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The Present, A Thousand Times Deeper

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A Thesis

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by

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Abstract

The creative nonfiction essays and poetry in this collection explore family survival during the hardest of times—when the desire to give up is at its greatest—as told from the perspective of a woman who is a daughter, sister, wife, mother and grandmother. These are not stories of defeat. Nor are they merely explorations of death and dying. They are celebrations of living, of surviving, of loving and being loved against all odds.

Keywords: Creative Nonfiction; Women; Bees; Apiculture; Colony Collapse Disorder; Survival; Family, Death and Dying; PTSD; Parkinson's Disease; Hurricane Katrina; Hurricane Gustav; Louisiana; Pearl River

Preface

When I began thinking about writing my thesis, many ideas came to mind. In time, I settled on writing a full-length book entitled "Bees in Winter" (a significantly abridged version appears as an essay in this collection), inspired by generations of family life in southeast Louisiana and my father's involvement in apiculture. I had read Janisse Ray's *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood,* and thought I could write something similar. I wanted to demonstrate how an ordinary family can be extraordinary simply by the way its members support each other. No other creatures demonstrate single-minded survival of both the family unit and the species quite like honeybees. Thus, I thought them the perfect medium for exploring family survival.

The idea evolved gradually, and, as my focus grew to include our family's response to my mother's struggle with Parkinson's disease, I realized the book I wanted to write could not be written yet. My mother, though now in what her doctor calls "end-stage dementia," is still alive. Our family is still coping with caregiving and coming to terms with loss and grief. I must wait for events to play out. Also, it is clear to me that I need time and distance in order to write objectively. The book will wait.

Yet, over the past few years, I have written about isolated events shaped by my mother's illness. Simultaneously, I have written about events shaped by my own challenges as well as those of my husband. As in life, events overlap in these essays, providing a loose connectedness to the collection. On the surface, the essays and poetry included here may appear merely to be stories of death and dying or stories of defeat. However, I submit that they depict my family during the hardest of times—times when we felt like giving up but didn't. These essays portray

moments of living, of surviving, of loving and being loved against all odds. Ultimately, they speak of hope: the kind of hope that springs from a woman's heart, the hope only one who is a daughter, sister, wife, mother, and grandmother can express.

I have done my best to render these events and the people in them as truthfully and faithfully as possible. There are no composite characters in my essays. Each essay is built upon a framework of events I personally witnessed or upon events related to me by those who witnessed them. In some cases, I have been forced to "imagine" scenic details I could not have witnessed, and I have alerted the reader accordingly. My scenic visioning relies on details found in old documents, old photos, and even old weather charts. All "facts" are, to the best of my knowledge, factual.

I could not have written these essays and poems and assembled them in this collection without the help and support of many people to whom I am forever grateful: My dad, a private man who (often grudgingly) shared intimate details of his and my mother's lives; my mother, who shared what she could in the rare lucid moments her illness allowed; my sisters, who also helped fill in some blanks for me; Mechele Hartfield, who really is a rock; the MFA students who patiently read and diligently critiqued my essays in workshop; Dr. John Hazlett, who encouraged me to pursue an MFA and who championed my acceptance into the program; Professor Richard Goodman, who shepherded me toward greatness in writing; Professor Carolyn Hembree, who held my hand through poetry workshop and led me out of fear and into achievement; Professor Randy Bates, who listened, advised, "wondered if," praised, and helped me bring my better nature to the page; Cynthia Davidson, a friend in every season; my children and grandchildren who watched with amusement, amazement, and praise as Mom/Grandma

wrestled her dreams into submission; and most of all, my husband, Andrew Talley, who is my best friend and staunchest supporter.

"For the present when backed by the past is
a thousand times deeper . . .

Virginia Woolf
Moments of Being
"A Sketch of the Past"

Bees in Winter

A bee
staggers out
of the peony.
~Matsuo Basho
1644-1694

Dad climbed into the bucket suspended from the truck's long arm. Mom sat in their old golf cart parked a safe distance away and watched. Her eyes darted from Dad to me, to the truck, to the bees hanging from a tree limb, and back to Dad. She raised her right arm and pointed toward the bees. She muttered something incomprehensible. I smiled and nodded, hoping to calm any fears she might be experiencing, even as I tried to quash my own.

