be honest with yourself. If he mistreats you in any way, he is not the man for you.

Charlotte and I lived in the 10-story New dorm, which the university had just built. When Betty Sue’s son, Jim, asked where I was living, he said, “Hoar Hall? That’s why they call it New dorm. They wanted to name it after the Hoar family, but too many people laughed at that name.”

Our dorm was just down the hill from the Kappa house, and the sorority billed our fathers for all our meals at the house, even though we never made it up the hill for breakfast or lunch. Dinner was a formal affair, held in the large dining room. It seated 100 people, 75 of the sorority’s senior members who lived in the house and our 25-member pledge class.

The pledges sat at a long table covered in white linen, with linen napkins, and the senior members gathered at round tables near the kitchen. Six houseboys, law students who received free meals, served dinner to 100 chattering women. They offered us porcelain dishes full of Southern country-style cooking: pot roast with potatoes and carrots, fried catfish with hush puppies and slaw, stewed chicken with green beans and canned pineapple slices served atop iceberg lettuce with a dollop of mayonnaise.

At five-foot-seven, 110 pounds, with blond hair that went down to my waist, I caught the eye of houseboy Kenton Bonifay. He was from Jackson and had an easygoing personality and brown eyes that twinkled when he smiled. He served our table every night, and we developed a flirtation that turned serious with the start of football season. He had tickets with his Kappa Sigma fraternity brothers, and he needed a date.

Women wore dresses, a full face of makeup and high heels to football games. Men wore khakis, dress shirts with ties, and navy blazers, with an inside pocket that hid their silver flask of sour mash. Fountain soft drinks, bought at the concession stand and served in red Solo cups, were the perfect vehicle for whatever liquor the boys could hide.

In the fall, the pledges were assigned big sisters, seniors in the sorority who would advise us. Sarah Jessup, a blonde from St. Louis, was assigned to me. At Ole Miss she had learned to be hospitable in conversation, but her light-blue eyes rarely gave away her feelings. When Kenton started showing an interest in me, Sarah began to show an interest in my social life. “What did you and Kenton do this weekend?” she asked after dinner, when the pledges were invited to our big sisters’ bedrooms. I faithfully recited where we sat for each football game, what we drank and where we went for dinner.

In mid-October, the perfect time to watch a football game in Oxford, we played Georgia, and our friends Tim Morgan and Catherine O'Donnell smuggled in a plastic milk jug that had been filled with vodka and bloody Mary mix. All we needed were cups with ice, and Tim, an officer with Kappa Sig, could sweet-talk anyone, even cynical concessionaires. In early November, I rode with Kenton to Jackson for the LSU game, played in Mississippi Veterans Memorial Stadium, home of Jackson State University. Ole Miss won that night, 17-13, and we were full of joy and whiskey on the three-hour ride back to Oxford.

When we got back to his apartment, we had sex for the first time. He was quiet afterward, and I asked him what was wrong.

"You are too inexperienced," he said. "You don't move around enough."

I felt ashamed, but I didn't know what to do. I didn't move around enough because I was frightened, and I was too inhibited to tell him. He was too inexperienced with young women to teach me how to have a pleasurable experience.

Sarah, my big sister in the sorority, was eager to know the details of my weekend that Monday after dinner. She had short, highlighted hair and wore a shirtdress. She took me upstairs to her room, which she shared with another girl. Her room had the same beige carpet plushness of the living areas downstairs, and her silk-draped window overlooked Sorority Row. Each upstairs room had two twin beds, two desks, and an easy chair, and they shared a walk-in closet with the room next door.

"Here, have a seat," she said as she motioned for me to sit on the end of her bed as she propped herself on a corduroy study pillow against the bed's headboard. "So, what did you and Kenton do this weekend?"

I excitedly told her about the ballgame, and how fun it was to beat LSU.

“Did you drive back after the game or did you get a hotel room?” she asked.

“Oh, we drove back,” I said. “Kenton wanted to get home so he could study on Sunday.”

“Did you spend the night?”

I paused. She drew closer and looked sympathetically into my eyes.

“You can tell me,” she said. “I won’t tell anybody.”

As a member of an Irish-American family from the Mississippi Delta, I never shy away from telling a good story, especially if it involves embarrassing details about myself. That’s what makes a good story in the Delta. Sometimes the exhilaration of performance shadows rational thought, such as self-protection and discretion.

When I got to the embarrassing part, about Kenton telling me that I don’t move around enough, Sarah’s brow knitted in concern. “He’s such an asshole,” she said.

“Wait, do you know him?” I asked.

“Yeah, I’ve known him for about four years.”

“How do you know him?”

“He used to date Missy Krieger, one of the seniors.”

“Missy Krieger?” I asked.

The senior members of the sorority always sat together at dinner on the other side of the dining room. It was becoming clear that Kenton’s flirtation with me had been closely watched.

“Kenton and Missy dated for years as undergraduates,” Sarah said. “They were very serious. They even got engaged at one point.”

“Why didn’t they get married?” I asked.

“They broke up last summer,” she said. “Kenton just didn’t want to get married.”

“How did he become a houseboy?”

“Missy had gotten him the job before they broke up. He didn’t want to give it up because it’s such a plum job for law students.”

I was the rebound relationship for one of the houseboys. And no one had told me about his past. I suppose I should have asked, but at 18, I accepted people and events without much question. It didn’t take me long to get over Kenton. My problem lay with my big sister, Sarah. Is that how big sisters are supposed to act?

I started questioning sisterhood and what it means to be in a sorority. I made another 4.0 that semester, and the sorority officers urged me to move into the house. I liked the idea of padding down to breakfast in my pajamas, but I wasn’t comfortable with the emotional coldness I still felt from some of the girls. I didn’t like their lack of boundaries, how they would go into each other’s closet to look for something to wear on a Saturday night before they would go on dates. How do you keep up with your clothes?

Even as a teenager, I knew I needed more privacy than that. I liked to read and study in a quiet room, and none of the rooms seemed tranquil enough to encourage concentration. Girls constantly were going in and out of rooms. The sorority held a study hall every afternoon in the dining room, before the houseboys came at 4 p.m. to set the tables with silver and china. But I couldn’t study, even there. There was too much chatter.

Charlotte had become a regular member of study hall because she was on academic probation with the sorority. She was studying early childhood education, like a lot of women at Ole Miss who wanted to become teachers, and she just wasn’t going to class. She and Larry both had cars, and they liked to go out. Oxford in the mid-1970s was just beginning to develop restaurants and bars that catered to students. There was a popular bar on the Square, with brick walls, dark wood and ferns hanging above the chairs.

We liked to go to a converted cotton gin just down the hill from Neilsen's department store for pitchers of beer and live music. The cover charge was always low, and The Gin featured local bands and bluesmen. If we didn't feel like The Gin, we'd go across the street to The Hoka, named after a local Indian princess, for hippie fare such as avocado sandwiches, whole-wheat cookies and herbal tea. Owner Ron Shapiro had moved to Oxford from St. Louis because he liked the small-town vibe, and he was able to negotiate a lease on the old warehouse that he turned into an "earth movie theater."

He showed films that we never would have seen in Oxford or Mississippi. We saw *Annie Hall*, *Manhattan*, *Emmanuelle* and *The Story of O*. His Friday-night soft-porn movies started attracting fraternity boys, who placed their cases of beer in ice chests on the cement floor. Those of us who enjoyed watching art-house movies in silence had to deal with loud laughs and catcalls from the boys. Friday nights became so successful that Ron started showing *Deep Throat* and *Debbie Does Dallas*. That's where I drew the line.

Larry and Charlotte loved to drink beer, so they spent most weeknights at the lone pizza parlor on the square or at The Gin. For dinner on the weekends, we went to The Beacon for Southern home cooking and Mistilis for thick hamburger steaks and hand-cut french fries. I did well in school because I majored in English, French and journalism. Minimum reading was required, and as long as we knew how to organize our thoughts and write well, we could ace the course by filling up blue books, the six-by-nine-inch composition notebooks that served as our examinations in the College of Liberal Arts.

Early childhood education was supposed to be even easier, but Charlotte did not take advantage of that. She just couldn't focus on her courses, and after our fall-semester grades came out, she was put on probation. She couldn't attend any of Kappa's social events and was required

to attend study hall every day. She came into my dorm room several times to sit on my bed and sob. She came to Ole Miss to have fun, and her dream was to be a Kappa.

I didn't have that dream. My rational mind knew that being in a sorority would serve me well if I wanted to be editor of the paper. But my emotional and spiritual selves were not on board. I didn't approve of the way they tortured Charlotte with their demands for higher grades. I hated the way sororities in general treated women. My neighbor in the dorm, Dotty Buchanan, was a Chi O from Beaumont, Texas, and she told me hair-raising stories about how that sorority chose its pledges.

She made the cut because her father was a geologist with one of the top oil companies in Houston. As a junior, Dotty was required to attend all the sorority meetings in which they showed each potential pledge's photograph in a slide show as the members lounged on silk sofas in the house's double parlors. If a girl posed with her dog, the catcalls would be: "Which one is the dog?" If a girl had a wealthy father but did not display great beauty in her photograph, the comments would be worse.

Ole Miss was known as a country club among Mississippi residents, but it was deeply mired in 1950s sensibilities. We even had a midnight curfew at our dorm, which we could negotiate with the security guard. When I complained about the curfew to my cousin, Betty Sue, she said, "Well, at least you can wear pants. We had to wear dresses and high heels."

By the start of the spring semester in 1976, the officers of the sorority started pressuring me to move into the house. My father had already spent several hundred dollars on sorority dues, gifts for my big sister and other required expenditures. A semester's rent was another big income producer for the sorority. I couldn't justify more money for an organization that didn't give me

much joy, with all its requirements for meetings and fraternity swaps. It all seemed like work, and my only true friendship was with Charlotte.

Kenton was still a houseboy, but he no longer waited on the pledge table. He didn't ask me out again after we had sex, and our relations were chilly but cordial. I also became distant from my big sister, Sarah, after I realized that she had pumped me for information only to tell her true friends in the sorority.

In April, the sorority officers called me up to the house for a private meeting. They asked if I wanted a Coke before we sat on one of the sofas in an upstairs parlor. The sorority's vice president was the most direct: "We want to know why you haven't moved into the house."

"Well," I said, "I don't feel comfortable here."

All four of the officers stared at me. They wore flowered sundresses and peach nail polish, and their long hair was pulled back with barrettes. Their feet, clad in espadrilles, were crossed at the ankles.

I tried to fill up the silence: "I don't like the way girls go through each other's closets before they have dates."

The secretary had a ready answer: "You can tell the girls not to go through your things."

"There aren't locks on the doors," I said. "How do I keep them out when I'm not here?"

"You'll just have to let them know."

This seemed unreasonable. I said, "I don't like the way you've been pressuring Charlotte to keep up her grades."

"That is part of the legacy of Kappa," the president said. "We are the smart girls' sorority. We are the Southern belles' sorority. We have to keep up our standards."

“I just don’t like the way she’s been treated,” I said. “She comes into my room to cry almost every day.”

“Charlotte knows what is expected of her,” the president said. “If she has a problem with us, then she needs to come to us.”

I knew immediately that I had gotten myself in trouble with Charlotte.

So I piled it on: “I don’t like going to fraternity swaps,” I said. “We are herded into those houses like cattle, and the boys look at us like we’re pieces of meat. It’s disgusting.”

Again, they just stared at me.

“And then I’m questioned by my big sister about my dates with a houseboy,” I said.

The officers leaned in to hear more.

“It’s just to get information to pass along to her friend, who is also in the sorority.”

Their gaze told me to go on.

“Why didn’t anyone tell me that he had dated a senior in the sorority?”

The president spoke: “That isn’t our business.”

“Well, it is the business of a so-called sisterhood, as I see it,” I said.

They kept staring at me.

“So I guess I want to de-pledge.”

“De-pledge?” the president said. “Why would you want to de-pledge?”

“For all of the above reasons,” I said.

“What about your legacy?” the president asked.

“My legacy?” I asked. “What legacy?”

“Your daughters will not be able to become Kappas if you de-pledge,” the vice president said.

That really irritated me. I lost my temper: “I would not do this to my children,” I said. “This has been one of the worst experiences of my life.”

I got up to walk out, and the president stopped me. She said: “You can’t just walk out. You have to write a letter to national explaining why you are de-pledging.”

“What do they care?” I said.

“It is required,” she said. “You cannot leave until you write a letter to national.”

I asked for a piece of paper. I felt confident.

“Don’t you want time to think about this?” the president asked.

“I have thought about it,” I said. “I can’t do this anymore.”

Using the skills I had developed in filling up blue books with answers on my English and history exams, I wrote an explanation to the national organization on why I no longer could be a pledge. I was savvy enough not to use any names. I handed over my resignation to the president.

“OK,” she said. “I really wish you would think some more about this.”

“No thanks,” I said.

As I walked through the large front door of the massive house and down the hill to my dorm, I felt a tremendous sense of joy and relief. “So, this is what freedom feels like,” I thought.

True to my intuition about Charlotte, she was upset that I had mentioned her name during my meeting with the officers. She was nervous and irate that she had to explain to them why she cried so much about her grades.

It didn’t come between us. My leaving the sorority brought it to her consciousness that she needed to be more serious about her exams. I helped her by scheduling study sessions. The art of blue-book writing requires that you memorize as much material as you can before an

exam. When you get your essay questions, you take a deep breath and organize your thoughts. Then you start writing. I helped Charlotte break the code.

We became roommates that June when we decided that we liked the laid-back attitudes of the teachers and students during the summers at Ole Miss. I planned to get my degree in three years. Charlotte used the summer to catch up on the courses she had almost failed the first two semesters. I usually took English and history courses during the summer, building up my core curriculum. One of my history courses was Hitler and Nazi Germany, and I learned much more about Berlin than I ever did as a child.

My social life revolved around whatever Larry and Charlotte were doing. One Saturday night, after Larry had dropped us off after dinner, Charlotte and I were lying in our beds, talking. We got a phone call from Larry: “Y’all have got to come over here,” he said. “There is a guy from Dallas who just pulled in to the parking lot with a case of cold Coors.”

Cold beer was a novelty in Oxford. The fundamentalist Christians who controlled the town and county had made it dry, meaning we had to drive to the county line to buy cold beer. We laughed at the irony of the town elders wanting to prevent drunken driving by forcing us to drive the highways to buy beer. And cold Coors was as rare as truffles. The beer made with Rocky Mountain spring water was not sold east of the Mississippi River.

Newt Walker was a lanky 6-foot-tall Texan who had large brown eyes, a prominent nose and a wide smile under his shaggy Beatle haircut. His father was from Nashville, Tennessee, and had attended Vanderbilt. His mother was a Memphis belle and knew how to wield Southern hospitality. She told Newt to put a case of Coors on ice for his trip to Oxford so he could make friends right away in the dorm.

By the time Charlotte and I got to Newt's first-floor room in Kincannon Hall, it was overrun with boys who wanted a cold beer. Newt welcomed all comers with a handshake and a smile, and his Texas mannerisms were charming. I sat on his bed and gazed at him. It was love at first sight.

After the boys had their first Coors, Newt talked them into helping him unload his U-Haul trailer. They brought in a Bang & Olufsen receiver and large JBL speakers. Newt carried his turntable himself because it had an arm that somehow hovered over a record as it played. Like most Ole Miss students, he had a rack of hanging clothes, and I marveled at the soft, thick luxury of his cashmere Brooks Brothers blazers.

His father, Tom Walker, had done well at Vanderbilt, majoring in business. He had a knack for securities, and started working with the Equitable in Nashville in the early 1950s. He moved his young family to Dallas just as the city was becoming the epitome of mid-century modern design. The Equitable wanted him to move to New York in the 1960s, but he wanted to stay in Dallas. A then little-known investment bank on Wall Street, Goldman Sachs, asked him to open an office in Dallas in the early 1970s. Tom found willing investors among the cattle barons and oil executives who had become his friends at downtown dining clubs and Brook Hollow Golf Club, not far from their large two-story home in Highland Park.

Newt had the combination of his father's good looks and his mother's ease with people. He offered me another beer as he sat on the bed next to me. "So, where are you from?" he asked.

"Well," I said, "I'm an Army brat from the Mississippi Delta."

"Army brat?" he said, laughing. "Why do you call yourself a brat?"