On a warm, sunny, southeast Louisiana day in late April 2015, weeks before his 77th birthday, Dad hoisted himself skyward in the bucket of an old, overhauled truck a friend in the tree-cutting business had given him. The truck, like my dad, was a relic of an earlier time. Both were beat up, but they still had some life left in them. Dad, a renaissance man—carpenter, mechanic, towboat captain, and inventor of treasures from trash—had no difficulty resuscitating the old workhorse's engine. But the bucket arm, a rusty appendage held together in places with hope and extra-durable bungee cords, creaked and wobbled even more than Dad did when he walked. The bucket bounced and jerked as the arm lifted it. Dad grinned and looked down at us. My face contorted into half-smile, half-frown, a mixture of excitement and worry.

More than forty years earlier, before he retired from his job at the shipyard and opened his own mechanic shop, an engine fell on Dad's right foot. He ignored the broken bones, which

healed in a twisted knot, and kept working. Finally, after closing his shop and retiring the second time, he agreed to reconstructive foot surgery. But Dad couldn't stay off his feet for three months. He couldn't stand being cooped up that long. He ignored his doctor's advice and went back to work around the house as soon as he could stand the pain of walking. Pipes broke. The roof leaked. The grass needed mowing. Jobs always needed doing, and he always wanted and needed to do them. He turned down all offers of help. In the end, the surgery failed, leaving him to limp painfully for the rest of his life.

Climbing into the truck's bucket on that deformed foot had been as much a test of physical endurance as a labor of love. I feared he would fall in the attempt and hurt himself, but he made it seem easy—almost. He looked up at the swarm of honeybees clustered on the branch above him and, without glancing at the handheld controller, carefully guided the bucket into position so that he could tie a rope to the branch without disturbing the bees.

"Don't worry," he had told me before climbing into the bucket. "Bees gorge themselves with honey before they swarm. They're too full and sluggish to sting."

They hadn't looked sluggish to me as they darted to and fro until, finally, gathering around their queen on the tree branch. But I trusted Dad. My dad, Russell McKinney, had become the man locals visited when they wanted advice about beekeeping.

Once Dad secured the rope, he tossed the free end to me and then began lowering the bucket.

Back on the ground, he placed a sheet of plywood over the mouth of the bucket and then hobbled to the golf cart to retrieve a pre-constructed beehive, a wooden cube whose white paint all but glowed in the afternoon sun.

“Hello, darling,” he said to Mom, who sat on the passenger’s side of the golf cart’s seat. “We’re gonna catch us some bees.”

She smiled and cocked her head to one side. Her behavior reminded me of a dog trying to interpret a strange sound, and I wondered how much of his statement she understood.

Dad removed its cover and then centered the hive box on the plywood atop the bucket. He looked again at the clustered bees hanging swag-like from the branch. He climbed onto the back of the truck and, using the controls mounted at the base of the bucket arm, he carefully positioned the top edge of the hive box just below the curtain of bees.

“When I say go,” he said, turning to look at me, “I want you to yank on that rope as hard as you can. Keep yanking until you shake all the bees into the box.”

I looked at my nephew, Jesse, who at twenty-six was as tall as I and probably, I thought, much stronger. “Wanna help me shake?”

He smiled and nodded. I think Jesse wanted to get involved, but he didn’t know how. Or maybe I wanted to involve him. Maybe I wanted to pass on this knowledge and experience to the next generation, just as Dad had passed it on to me. Jesse wrapped his hands above mine on the rope. Dad dismounted the truck and moved between us and the golf cart so that he could keep one eye on Mom and the other on the bee shaking operation.

“Go!

Jesse and I tugged hard on the rope again and again. With the first tug, a large clump of bees fell into the box with a muffled thud. The remaining tugs shook off the bees still clinging either to the limb or to each other. Finally, the only bees not in the box were the ones flying around it.

“That’s good,” Dad said. “Now we’ll wait until it’s almost dark to move them into place.”

“Will they stay? What’s to keep them inside with the cover off the box?” I’d forgotten that the hive box has a built-in opening for bees to go in and out at will. The cover simply protects them from bad weather and predators.