“It’s a term that was given to us a long time ago,” I said. “It’s because we move around so much. We take over schools when we arrive. We ‘hit the ground running,’ as they say in the 82nd Airborne.”

This seemed to intrigue him.

“Where did you go to high school?” I asked.

“Highland Park.”

“Where is Highland Park?”

“It’s the nicest part of Dallas,” he said. “It’s one of the best high schools in Texas.”

“Hey, I’ve got an idea,” Larry said. “Let’s drive to Sardis.”

At 4 a.m., we were the last four in the room. Sardis was on the county line, and had a store on Highway 6 that sold cold beer all night. It also featured a large lake that was created by the Army Corps of Engineers in 1936 when President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Flood Control Act. The corps had hauled in white sand to create beaches on the Lower Lake near its massive dam, which controlled the Little Tallahatchie River, the headwaters of the Yazoo.

“We’ll meet you out there,” Larry said as he and Charlotte headed to his car.

“Are you ready?” Newt asked me. My heart was racing. I never had experienced so much spontaneous fun in one night.

We got to his car, an orange 1976 Datsun 280Z. Even among Ole Miss fraternity boys, who jockey for position with the latest sports car, this was a good-looking car. His Texas license plate said SUDS-UP. “How did you get a license plate like that?” I asked.

“You just have to pay for it,” he said.

“Aren’t you afraid that the cops are going to pull you over?”

“My mom says that my orange car is enough to get the cops’ attention,” he said. “So she let me have the license plate.” Even though the hot car with the personalized license plate could set him up for arrest, she compromised as only a mother of a college-age boy can.

He opened the passenger door and I slid into the deep, black-leather bucket seat. The car enveloped me. I could see out the bottom of the passenger window, but the elongated windshield offered the best view.

Newt popped in an eight-track of Jeff Beck’s *Blow by Blow*. The plaintive strains of “Cause We’ve Ended as Lovers,” written by Stevie Wonder, put me in a contemplative mood. I had never heard music like this before. It was all electric guitar with quiet drumstick brush strokes and soft electric piano. Newt stopped at the store on the highway, bought a cold six-pack of Miller High Life bottles, and we cruised toward the lake along winding Highway 315, also called Blackjack Road.

Sardis became a gambling mecca during the early part of the twentieth century, mainly because of Prohibition. Gambling wasn’t legal in Mississippi, but casinos still thrived in backwoods country houses. There is heavy virgin hardwood timber on both sides of Blackjack Road, and kudzu covers the hills. Newt downshifted as his car tugged at the curves and Jeff Beck’s guitar raced to George Martin’s lush orchestration. I was on a magic carpet ride.

By the time we got to the beach at John Kyle State Park, I could hardly drink my beer. The beach was wide and empty as the sun started coming up. Larry and Charlotte had waved to us as we arrived but soon found a secluded place. Newt and I talked as we lay together on the sand. He kissed me and we rolled around on the sand for a while, but he didn’t try to go any further and I didn’t encourage him. I had learned my lesson with the fraternity boys. This relationship was going to be different.

About 8 a.m. the sun started feeling hot, and the beer was gone. We decided to head back to campus. As we rode along Blackjack Road, the other side of *Blow by Blow* was playing, and I knew it would be the soundtrack to a memorable night.

As I climbed into my bed in the dorm, Charlotte was in hers, and neither one of us could go to sleep. “Christy,” I said, “I think I’m in love.”

“What?” she said. “Oh, girl.”

“No, I really think I’m in love.”

She laughed and said, “We have to call Larry.”

She called Larry’s room and told him, “Hold on, Lou has something to say to you.”

“Larry?” I said. “I think I’m in love.”

“What?” he said. “How do you know?”

I talked about my first impression and the music and the drive and how wonderful I felt while we were making out.

Then Larry’s Southern accent suddenly changed. I realized it wasn’t Larry on the phone. It was Newt.

My face reddened and I stammered that I had to go.

I felt humiliated. I said, “Christy, did you know that Newt answered Larry’s phone?”

“Are you sure?”

“Christy, I swear it sounded like Larry at first, but then I realized it was Newt imitating Larry.”

“Oh, God, Lou, let’s go to sleep.”

Chapter 4: The Alchemy of Relationship

Newt Walker and I were an attraction of opposites: He grew up in Highland Park, an upscale area of Dallas, and I grew up on Army bases. Newt lived in a large two-story house that had a separate small house in the backyard that served as a guest suite and a party room for him and his older brother when they were teenagers. I lived in military housing, usually a duplex, until we moved to Berlin in the 1960s. The American and British brigades had built two-story houses for its officers in Dahlem and Charlottenburg, wealthy areas that buffered the city from Potsdam, where members of the Russian KGB lived in villas. As a child, that was as close as I got to the luxury that Newt experienced as the son of a partner with Goldman Sachs.

We started dating the summer we both turned 19. On our own for the first time in our lives, we were awash in hormones and each other. But there was something deeper going on. Our different energies complemented each other. Our relationship provided security for me and acceptance for Newt, but chemistry is what held us together.

Newt majored in business and I majored in liberal arts in the mid- to late 1970s at the University of Mississippi. He was born with dyslexia and I loved to read. With the help of his mother and a boarding school in Connecticut, Newt had learned how to negotiate the world in which letters and numbers were scrambled to him. I didn't know he had dyslexia until he asked me to take economics with him so I could summarize the text for him.

Newt excelled in talking to people and winning them over with his humor. I was more of an introvert, needing space and time to myself to recharge. He loved to fish, bow-hunt and play Frisbee. I loved to watch movies and lie in bed with my nose in a book.

The difference in our families' wealth and social class enhanced our attraction to each other. He liked that I depended on him for rides to class or to restaurants and clubs. He enjoyed

the feeling of being the provider, of giving me everything I needed. I loved the smooth softness of his cashmere blazer, and when I hugged him or held his arm, I felt warm and protected. When we fell asleep, his left arm cradled my head on the pillow as we spooned, and I could hear the soft sweep of the second hand on his Rolex Oyster Perpetual gold watch, a high school graduation gift from his parents. I still love to touch anyone wearing a cashmere blazer, and the sound of an expensive watch still puts me at ease.

We found common ground on his grandfather's farm on a large spring-fed lake in Blue Springs, Mississippi, 50 miles east of Oxford. His grandfather, Saint Elmo Newton, had retired after a career with a large printing company in Memphis. His first wife, Anne Marie, died when their only child, Newt's mother, was a child. Elmo remarried but made sure that Newt's mother, also named Anne Marie, was educated at the private all-girls Hutchison School in Germantown, which used to be farmland but now is a thriving part of east Memphis. She also attended Mary Baldwin College in Staunton, Virginia.

Newt and I spent at least one weekend a month in Blue Springs. On Friday afternoon, we'd pack his car with overnight bags and a six-pack of beer on ice. We'd get to Blue Springs in time for supper, which was usually steaks, baked potatoes and salad prepared by Shirley, Elmo's third wife who was 30 years younger. Elmo told Newt: "Son, you need three wives in life. One for your younger years, one for your middle years and one to take care of you when you get old."

We enjoyed an easy camaraderie with Elmo, who was in his 80s but seemed much younger. He kept in shape with daily walks around his spread, about 1,000 acres. He had a ranch hand, Sam, who lived in a small house near the entrance. "Cattle are pretty dumb," Elmo told me one morning as I accompanied him on one of his walks. "They're always getting stuck in the

cattle grates and we have to help them out. Or the little ones will get excited when we put hay in the feed trough and will climb in and get their legs stuck.”

During our steak dinner on Friday nights, Elmo and Shirley talked about our meal as if it were familiar. “Charlie is pretty good,” Elmo said, “but Buster was better.” I asked him what he was talking about, and he said, “Why do you think we eat so much steak?” My mouth fell open and everyone laughed. I couldn’t finish my dinner. Elmo never let me forget it, either. When I finally was able to eat a steak at his house, he’d wink at me and say, “I didn’t name this one.”

Elmo also raised Tennessee walking horses, and would harness one to his two-seat wooden carriage and ride the perimeter of his property. Most of his land contained deep Mississippi hardwoods—red oaks, poplar, black cherry and dogwoods, with tall pines along the ridges. The magic of my attraction to Newt became apparent one morning after breakfast, when Elmo gently guided his Tennessee walker along a ridge.