“They might fly off,” Dad said. “But that rarely happens. Once they’re in the box they’ll stay as long as the queen does. We have to leave the top off until the rest of ’em find the queen and settle in.”

Jesse, who’d been silent earlier, became effusive.

“Oh, man! That was so cool. I never saw anything like that before, the way they were just hanging there. And then they just fell into to box. I thought they were going to attack us, but they didn’t. It was awesome!”

“Come on,” Dad said, laughing. “Let’s go sit on the back porch and drink some coffee while we wait.” He climbed into the golf cart beside Mom and smiled at her. “Did you see us get those bees, Maria?”

Mom, whose name is actually Marie, smiled and mumbled. Dad smiled back, but it was a sad smile, one that curled the corners of his mouth but never reached his eyes.

* * *

Getting my dad to tell me stories is a lot like hypothetically pulling my own teeth—I want them out, but I know there is no quick, painless way to do it. So I ask a question and persevere through the excruciating process of extracting an answer. The process involves reasoning: "But Dad, don't you want your family to know what life was like then?" It involves patience: "Dad, please come sit back down and finish your story." And it involves detective work: "How old were you when that happened? Well, if you can't remember your age, can you remember anything about that time period? Who was president? Where did your family live? Was the road dirt or blacktopped?" With minimal information in hand, I resort to various sources, like National Weather Service archives, old photographs, and my own memories of roads and neighborhoods, to fill in the blanks of a scene Dad describes.

So it was when I asked how he first became involved in beekeeping. He remembered how old he was. He remembered the major players. But many of the small details I filled in for myself. I wanted to "see" my dad as he was then—the young, enthusiastic naturalist with his first hive of bees. In my mind, getting those bees went something like this:

It was finally happening! Bring me a box, Mr. Brown had told him, and when they swarm I'll catch them for you. Dad had sweet-talked his neighbor, old Mrs. Zirkenbach, into giving him a spare hive box. It had been easy enough to do. By thirteen, he had developed a natural charm. His toothy, ear-to-ear smile, his hazel eyes that seemed to gleam with mischief, and his hair that fell in thick, dark waves over his forehead completed the handsome package. He had even charmed Mr. Brown, a friend of his father's, into catching the bees for him. Dad had been looking forward to spring, the time of year when bee colonies swarm. He preferred the outdoors

to a schoolroom and had a passion for learning how things worked. Bees fascinated him. How did they know what to do and when to do it? He had to find out. He had to have his own bees.

Pawpaw McKinney, my grandfather, drove Dad to Mr. Brown's farm.

"How are we gonna bring 'em back, Daddy?"

"We'll put 'em in the trunk. They'll be fine in there until we get home."

"It's a long way back from Military Road. Are you sure?" The lines on Dad's forehead creased. He clenched and unclenched his teeth, a nervous tic that made the angles of his jaw protrude, recede, protrude, recede.

"They'll be fine."

True to his word, Mr. Brown had the newly swarmed colony of honeybees safely established in their hive box when Dad and Pawpaw arrived. The box fit neatly into the Chevy's huge trunk. The early months of 1951 had been rainy, and Gause Road, little more than a wagon trail, sucked the car's tires into its muck and potholes as father and son crept along.

"We'll wait until just before dark to move them," Pawpaw said. "Bees stay put when it's dark."

Dad didn't want to wait, but he obeyed his father. As the sun's last rays slipped below the western horizon, the two of them lifted the box and carefully positioned it beside the Artesian well overflow ditch that ran alongside their property at the end of Zirkenbach Lane. Smiling, the fledgling beekeeper stepped back and admired his new acquisition.

Alfred Lord Tennyson, in his poem "Locksley Hall," summed up the essence of spring thus:

> *In the Spring a fuller crimson comes upon the robin's breast;*
> *In the Spring the wanton lapwing gets himself another crest;*

In the Spring a livelier iris changes on the burnish'd dove;
In the Spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love.

In the spring of 1951, my dad's fancy lightly turned to thoughts of bees. With his new hive in place, he began to ponder the mysteries of colony life. He had so much to learn. How did the bees know where the flowers were? How did they share that information with each other? How did they build honeycombs? How could he get the bees to create separate combs for egg-laying and honey production? How could he harvest the honey without being attacked by the bees? When should he harvest it? How much should he leave behind?