He could tell that Newt and I had become serious. Newt’s mother, Anne Marie, had become concerned because she thought we were “living in sin,” cohabitating without marriage. Elmo asked about my family, and I launched into a description of what the men did for a living in the Mississippi Delta.

“I did some business for a while with Edgar Lawrence in Greenwood,” Elmo said.

“That’s my great-uncle!” I said.

“Lawrence Printing Company?” he asked.

“That’s it!”

In the late 1970s, we had not heard of the concept of six degrees of separation, the theory that everyone and everything is six or fewer steps away, by way of introduction, from any other

person in the world. It seemed that there was a higher intelligence at work when Newt and I were drawn together in the summer of 1976.

Even though we were in different colleges at Ole Miss, we planned our classes together so we could meet for lunch at the Student Union. Our afternoons were free; we either went down to the Square for a drink or took a fun class, such as news photography, in which we took photos around town and then processed our film in the Journalism Department's small white house near the entrance to campus. We spent most of our afternoons with our neighbors, law students who also lived in the round houses on Hathorn Ridge, octagonal modular structures with lots of windows that had been built in the early 1970s.

Newt had decorated our living area with a parachute he had gotten from an Army surplus store. The parachute's orange and white silk was draped from the ceiling, from one wall to the others. Two white love seats dominated the area, with a large wooden cable spool as our coffee table. The television was under the picture window, and Newt's stereo was stacked on glass shelves with lightweight silver rails. A wall-size photograph of deep woods was behind the love seats. The total effect was hippie hangout, and we loved it.

Newt's roommate, Jay Markwell of Casey, Illinois, had one bedroom in the apartment and Newt and I shared the other. We got along beautifully until Newt mentioned something to Jay about their shared expenses. Jay calmly said, "Newt, I've never complained that Louann lives here full-time, taking showers and cooking. Why are you bothering me for more money when you've had two people living here the whole time?"

Newt saw the error of his ways, and we went back to hosting afternoon parties for our law-school neighbors. They spent most of their time in the Law School library, studying for classes, mock courtrooms, and their long exams. They needed a place to blow off steam when

they came home, and Newt and Jay kept a dorm refrigerator stocked with cold Budweiser longnecks.

Someone would inevitably light up a joint, and we would laugh at Mr. and Mrs. Thurston Howell the Third on reruns of *Gilligan's Island*, and then *The Little Rascals*, black-and-white comedy films from the 1930s. About sundown, the tipsy and stoned law students went back to their house to lie down and then get up at midnight to study some more.

I had another six-degrees-of-separation moment one Sunday when Newt invited our neighbors for a cookout after he had slow-smoked venison for 24 hours in a double-barrel contraption stocked with mesquite. I had made potato salad the way I had been taught by my grandmother: I boiled the potatoes in their jackets, sliced them when they cooled off, and added large chunks of sweet pickle and boiled eggs with Hellmann's mayonnaise. Adam Chandler took a bite and said, "This tastes like it's from Ruleville, Mississippi." I gasped, "It is from Ruleville, Mississippi!"

"You're kidding," he said.

"I'm not kidding. I'm from Ruleville."

"Why am I just finding that out?" he asked.

We laughed and then made the connection. He said his grandmother, Juanita McDowell, made potato salad like that, and was from Ruleville.

"My grandmother plays bridge with Juanita McDowell!" I said.

At the time, we thought it was a weird coincidence.

In mid-August 1977, Newt and I came back to school early so we could be together. My father had confronted me the previous Christmas about why he shouldn't have to pay for a dorm room if I was going to live with Newt. I planned to register that month for my senior year

without getting a dorm room. I hadn't discussed my plans with my parents because they were so volatile about the subject. I had \$2,000 in a savings account in case my father cut me off.

When my mother called to find out how much tuition was, I told her.

"That's low," she said.

"I didn't get a dorm room," I said. Total silence.

"Well, Daddy said he didn't want to pay for a dorm room if I'm living with Newt."

More silence, and then she said, "I'll have to talk to your father about this."

My parents never raised the issue again. I was about to turn 20 and I was going to graduate in May. When my father confronted me at Christmas, I'd cried because I didn't want my grandmother, Lou, to be disappointed in me. She was my champion, telling my father: "You would have done the same thing at her age if that had been the thing to do." My parents liked Newt, but they didn't think we should live together if we weren't married.

Newt also was getting grief from his parents, particularly his mother. During one of our weekend visits to Blue Springs in 1977, Elmo asked me to take a buggy ride with him.

We were on one of the ridges when he said, "Newt wants to get married here."

I said, "What?" This was news to me.

"Newt thinks this is the way to make both of your parents happy."

I was in shock. "What do you think, Elmo?"

"I think if you two get married here with just me and Shirley present," he said, "it will cause more problems with Anne Marie than you can imagine."

I agreed. Newt's mother was friendly to me, but she did not approve of what we were doing. When I visited Newt in Dallas, I stayed in the guest house in back. One morning Newt came to wake me up, and I was sitting in bed in my nightgown talking to him when his mother

came in. She had Newt's large brown eyes, shoulder-length hair, and wore Brooks Brothers slacks and Ferragamo flats. The look on her face registered shock and disgust.

I was ashamed, and I told Newt how awful I felt. He said, "She'll get over it." But I couldn't do anything to make amends. When Newt told her that I was majoring in English, French and journalism, Anne Marie replied: "That's a lie. No one can major in three subjects."

The summer of 1977, before I was a senior, Anne Marie planned a big family vacation so she could be with her two sons before they became official adults. The family spent a month at an exclusive resort in Sardinia and then another month in Portofino, Italy. When Newt and I reunited in August, we were closer than ever. The attempt to distract him did not work.

The afternoon of August 17, 1977, Newt and I were watching *Gilligan's Island* on a Memphis TV station about 3 p.m. when the news team interrupted the program to announce that Elvis Presley had been taken to Baptist Hospital. A few minutes later they announced that Elvis had been pronounced dead. We were sitting with Rusty Chapman, a friend of Newt's from business school. All three of us looked at each other and said: "We've got to go to Memphis!"

We always were looking for spontaneous fun, and we were high from smoking several joints. We quickly packed Newt's yellow 1977 Porsche 924 with an ice chest full of beer. Rusty got into the small backseat, and we sailed the eighty-six miles to Memphis in just under an hour. Elvis' home, Graceland, is on U.S. Highway 51 in the Whitehaven neighborhood south of the city. Newt tried to get close to the entrance, but it was crowded with people. By the time we got there, the line of people who wanted to get into Graceland stretched four long blocks.

Newt found a parking place and we walked in the hot sun toward Graceland. It was pandemonium. Memphis police tried to control the crowd, and ambulances had been called.

Some of the people who were standing near the gates had passed out from the heat and the push of panicked people. We were drawn in by the excitement, but that soon wore off.

Newt took a few photos and then said, “Let’s get out of here. This is redneck city.” We got back in his car and headed to Overton Square, the intersection of Cooper and Madison in Midtown. During the late 1970s, to us, Overton Square was the place to be. Friday’s was a new restaurant and there were other watering holes that served barbecue and Southern food. We had seen *Star Wars* the previous May at The Memphian theater, at 51 South Cooper Street. The theater was so crowded, we had to sit on the front row, where George Lucas’ opening scene of the starship going over our heads made us gasp.

The evening of August 17, we were excited to be in Memphis but still shocked about Elvis’ sudden death. He had been overweight, but we didn’t know anything about his prescription drug abuse, which was publicized later. We got a table inside Friday’s enclosed sidewalk area to watch the crowd while having drinks. As we talked about the people who had passed out in the heat, Rusty asked me where I was from. I said, “Ruleville,” and he said, “Do you know the Dorrough boys?” I laughed and said, “Of course I do. They’re my cousins.”

About five minutes later, I looked up at the crowd gathered at the bar. At a table inside the restaurant, I saw Uncle Sonny and Aunt Sister, the parents of my cousins. I told Rusty, “And here are the Dorrough boys’ parents!” He and Newt got up with me to greet my relatives.

“What are you doing here?” Sister asked.

“We were watching *Gilligan’s Island* and the Memphis station said that Elvis had died.”

“I know,” she said. “I’ve got tickets to see him in concert.”

“What are you going to do with them?”

“I’m going to try to get my money back.”

“What are y’all doing up here?” I asked.

“We came to see Willie Nelson,” Sister said. “He’s our favorite.”