Of course, the bees instinctively knew the answers to all of Dad's questions, as well as questions scientists are still trying to answer. The little insects immediately went to work, and Dad immediately began observing them. He soon learned that a bee colony is a self-contained, self-reliant unit comprised of thousands of individuals functioning together as a living organism, much like the disparate cells of the human body work together, for the good of the whole. They are single-minded in their purpose: colony survival.

Dad watched his first colony of bees work their way through the spring and noted their behavior. It was fun except when his mother complained.

"I can't step out on the porch anymore without those damned bees buzzing around my head," she told him.

But Dad fell in love with the fuzzy little insects. He learned to value their economy and efficiency. He was impressed by the way they all worked so hard and so single-mindedly and wasted nothing. I believe he learned through bee husbandry an approach to being a husband himself—a combination of tenderness and tenacity that would see him through life's difficulties.

No believer in evolution, Dad sees God in all manner of creation. But none, I think, does he admire more than the humble honeybee.

* * *

When I was a kid, I followed my dad wherever he led. He taught me to hunt and fish and grow things in the garden. He taught me to never kill anything I couldn't eat unless it meant to harm me. And he taught me almost everything I know about honeybees. I learned from other sources, too, and I'd often shared what I learned with Dad.

We were surprised to learn that honeybees are not native to the Americas[1]. They arrived with European settlers beginning in the 1600s. According to Thomas Jefferson, Native Americans called honeybees "white man's flies," and took it as a bad omen whenever they spotted bees in their territories.[2] Bees came to symbolize the invasiveness of white men. But that characterization, in retrospect, was unfair to bees. European bees, smaller and milder-tempered than their African cousins, rarely attack unless threatened. They prey on no other creatures. Instead, they buzz about, pollinating edible and non-edible plants alike.

Bee colonies, those that survive winter's cold temperatures and dearth of nectar-producing flowers, undergo significant changes in spring. As the temperature outside the hive warms, the queen, a genetically unique bee, begins laying eggs in empty brood cells. She may lay as many as 1,500 tiny white eggs each day. The queen is the largest member of the colony and, under normal circumstances, the only one capable of laying eggs. Her elongated abdomen

[1] For a brief discussion on the history of beekeeping and the introduction of bees into the Americas, see *Honey Bee Biology and Beekeeping* by Dewey M. Caron and Lawrence John Connor (Wicwas Press, 2013), pp. 9 – 19.
[2] See *Bees in America: How the Honey Bee Shaped a Nation, by* Tammy Horn (University Press of Kentucky, 2005). The Chapter 2 epigraph cites a passage from Thomas Jefferson's 1785 "Notes on the State of Virginia."

holds the millions of sperm cells she collects in the spring from male bees known as “drones.” The queen crawls across the surface of brood cells, wax constructions made by worker bees, lowers her bottom into a cell and deposits an egg barely visible to the naked eye. Then she moves on to the next cell. Most eggs will mature into unfertilized worker bees, who, though not sterile, are unlikely to lay eggs themselves unless the queen dies or becomes incapacitated. A relative few eggs will become drones. Even rarer are potential queen eggs. These she lays in specially constructed cells built around the edges of the brood nest.

A crew of worker bees, called nursery bees, goes behind the queen, depositing into the cells a substance called royal jelly and topping them off with honey before sealing them with a wax covering. Royal jelly contains hormones that cause larvae, then pupae, to differentiate into either female (worker) bees or male (drone) bees. Drone eggs get more honey and less royal jelly. Consequently, they grow larger than workers and develop male sex characteristics. Queen eggs get only royal jelly, thus the name, “royal.” Interestingly, the queen tends neither the eggs she lays nor the hatchlings. Nursery bees, worker bees less than two weeks old, crawl over the open cells, detect from the pheromones the queen leaves behind whether the eggs within are male or female, and fill the cells accordingly. Those same nursery bees, whose eyes have not yet matured enough to withstand light outside the dark, womblike brood nest, minster to newborns. As their eyes mature, nursery bees relinquish nest-keeping chores to recently-hatched workers, and move on to other duties.