Newt, Rusty and I went back to our table, laughing about what a small world it is. We ate burgers to soak up the alcohol and then headed back to Oxford. We couldn’t make it to Elvis’ funeral. “Too many rednecks,” Newt said. The people who were devoted to Elvis were solidly middle class, not Newt’s kind of people. After seeing so many people pass out in the sun, I had to agree that it wasn’t our scene.

During my senior year, we continued to have fun. We took a movie-making course together, and I didn’t even think about getting a job until May, when I saw an index card on the Journalism Department bulletin board. There was a feature-writing job available in Hattiesburg, home of the University of Southern Mississippi.

Newt and I enjoyed weekend trips to New Orleans, which was two hours from Hattiesburg, and one of our friends, Johnny Haddad, was transferring to Southern. So I interviewed at *The Hattiesburg American* and got the job. Newt still had a year left of school, and we tried to have a long-distance relationship. He had more than a few distractions, including Jamie Kapeghian, who posed for the Girls of the Southeastern Conference in *Playboy*. The September 1981 magazine cover, with a photo of Bo Derek embracing an orangutan to promote her new role as Jane in *Tarzan, the Ape Man*, says of the SEC girls: “No wonder those guys play such good football.” When I found Jamie’s small pink panties under Newt’s bed during one of my weekend visits, I was shocked.

As I held the panties up in the air with my thumb and index finger, I questioned him about where they had come from. He gave me calm and honest answers, which defused my anger. But it did not cure my heartbreak that our relationship was ending.

I became friends with sportswriters Rick and Bobby Cleveland at *The American*, and they invited me to the New Orleans Saints' home games. One Sunday when the Saints were playing the San Francisco 49ers, Bobby put a field photo pass around my neck and gave me a beat-up Nikon. "Here you go," he said. "This is the only way you can get on the field."

I obviously was not a professional photographer, but *The Times-Picayune* photographers introduced themselves to me. The only one who didn't seem like he was trying to pick me up was Ben Child, a native of Arkansas. I learned later that he was trying the hardest; he just had the skills to make it seem effortless. We became friends and then started dating. My relationship with Newt took a backseat.

I visited Newt one other time when he moved to Dallas after graduation. He had borrowed money from his father and used it as collateral to buy a few small downtown warehouses. In the early 1980s, Newt was one of the only real-estate brokers who could see that the Warehouse District on the West End of Dallas might be turned into shops and restaurants. "The 20-block area [now] employs approximately 10,000 people and generates approximately \$200 million in total annual sales," according to a West End website.

Newt made so much money as a broker in the early 1980s that he surprised his father, a kind, sweet man who is "smarter than all of us," as Newt says, with the gift of a Rolls Royce. During one of our sporadic long-distance phone calls, Newt told me that his father had always wanted a Rolls but never would have bought one himself because he's so conservative with money. I laughed and said, "Well, Newt, I've always wanted a Jaguar."

I was impressed with what Newt was accomplishing. But our emotional ardor for each other had cooled off. We were too distinct as individuals. When he had joined Brook Hollow

Golf Club as a junior member, I knew I couldn't be his wife. Our core values were too different. I wanted to write and travel. I did not want to be a country club wife.

In my early 20s, I also thought that I had plenty of time to find a new soul mate. Even though I had watched all the Hollywood movies about first loves being the strongest, I did not have the emotional maturity to realize that indiscretions can be forgiven, that we got along well and enjoyed each other's company, that true love can overcome obstacles.

I moved to Pine Bluff, Arkansas, in 1979, on the advice of Child, who said I could get better experience at *The Arkansas Democrat*. My relationship with Child had cooled off, and I met Dean Williams, a fellow reporter at *The Pine Bluff Commercial*. We got serious right away. Newt and I had lost touch, but he called me unexpectedly one afternoon. "What are you doing?" he asked. "Working," I said.

"What's new?" he asked.

I paused. "Well, I'm getting married."

"What do you mean you're getting married?"

"Well, Newt, you haven't called me in so long. You seem to have a new life in Dallas."

"Yeah, but I didn't think you'd get married this soon."

I told him I was sorry, and we ended the call.

"Good luck to you," he said.

Again, I felt the emptiness I had felt when my father went to Vietnam, but I was very adept at hiding it.

In early July 1982, Newt gave himself a birthday party at Billy Bob's, a large warehouse in Fort Worth that featured loud music, multiple bars and mechanical bulls. He had booked a bus to take all his friends from his large mid-century modern house in Dallas to Fort Worth and back. Dean and I attended the party, but it wasn't fun for me to be around Newt when we weren't together. I still had feelings for him.

When I got back to Little Rock, I called Haddad, who had roomed with Newt in Kincannon Hall at Ole Miss, got his degree at Southern, and then sold men's suits at Neiman Marcus in Dallas.

"Johnny," I said, "I'm so miserable."

"Lou," he said. "You've got to let Newty go. Y'all aren't together anymore. You are married."

"I know, Johnny," I said. "But I'm still miserable."

"You can get over it," he said. "You're strong. I know you can."

In the mid-1980s, just as I was getting divorced from Dean and moving to New Orleans to work as a copy editor at *The Times-Picayune*, Newt married Fay Clark, who had attended Highland Park High School with him. "She's a good girl," Newt had assured me.

"Well," I said. "She certainly fulfills your mother's qualifications as a nice girl from Dallas."

"Lou, don't start with that," he said. "Fay and my mom have become good friends. They go shopping together." My heart sank because I knew I never had a chance with his mother.

Anne Marie also was one of the first masters of arbitrage, the practice of taking advantage of a price difference between two or more markets. When American Airlines started offering its passengers vouchers for a future flight to promote its frequent flier program in the

early 1980s, Anne Marie and her friend, Jane Hooker, went to the American terminal at Dallas Fort Worth airport. They asked people getting off American flights if they wanted to hand over their frequent-flier vouchers. People usually did, because they didn't plan on using them. Later, when the vouchers became valuable, Anne Marie and Jane sold them at a profit.

Newt was right. I never would have enjoyed doing that. He had married the right woman. He and Fay soon had two children, a girl and a boy, and named them Anne Marie and John Newton Walker. Their life was complete. I still loved him, but I accepted that he had moved on.

I dated a series of alcoholic womanizers while working in New Orleans. I didn't know enough about my unconscious projections. The men in my family were funny and charming, but they also drank too much. And there was always drama with their girlfriends or wives about the other women they attracted. I didn't want to get serious about men like that, or God forbid, have children with them. In July 2003, when I was planning my second wedding to a conservative New Orleans lawyer, I had some down time at work and I Googled Newt's name.

The first entry was a press release from the U.S. Department of Justice. I gasped as I read the headline: Local Office Manager Who Embezzled \$5 Million from Newt Walker Company Sentenced to More Than 5 Years Imprisonment.

According to the press release, she "embezzled approximately \$5 million from her employer from 1995 through April 2002. [She] has admitted to spending the embezzled funds on luxury items and trips for herself, her children and friends; home purchases; landscaping, furniture and other home improvements for herself and her children; school tuition for grandchildren; and monetary gifts to her children, friends, church and church leaders."

I immediately called Newt's office. His secretary connected me. I asked, "Newt, what is this about your office manager embezzling \$5 million?"

“Where did you see that?”

“Google.”

“Google? Have you been Googling me?”

“Yes, I’ve been Googling you, and this is a U.S. Justice Department press release.”

He sighed. “Yeah, it’s true.”

“Newt! What the hell happened?”

“Well, Lou,” he said. “As you know, I trust people. I hired her as my office manager after an older friend told me that she’s a good office manager, a church lady.”

“Wow, Newt,” I said. “So much for church ladies.”

“Tell me about it,” he said. “She not only cleaned out my business accounts, she tapped into my investment accounts.”

“Newt, I’m sorry,” I said.

“Thank you,” he said. “This has been the hardest time in my life.”

I couldn’t stop myself from telling him that if he had married me, I would have asked to see a bank statement every month. I asked him why Fay never had asked for a statement.

“Because I make the money and she spends it,” he said.

His office manager, Linda Beth Trostman, admitted that she forged and altered checks and used Newt’s credit cards without authorization. She would “type checks payable to ‘cash,’ usually in the amount of \$500, and then have Mr. Walker sign the checks. She would then add numbers to the checks, usually a ‘9,’ making the check payable to cash for \$9,500. After cashing the check, Trostman would give Mr. Walker the \$500 and keep the excess for herself,” the release says.

It *was* a tragic story. Newt and I were drawn to each other because we offered each other something that was lacking in ourselves. We didn't stay together because our different backgrounds made it impossible. We were too young to honor our differences and make it work.

Chapter 5: Crystal Daggers

U.S. Attorney John Volz leaned his tall frame over the mahogany bar and gazed at me with large brown eyes down an aquiline nose. “I’ll have a Chivas and soda with lime,” I said. He turned the bottle of scotch upside down into a six-inch plastic cup filled with ice. “With lime?” he asked as he sprayed club soda from a nozzle under the bar. I smiled and nodded. He smiled as he shook his head, showing mild disapproval of my desire for a spritz of tangy citrus in 18-year-old blended whiskey.

It was my first media night at Molly’s, an Irish bar on Decatur Street in New Orleans’ French Quarter, and the U.S. attorney was the celebrity bartender. Newspaper and television reporters gathered every Thursday to drink and trade stories, and politicians worked behind the bar. Governor Edwin Edwards had drawn a crowd the previous week with his natural charm and one-liners, and Volz wanted to show that he had a sense of humor, too. Volz had spent most of 1985 prosecuting Edwards on racketeering and fraud charges, and they both needed a break.

Louisiana’s governor and the U.S. attorney both served drinks to reporters during a federal trial? I wanted to know more. I squeezed my way through the crowd of men in loosened ties and women in business suits as the jukebox blared Frank Sinatra’s “New York, New York,” and joined my fellow copy editors on the sidewalk.

“What did you think of John Volz?” Brian Erskine asked.

“I thought he was really nice,” I said. “He seems much more severe when I see him on TV at news conferences.” Volz possessed an official-government presence, but he was at ease behind the bar. He kept moving, with the cuffs of his starched white shirt rolled halfway up his tanned forearms.

“He has to be serious in dealing with Edwin Edwards,” Brian said. “At one point Edwards rode a

mule to the courthouse to protest the slowness of the federal government!”

We laughed, so it led to other stories: “When Edwards was running against Dean Treen, he said that Treen moved so slowly that it takes him an hour and a half to watch *Sixty Minutes*,” Brian said to more laughter. “He said the only way he could lose to Treen was if he was caught with either a dead girl or a live boy.”

I was thrilled to be living in such an entertaining place. I had moved from Little Rock, Arkansas, where Sunday and Wednesday church dictates most people’s lives. I worked as an editor for civil engineers while my husband, Dean Williams, was a business reporter. We built a passive solar house and took hikes on Petit Jean Mountain. But I longed to see art galleries and European films. When I heard that the New Orleans paper was hiring copy editors, I bolted from our five-year marriage and its housewifely duties.

I looked through the open French doors at Molly’s. A wiry young man with dark curls and eyes was staring at me. He held a Budweiser longneck in one hand as his elbows rested on the bar. I asked my new friends about him.

“That’s Nick Chance,” Brian said. “He’s a writer at the paper. He’s a really good writer, but watch out. He’s a womanizer.”

“Yeah, you don’t want to get involved with him,” Susan Indest said, laughing.

“He’s a womanizer?” I said. “Well, maybe I’m a man-izer.” We laughed some more as Chance broke his gaze.

I felt confident as a 28-year-old woman who had just left her husband in Little Rock. Dean and I had had our ups and downs, as all couples do, but infidelity had crept into the picture. When I started taking public relations trips, Dean wondered what to do on the weekends. I always had planned our outings to see the latest techno-pop bands. “Call Stella,” I said, referring

to my best friend who also enjoyed music. “Go to dinner with her.”

Both Stella and Dean took that as a green light to have an affair. When I found out about it months later, I was furious about the betrayal. During one of our arguments, I waved my grandfather’s handgun at Dean, trying to scare him. It worked. He grabbed it out of my hand and left the house. When he returned later, he said he had thrown it into the Arkansas River. We both calmed down, and I told him I needed to go to Destin, Florida, for a week. We left the next week for the beach, and I stared at the waves every day. It felt like therapy. I returned to Little Rock, but the marriage was over.

I tried out for a job at the New Orleans paper in November 1985. I took a seat next to Joe Schultz, who was teaching me their editing system. As Joe clicked his fingers along the large beige keyboard, a blinking green cursor followed Chance’s story on the screen. Chance used poetic language to describe a bloated couch that had been put on a West Bank sidewalk after Hurricane Juan’s week of sideways rain.

“This guy is really good,” Joe said. “You should introduce yourself.”

At 28, I had not learned that people could have a sinister intent when they say something friendly. With his frizzy hair and bulky frame, Joe knew that I’d never be interested in him. So he fed me to the lion.

Even though I had told my new co-workers that I was a “man-izer,” I did not have the true confidence of a woman aware of her power. I thought I was powerful only because I had read Ms. magazine. I was well into my 50s before I realized what true power feels like. Power is controlling one’s self in the face of temptation. Power is articulating true feelings. Power is the ability to say no and mean it.

On the outside, Chance exhibited the confidence that most of us lacked. Because he

turned in stories with “crystal daggers,” his favorite description of polished prose, the editors let him keep his own hours. He rarely entered the newsroom, but when he did, everyone knew it.

“Ni-ii-ii-ck!” cried other reporters as his herky-jerky frame moved past them, a studied imitation of the way that Bruce Springsteen walks across a stage. Chance’s animated conversation with his editors could be heard across the newsroom, about the size of a football field.

Chance was a Frankensteinian combination of Springsteen, writer Charles Bukowski and Prince. When he’d arrive at Molly’s on Thursday nights, the cries of “Chance!” would greet him as he bopped in wearing a rolled-up red bandanna tied around his forehead. Sometimes he wore the bandanna tied around one thigh of his blue jeans. Like Bukowski, he drank too much. Most of us at Molly’s were children of alcoholics, and believed that if one beer makes you feel good, why not try drinking 10? And, like Bukowski, he was known for documenting the lives of marginalized people while carrying on love affairs with multiple women.

Chance was successful with women because he knew how to have fun. Like Prince, he was a graceful and vigorous dancer. During the weekends, when most of us checked the paper’s nightclub listings to find good music, Chance guided us to out-of-the-way places that seemed dangerous. We went to Dorothy’s Medallion on Orleans Avenue because Chance said we had to hear Johnny Adams sing. Two other reporters and Julie Savell, a friend who was getting her master’s degree at Tulane, accompanied Chance and me into the dimly lit nightclub. No one from our social circle ever went to Dorothy’s Medallion because it was a black bar. It was off limits to us as white children from conservative families.

As we paid the \$4 cover charge and walked under the stairs toward the bar, people turned around to look. The men were in suits and the women in dresses and high heels. After we

ordered our drinks, we noticed that most of the patrons had bottles of whiskey in brown bags on their tables. They bought their soft drinks and club soda from the bar. As Adams took the stage and started singing, accompanied by Walter “Wolfman” Washington on guitar, Julie and I decided to dance. There wasn’t a dance floor, so we danced a few feet from the bar. Even though we were outsiders, we felt at home. We didn’t feel disapproval from the crowd.

One of the reporters told me later that they were nervous the whole time we were dancing. “I felt like I was in a scene from *The Blues Brothers*,” he said. “The one where they go into the country bar and they can’t pay their tab.” We laughed, but it became one of our all-time favorite moments. Johnny Adams *did* have “a voice like an angel,” just as Chance said. Washington’s bass player and drummer were tight. We had walked into an unfamiliar situation, overcome our fears, and had spontaneous fun.

Chance was at his best when he was leading three or four of us into Déjà Vu or The Dungeon in the French Quarter to dance late at night. He always knew which bands to pick on the jukebox: Orchestral Maneuvers in the Dark, Psychedelic Furs and Book of Love got us dancing every time. “I Touch Roses” became our theme song.

My personal relationship with him was more complicated. He was 25, three years younger. I was attracted to him because of his charisma. He was attracted to me because of my availability. Occasionally we ended up in bed after a night of drinking, and I wasn’t his only lover. I dealt with my anxiety over the situation by drinking more, usually Corona beers with lime. I did not realize that his vivacious personality and rampant womanizing were his attempt to deal with his own deep-rooted anxiety. And I certainly was not aware of my own role in the drama: My romantic idealism mixed with narcissism made me think that we were in love. Other women also were attracted to him. He wasn’t available to any of us. This didn’t stop me,

or any of the other women, from thinking that our relationship could be different. I thought I was rising to the challenge of converting a womanizer into monogamy. Unconsciously, I was returning to the scene of the crime.