Once queen eggs hatch, usually within ten days after being laid, a struggle begins in the hive. There can be only one queen. The old queen has increased the hive’s population exponentially, ramping up for pollen and nectar season. The newly-minted queens must either expel her, kill her and take her place, leave with a swarm of their own, or fight their sister queens

to their deaths. Usually, the old queen leaves, taking a contingent of about 10,000 bees with her in a process known as swarming. The swarm finds a place to start anew, and if all goes well, the brand new colony thrives. If more than one queen hatches in the original colony, there may be subsequent swarms. Colonies rarely swarm more than two or three times each spring. Modern beekeepers sometimes destroy queen eggs before they hatch to deter swarming because colonies that don't swarm grow larger and stronger and are more capable of fending off predators. They also produce more honey, a boon to apiarists (beekeepers) who harvest honey for sale or personal use. Sometimes modern beekeepers capture newly-hatched queens to transplant them into colonies where the old queen is ailing or has died.

New, virgin queens must leave the hive to mate. In a show of bee aerial acrobatics, the queen connects with as many drones as possible during her brief mating flight. She stores their sperm in a special compartment within her elongated abdomen. During that single mating flight, she procures all the sperm she will ever need. Then she returns to the hive to perform her most important duty—egg-laying. Unless she leaves with a new swarm, she remains inside the hive until her death.

Mating is a drone's sole purpose, and he dies in the process. Instead of stingers at the ends of their abdomens, drones have the bee equivalent of penises. Thus, they are incapable of defending the hive. Furthermore, they are not built with the fuzzy pollen-collecting pouches on their legs that worker bees have, so they cannot harvest pollen. Soon, worker bees will block unmated drones' entrance into the hive and leave them outside to starve or die of exposure. As a child, I thought that was very cruel, but now I think it's not really so bad. Compared to workers, drones have it easy. Most will work themselves to death within about five or six weeks. Bee life

expectancy, except for queen bees, is very short—perhaps mercifully so given how hard they work.

Once swarming is over, honeybees settle into their busy spring and summer schedules. Young workers either nurse the eggs the queen steadily produces or they perform housekeeping chores. As their eyes become better adjusted to light, worker bees take up chores near the hive entrance: They receive and store materials gathered by foragers; fan the entrance to maintain optimal hive temperature; or fend off invaders like wax moths, hive beetles, mice, bears, and even humans. Some build honeycomb by shaping wax secreted from abdominal glands into hexagonal cells. Near the end of their life cycles, after their eyes have fully adapted to sunlight, some worker bees scout for flowers and return to the hive to signal, with "waggle" dances, the distance and direction of their finds. Others fly out to collect pollen, nectar, and other materials used in hive construction. Workers store pollen for high-protein food. They regurgitate nectar, drawn from flowers into special nectar stomachs, and store it in honey cells. It is not honey yet, but it will cure into honey over time and provide bees with the high carbohydrate nutrition their busy bodies need. Drones, when not away attempting to mate with queens from other colonies, congregate near the hive's entrance, hoping for a little food now and then.[3]

Throughout spring and summer, bees build their nests, grow their families, and begin laying in supplies of food and water to get them through the coming winter. In the fall, the queen lays fewer eggs and the colony's population shrinks. Those who remain huddle inside the hive during the coldest stretch of winter to maintain heat. They eat honey and pollen stored during the

[3] For more information about honeybee development, functions, and life cycles, see *Honeybee Democracy,* by Thomas Seely (Princeton University Press, 2010), "Life in a Honeybee Colony," pp. 20-42.

spring and summer. Thus, survival depends on each bee's inimitable work ethic and willingness to devote its life to sustaining the colony.