Hidden in my subconscious was my adoration of my father, who went to Vietnam twice, in 1961 and 1969. I was four and 12, the ages when most children fall in love with their preferred parent. As a four-year-old, I was not encouraged to talk about my sadness and confusion that my beloved Daddy was gone. I expressed my anger when he returned after a year, and my mother made me feel guilty about that. So I started burying all of my negative feelings. My anguish over his abandonment at age 12, when he returned to Vietnam for a second time, was replaced with joy and relief when he made it home safely during the height of the war. When Chance regularly disappeared after our sexual encounters, the feeling was familiar. It didn't feel good, but it felt like home.

The first time I had sex with Chance, I ignored the warning signs in my pursuit of this free spirit who possessed the writing skills that I wanted for myself. As usual, we ended the night with a large group dancing to a band at the Storyville nightclub across the street from Molly's. He danced with everyone. I was one of the last women standing at 4 a.m. He threw an arm around my neck and whispered, "Want to go to my place?" We danced until the other club-goers had left.

We veered a couple of blocks down Decatur Street until we got to St. Philip, where he lived in an apartment building with thin iron railings on the balconies. He turned the key in an alley door that had burglar bars over a small window. As we climbed the winding wooden staircase in the brick courtyard, I said, "Wow, this is like Tennessee Williams." He enjoyed the reference. It reminded me of *Streetcar Named Desire*.

Chance wanted to fashion himself after the famous playwright, who achieved success by writing about New Orleans while living in the Quarter. A year later, Chance moved to Williams' former apartment on Dumaine Street. Being from the Mississippi Delta, I love Williams' writing, but I was referring to the rundown atmosphere of Chance's courtyard. It looked the same way it must have looked in the 1940s, when *Streetcar* was written.

When we got to the second floor, Chance opened the door to his apartment, which also had the air of neglect. Musty indoor-outdoor carpet ran the length of two rooms. He had very little furniture except for a mattress and box springs on the floor. He asked if I wanted a drink, and brought me a can of Pabst Blue Ribbon from his small refrigerator.

The sex was athletic and quick. There was very little romance. As I got dressed, he asked, "Can you get back to your car? I have a story to write in the morning, and I'm tired." My feelings were hurt. I didn't honor myself by acknowledging them or even asking why he said that. I knew why he was being dismissive. It's in the hidden contract of the one-night stand. My laissez-faire attitude sealed my role in the dysfunctional drama we had begun.

During the late 1980s, I felt safe while walking back to my car from a nightclub or a friend's apartment in the Quarter. My bravado was fueled by youthful indiscretion and the lack of direct experience with crime in New Orleans. It would be years before I witnessed the armed robbery of my Broadmoor neighbor while putting out my trash on a late summer evening. In the meantime, I regularly ventured into Tipitina's nightclub to meet friends after I got off work at 11.

In 1989, the year I turned 32, I couldn't find anyone to go out with me on my birthday, so I went out alone. After the show at Tip's, I went to Benny's Bar, at the corner of Camp and Valence streets. We had gone there so often as a group that I felt comfortable going by myself.

The former corner grocery store's French doors were always open; the Neville Brothers had grown up down the street. I parked a block away on Magazine and greeted the regulars at the bar.

J.D. and the Jammers played every Thursday. The audience gathered in the front room as they watched the band through wall studs. It felt like an authentic juke joint. Cocaine dealers frequented the street corner, but that didn't bother me. We were part of that milieu.

With the availability of cocaine, my sexual relationship with Chance intensified. My salary had jumped from \$12,000 a year in Little Rock to \$30,000 a year as a copy editor, and I regularly treated us to an eight ball of cocaine, 3.5 grams. We made a lot of money because the paper's owners didn't want to deal with unions, so they paid us a union wage with union benefits. Our more mature colleagues used the extra income to put large down payments on houses or increase contributions to their 401(k) plans. Chance and I spent our money on vacations and drugs.

We also had easy access to marijuana and ecstasy. When I was living in Little Rock, I made regular trips to Dallas with friends to party at the Starck Club. Before MDMA, or ecstasy, was declared illegal, we had heard that family therapists used it to get their clients to open up to each other. At the Starck Club, we could order it with our drinks and put it on our credit cards. The multi-level club featured large rooms for dancing and smaller ones for snorting.

In New Orleans, the ecstasy made us feel closer during our binges. Chance and I prided ourselves on having four-drug nights: We snorted as much cocaine as we could find, popped an ecstasy pill before dancing all night at Déjà Vu or The Dungeon, relaxed by smoking a couple of joints, and fueled it all with numerous beers and cocktails. This inevitably led to all-night conversations in which we seemed to finish each other's sentences.

We mistook this for intimacy. We basically were talking *at* each other, and the drugs in

my brain made me think that I had found my soul mate. Chance contributed to the fantasy by saying what I wanted to hear: that we *were* soul mates, that we should run away together to get our MFAs in creative writing in Vermont.

“Vermont?” I asked. “I’m not going to Vermont.”

“Why not?” He looked wounded.

“Because this is my home,” I said. “These are my people.”

He loved that response. Over the years, he adopted it for himself.

During my four-year off-and-on relationship with Chance, he juggled relationships with several women. He became serious about Adele Simpson, a New Orleanian who was in her early 20s. She worked as a waitress in the Quarter and fashioned herself after the flirtatious and voluptuous Jessica Rabbit cartoon. She loved to say: “I’m not bad, I’m just drawn that way.” She made a good living from the tourists, who tipped her for cooing to children while scooting chairs under them and pushing out her lips while getting drink orders from men.

Adele usually wore backless dresses or capri pants, which showed off her ample derriere. She liked to drink tequila at Molly’s by taking the hand of one of the reporters, pouring salt on it, and then slowly licking it off while gazing up at him. All of Chance’s friends were in love with her.

Chance’s attention to me increased when Adele started talking marriage and children. One night, as we were dancing to Clifton Chenier’s zydeco band at Tip’s, he leaned over and asked me what days I had off. We were in a group that included Adele, so I was confused. He seemed serious and intense.

“Um, I’m off on Mondays and Tuesdays,” I said.

“Let’s get together,” he said.

All the nerves in my neck lit up. They were not alerting me to his inner conflict over Adele. They were signaling excitement and fear: I was getting attention from the object of my desire. In my addled mind, our relationship had evolved. He had told me that I fulfilled his intellectual needs and that Adele fulfilled his physical ones. The comparison didn't bother me because I knew we had great sex, too. Our ability to be emotionally intimate with each other evolved during conversations over breakfast. Adele craved affection, he said. I loved talking about books and movies. She prided herself on her chicken and dumplings made with Bisquick. I liked to go to restaurants. She wanted to have his children.

I wanted a soul mate who also wanted to travel and write. Chance did everything he could to fulfill that fantasy. He wrote beautiful love letters when he sensed that I was detaching. When the Tennessee Williams Festival got underway in the Quarter in 1987, he bought us tickets to see *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. He knew I identified with Maggie the Cat, the outsider in a dysfunctional Mississippi Delta family. He reached over for my hand when I wept at Maggie's emotional declaration: "Maggie the Cat is alive. I am alive."

I was oblivious to the subtext that was occurring in my own situation: That Maggie the Cat was in love with a man who "couldn't stand" her. As Brick Pollitt says in the play: "I don't have to do anything I don't want to! Now you keep forgetting the conditions on which I agreed to stay living with you." I agreed to be the tough survivor while Chance did what he wanted.

I was trying to fill an emotional space that had been empty since my father first went to Vietnam. I had not learned that only I can fill that void. Chance and I had enough tender moments that fed my romanticism. We both enjoyed reading in bed, and he recited passages from Southern writers he admired. He kept reading Barry Hannah's *Airships* to me, and I couldn't understand why.

I found out 23 years later, when Hannah died. Chance was working as a columnist for an alternative weekly after taking a buyout from the paper. In his tribute to Hannah, he wrote: “As a young man in New Orleans—a poseur and a rake—I got laid while reading Barry Hannah out loud to girls more than any other writer; more than Dorothy Parker, more than Pablo Neruda even.”