Dad also taught me that bee survival also depends on the actions of man. On September 30, 2016 the United States Wildlife and Fisheries Service published a ruling placing seven Hawaiian bee species on the Federal Lists of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants, a first for bees in the United States.[4] This came after reports from leading bee researchers warning of the dangers of pesticides, loss of habitat, and disease to the tiny insects responsible for pollenating 80 percent of global food crops. Dr. Christopher Connolly, a honeybee expert from Scotland's University of Dundee, recently stated in a CNN interview that Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD) accounts for losses of 30 to 70 percent of U. S. commercial honeybee colonies annually. CCD is thought to be the result of many factors, some better understood than others. Connolly cites disappearing wildflower habitats for causing bee losses in Great Britain. However, he explains that it is impossible to measure the effects of multiple combinations of more than 700 pesticides in use globally on honeybee colonies. The deleterious effects of losing bees cannot be understated. Connolly maintains they are the "number one most important" species group because the "whole ecosystem depends on pollination."[5] Sadly, many people, if they think of bees at all, consider them little more than honey producers capable of painful and sometimes life-threatening stings. However, basic exploration of apiculture proves that bees are far more complex than generally perceived and vital to man's welfare.

Dad no longer harvests honey from his bees because without it they may not survive the winter. "They're so weak, these days," he says, too weak to even fight off the smallest of

[4] Federal Register "Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants; Endangered Status for 49 Species From the Hawaiian Islands." Sept. 30, 2016. http://bit.ly/2e2LDdG

[5] CNN. "Making a Beeline for Disaster. August 4, 2016. http://cnn.it/2aXblN7

invaders. He watches each hive closely for signs of pest infestation, usually wax moths. When he sees a stain seeping out from the seams of the box, he knows the wax and honey inside are melting and the bees have all either died or absconded. Lifting the lid on the box reveals massive web-like constructions between the layers of honeycomb. Within the comb's hexagonal cells, wax moth larvae have taken the places of bee larvae. Nothing can be done to save the hive. Dad fills the box with mothballs and seals it until all the larvae and adult moths have died. Then he destroys everything inside, airs out the box, and waits to refill it with a new swarm in the spring. He doesn't have to keep bees—he certainly doesn't profit from it—but he loves them, and what he loves he tries to save.

* * *

In 1957, Dad's fancy, as Tennyson predicted, "lightly turned to thoughts" of a different kind of love. On a warm evening in August, he leaned against the doorway of his oldest brother's living room. Mac, as his brother was called, had married a dark-haired beauty named Doris Anglin. Aunt Doris was a devout Pentecostal woman, and her cousin, Wil Hartfield, supplemented his "Holiness" or Pentecostal preaching by working as a handyman and itinerant crop-picker. Recently, Wil and his family had been picking fruit in California. But when his two sons joined the U. S. Navy in San Diego, Wil returned to Louisiana with his wife, Lou, and their two daughters, Myra and Marie. According to Dad, he fell in love the first time he saw Marie sitting in his brother's living room. She was playing the accordion and singing gospel music in the breaks between her father's sermons.

Russell tested the tow lines with his gloved hands and then brushed a windblown lock of hair out of his eyes. He pulled the collar of his coat over his ears and wrapped his arms around his lanky frame. The brisk November wind chilled his bones, but it did nothing to cool the fire in his belly. He looked one last time at the barge that was overdue for delivery to a customer on the south shore of Lake Pontchartrain. Certain it was secure, he turned toward the wheelhouse and hurried up the steps to have a word with the captain.

"I'm getting off this boat," he announced to BJ, who was standing at the helm.

Russell's eyes focused on a sight beyond his older brother. Through the F. N. Canulette's *windows, he saw low, gray clouds hovering over the saltwater lake. Huge waves, driven by a powerful nor'wester, pitched and tumbled over the water's surface. BJ had ordered the crew to anchor the little 400-horsepower tug at the mouth of Bayou Bonfouca, where they would ride out the autumn gale.*

At the confluence of Bayou Bonfouca and Lake Pontchartrain, the bayou's fresh water merges with the lake's brine beneath a vast expanse of rat-tail grass and Roseau cane. The brackish marsh comprises part of an estuarial ecosystem that produces Louisiana's prized seafood—fish, shrimp, oysters, and blue crabs. On fine days, omnivorous red-winged black birds soar over the marsh in search of food. Snakes, possums, rats, alligators, toads, frogs, insects, spiders, and turtles maneuver through the dense flora. Low tide reveals a feast for detritus feeders. High tide brings a surge of small fry seeking shelter from the lake's larger aquatic species. The marsh, though it may appear barren, teems with life. This day, its myriad denizens crouched beneath wildly swaying grass and blown-over canes lying prostrate like ranks of fallen soldiers. The animals and the Canulette's *crew hunkered down to wait.*

But Russell couldn't, wouldn't wait.

"If you leave, I'll have to fire you," BJ said.

"I don't care." He turned and pushed open the wheelhouse door. "I'm getting married—today!" The door slammed behind him as he started back down the steps.

BJ poured himself a cup of coffee and watched from the wheelhouse as Russell reappeared on the deck. His 19-year-old baby brother, head bowed against the wind, walked to the skiff mounted at the rear of the boat and peered inside. Shaking his head, he began moving sundry deck equipment, inspecting beneath and behind each item, and then returning it to its proper place. He disappeared from view and then, moments later, reappeared with a broom in his hand.

"What're you gonna to do with that?" BJ shouted from the wheelhouse door.

"Can't find the damned paddles for the skiff," Russell shouted back.

BJ sighed. "Forget it. Get the others to help you anchor the barge, and then cast off the tow lines. We're goin' back to the shipyard."

"You're gonna leave the barge here?"

BJ looked toward the lake, where the northwest wind was pushing water into the marsh and the mouth of the bayou. "It ain't goin' nowhere."

When the Canulette *and its crew arrived at the dock a few miles upstream on Bayou Bonfouca, BJ was fired on the spot. Russell, on the other hand, got three days off for his honeymoon. Canulette Shipyard rehired BJ the next day. The Canulettes and McKinneys, old Slidell families, understood the connections and loyalties that were part of doing business in 1957 Louisiana.*

I've heard this story so many times that I imagine it happening just that way. Since Dad's not much for sharing details, I have to improvise—the angry sky, his purposeful movements, the look of determination in his eyes—I have to draw on my experiences of South Louisiana's nature and my dad's own nature. Like a painting by Monet or Seurat, the image appears sharper from a distance. The eye blends the edges, fills in the blanks.

In previous tellings, Uncle BJ hid the skiff's paddles, thinking he could keep Dad from leaving. But now, almost 58 years later, Dad's memories are more Edouard Manet than Grant Wood. The clean, crisp lines have blurred.

"Maybe he hid them. Maybe there weren't any," he says now, with a big grin on his face. "It didn't matter. I was getting off that boat one way or another. I promised your mama I'd be there, and I meant to keep that promise." He pounds his fist on the dining-room table like a judge's gavel.

He married Marie Hartfield, just as he said he would, on November 12, 1957, at a small chapel in Poplarville, Mississippi. Grandpa Wil didn't approve, but Nanny Lou was all for it, had encouraged it even. She went with them to the Poplarville courthouse to sign the papers because Mom was only fourteen.

Dad and his bride spent their wedding night in the Fontainebleau Hotel Court on Front Street in Slidell. It was a small place with no more than eight or ten low, flat-roofed, dun-colored cottages and an office surrounding the motor court. In those days, before Gause Road had been extended to intersect with Front Street beside the little hotel, the motel lay quietly nestled within a grove of aromatic pine and oak trees. Looking at photographs from the era, I can see the romantic charm. Years later, Mom pointed it out to me one day as we drove past. I didn't think to

ask her what it looked like inside, but I imagine the rooms were decorated in a 1950's version of shabby chic.

"I didn't look at the inside," Daddy says now. "I only had eyes for your mother. She was so beautiful." His eyes moisten as he reaches across the dining table to gently pat her small, soft hand. "She still is."

It's Sunday, and I'm paying my weekly visit. I use the visits to extract stories from Dad before it's too late. He and Mom are the last of their generation, but I can only rely on Dad now for stories. Mom's once fine mind is gone—a casualty of Parkinson's disease.