As I read the March 2010 column, my heart froze. I was just one of many “girls” who “got laid” while he read to them. I no longer had feelings for him, but it still hurt. The reference to Dorothy Parker was the crystal dagger. It cut the deepest. I had turned him on to Parker’s writing, and he had compared my wit to hers.

During the four years we were together, Chance kept me at a distance. He made promises that he never kept. When I questioned him about it, he’d say, “I meant it at the time.” Now I realize that he must have enjoyed my humiliation when he and Adele paraded by at social events. Now I see that it was all about power and control.

Chance’s narcissistic personality has the same roots as mine. Our damaged childhoods are why we were drawn to each other. He is the youngest of five children who tried to achieve their father’s acclaim as the dean of a renowned medical school. His mother had major depressive episodes, and so did mine. Narcissists usually have a parent who needs to be admired but doesn’t care about the feelings of others. We share this wound of inferiority, and its damaging behavior.

When Adele moved to Miami Beach in 1988, Chance told me to “wait until May,” when he would be free to pursue a full-time relationship with me. That never happened, of course. He visited Adele in Miami, where they decided that she would move into his Dumaine Street apartment when she came home in the fall.

As soon as she moved all of her clothes and furniture into the apartment and set up an

ironing board in the living room, he called me, frantic to get together. He came over to my apartment and we had passionate sex. The energy was always highest when the specter of Adele was involved.

When I felt abandoned, later, I decided to strike. I called Adele and told her what had happened. This officially made me the other woman, the one who should be shunned. She was the official girlfriend and I was the interloper, even though I had known Chance longer. To our mutual friends, Adele compared me to Glenn Close's character in *Fatal Attraction*. Because of my indiscretion and Adele's wish to be his only woman, I was cast out of our social circle. But Chance and I continued to have sex. We couldn't avoid each other because we worked together.

In August 1989, when Adele had married someone else and his then-girlfriend was on vacation in Europe, Chance and I attended a concert by British singer/songwriter Joe Jackson at the Saenger Theatre. We got tickets close to the stage to watch Jackson and his 11-piece band perform all the songs, in sequence, from his album *Blaze of Glory*.

We danced in our chairs during the up-tempo songs "Rant and Rave" and "Nineteen Forever." During the second half, Chance and I held hands as Jackson played a baby grand piano and sang: "I'll love you forever / Or at least many years / If you know I'll never / Take away all your fears." We seemed to know that our relationship was ending.

We had sex for the final time on December 7, Pearl Harbor Day. Later that month, as I was unloading Christmas gifts from the back of my father's car, I felt a rush of blood to my abdomen. It didn't feel right. I had missed my period that month, but this wasn't cramps. I returned to New Orleans and bought a pregnancy test. When I told Chance that I was pregnant, he asked, "How do you know it's mine?"

It felt like another dagger, but I didn't have time to deal with my wounded feelings. My

rational mind took over. I had dated other people in the four years that I had been with him, but I had not had sex with anyone else. I knew it was his child. I knew I was not fit to be a single mother. I knew I could not have the child of a man who spent most of his nights in pool halls.

We agreed that I should have an abortion. He offered to pay for half. He never did. After the procedure, I recuperated at a friend's house in Gretna. I cried for days because of my guilt and my body's hormonal changes. Chance and I had a long conversation over the phone. He did have a sensitive side. But our relationship was over.

In early 1991, my father died of pancreatic cancer at age 59. I had a psychosomatic reaction to his death and stopped drinking. My throat closed up if I tried to have more than one glass of wine at dinner with friends. Now I enjoy the occasional cocktail and I won't turn down a toké off a joint. But my four-drug nights are long gone, and I'm happy about that.

Four days before my father died, Chance and I rode with other people from the paper as guests in the Zulu parade in New Orleans. We arrived at the Hilton Hotel at 4 a.m. in our black turtlenecks, vests and grass skirts to be transformed into riders. A professional makeup artist applied black grease paint to our faces and white paint around one eye as part of the krewe's satirical blackface. The paint itched. It was oily. I was told repeatedly not to touch my face.

Chance and I were not speaking. Our relationship had deteriorated in the year after the abortion. We were lucky that three co-workers were riding on the float. They provided a barrier to our latest dysfunction. At 6 a.m. we boarded the float, which was 24th in a parade of 26.

I had brought half a tab of LSD with me, and I split it with Ben McDonald, another rider. I had tried the hallucinogen four years earlier, and had learned that if you do it in small doses when you're outside, in nature, the experience can be transcendent.

As the float reached Poydras Street on the way to the start of the parade, I started to feel giddy from the acid tickling the nerves in the back of my neck. The sunrise coated the high-rise buildings in pink, and I became more aware of how beautiful our gold, green, purple and pink beads were as they glowed. Our float, pulled by a tractor, got only a few blocks up Poydras before the driver realized the float had a flat tire. He had to fix it with everyone aboard, and it took more than an hour for us to get underway.

We became bored and impatient, and a black limousine pulled alongside our float. The backseat window glided down, and actor Dennis McQuaid leaned out, grinning. Actress Meg Ryan was in the car with him, and we learned later that they had just gotten married.

I jumped up, waving, and let out a long “whoo-hoo.” Other riders realized who it was, and they jumped up too. We had a spontaneous celebration, and Chance and I looked at each other, beaming. It was going to be a good ride after all.

By the time we got to Claiborne and Jackson avenues, where the parade began, the crowd was restless. It was a sea of black people, the traditional audience for the old-line krewe that formed during Jim Crow. Most people get up early for the Zulu parade, and the long wait for the floats adds frustration to the excitement. We had to stop several times to wait for the earlier floats that were rambling through the crowd.

In the middle of Jackson Avenue, the crowd started rocking our float. They wanted coconuts, the prize throw, and our riders were not handing any out. I unloaded most of my beads and stuffed animals to appease them, but they were not having it. As the rocking and the shouts for coconuts became more intense, Abby Porter, a young intern who was riding with us, became frightened.

She grabbed my arm and said, “Let’s get off the float.”

“We can’t get off the float now!” I said.

Jed Horne, the oldest in the group and the city editor of the paper, saw our distress.

“Just turn around and sit down,” he said.

He was right. As we sat on the floor of the float and did not have eye contact with the crowd, we were able to calm down. I held Abby as she cried. As the float turned the corner onto St. Charles Avenue, we both stood up again and were able to interact with the crowd.

Ben had saved his 100 decorated coconuts to lure the young women in the crowd to bare their breasts. Many did. But at least half of the women who pulled up their shirts were middle-aged or older. Carnival means farewell to the flesh, and that’s part of the reason that so many women engage in this activity. Aesthetically, it’s a young person’s game. Ben handed out coconuts to all comers, even the women who look better with their shirts on.

On Canal Street, I threw most of my Frisbees to a friend who caught every one, and I soon ran out of beads. I was nervous about riding through the Iberville housing project without anything to throw. Ben had plenty of beads and shared some with me.

When the float turned onto Basin Street for our last route to Armstrong Park, the residents of Iberville were smiling and waving, playing with their children and grilling hamburgers and hot dogs. My anxiety was unfounded. They did not have the urgency of the Uptown crowd. They were families enjoying Mardi Gras. It was a magical way to end our ride.

We left the float and headed to Jed’s house to use the bathroom. We decided to head over to a reporter’s house on Decatur Street. As we gathered on the balcony, Chance was weaving and acting like he was going to throw himself off the balcony. He had been drinking beer since 6 that morning. I grabbed him by the lapels of his leopard-skin vest and got close to his face.

“Stop it,” I said.

He looked at me and settled down.

Raad Cawthon, a friend who met us at Molly's afterward, said, "Lou, riding in Zulu is intense. Taking LSD is intense. Taking LSD while riding in Zulu is *way too* intense."

As we descended the apartment's winding staircase, we followed Chance, who was the leader of our group even when he was the most drunk. Even though the LSD was working its way out of my system, I got a hint of why I had been drawn to him.

His Zulu costume morphed into a navy blue waistcoat and pants, and I was wearing a long blue dress, not my grass skirt. He was a pirate and I was one of his followers. I was in love with him then, too. The episode, which was like a movie scene, only lasted during our descent down the stairs, but it was the clearest picture I have had of a past life.

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