Also gone is the Fontainebleau, a relic as dated as the rustic filling stations and motels along Route 66. Gause Road eventually became Gause Boulevard. Fast-food restaurants, medical-office buildings, and carwashes cropped up like pustules on the landscape, and the corner of Gause and Front Street became prime real estate. Today, a Walgreens dominates that corner. A sign on tall, metal stanchions announces in scrolling electronic lights that a 12-pack of Coca-Cola is on sale for $4.99 and flu shots can be had in the pharmacy. Cars line up at the drive-thru, where harried citizens wait for medication refills while tapping messages into their smartphones. A voice floats across the paved parking lot, disembodied proof of life inside the big, square building. "Please place your insurance card and ID in the tube and press send." A car pulls out of the parking lot onto the boulevard that was, in 1957, a gravel road. Exhaust fumes foul the air. The sweet smell of pine is gone.

Some things don't last. Some marriages don't either, especially teen marriages. But when my parents said "till death do us part," they meant it. They exchanged rings and kisses. They signed the marriage certificate. Then they consecrated their vows at the Fontainebleau and considered the matter settled. The next morning, they began a new life together without once

thinking of old age or diseases that might surreptitiously invade their lives. Though they married in November, their love held all the promise of a bright, spring morning.

* * *

These days, when he's not catching bees, Dad enjoys sitting on the porch with Mom. They watch animals emerge, tentatively, from underbrush growing in thick patches along a stream at the back of their property. The house he and Mom built with their own hands stands about two feet off the ground on cement foundation blocks. The ground slopes downward from the porch steps toward the stream. Between the house and the stream is a spacious, well-kept lawn dotted with fruit and nut trees—plum, lemon, satsuma, Louisiana orange, kumquat, loquat, fig, persimmon, may haw, oak, and pecan. Rabbits, raccoons, possums, and squirrels make daily appearances. Birds flit from tree to tree, some of them alighting on Dad's grape arbor, much to his consternation. Dad dabbles in wine-making, and the leafy vines of big, white scuppernongs and purple muscadines, smaller white grapes, and blackberries form a shady canopy beneath his arbor. But his grapes and berries never make it to wine bottles—birds pick them off as soon as they ripen. Dad makes his wine from bought grapes, berries, or juice, or from wild berries he picks in the woods near his home. I think he keeps the arbor because he enjoys watching things grow. He also likes giving Mom something beautiful to look at. The trees, the arbor, the manicured lawn, even the bees—these are his gifts to her. These are life's flowers. He presents them to her daily though he no longer has any idea what she thinks of them now that her Parkinson's symptoms have progressed to dementia. He knows this little Eden once brought her joy, so he maintains it as he maintains her and the life they built together. The plants, the wildlife, the porch they designed

and built after Hurricane Katrina damaged their home—these things bind him to her, past to present, loss to hope. Like bees in winter clustered tightly to conserve body heat, my parents draw warmth from each other as they sip coffee, watch the animals, and wait for whatever comes next. For them, spring is over. They raised three daughters and proudly watched each establish her own "colony." They worked hard through the summer and autumn of their lives and stored up enough love to see them through the coldest of winters. Their bodies are failing, but their faith in God—at least Dad's faith—remains strong. He's clinging to his queen and hoping for a new, eternal spring.

A Bag of Rocks

If asked why I collected them, I'd be hard pressed to give a rational answer. They're only rocks, small ones that I picked up from places I've been. I chose them because they were big enough to be interesting and small enough to fit in the decorative bowl my mother keeps on a table just inside her entranceway. I tried to find something special about each one, like its color or striations, but they're really just plain rocks. I made sure each had at least one flat surface, and there I used a fine-tipped Sharpie to indicate where I'd found it.

For years, whenever and wherever I traveled, my mother's only request was that I bring her back a rock. During the summer of 2013, I studied abroad in Ireland and then spent an additional two weeks visiting Edinburgh, London, and Paris. I brought her several Irish rocks and a few from the other countries. I brought back so many that I needed a carry-on bag specifically for them. Of course, airport security personnel found my bag perplexing as they ran it through their scanners. Thankfully, most were amused when they found it contained exactly what I told them—rocks.

"Oh my God, this is heavy!" one of them said. "Why are you carrying this around?"

"I couldn't put them in my checked bag without going over the weight limit. So I have to carry them."

"Well, there's no rule says you can't." She shook her head and waved me through the scanning area. "Go on," she said, "and good luck!" She laughed as I hoisted the bag off the table.

Those rocks meant something to my mother. We talked about Ireland as I showed her the photos I'd taken. I explained that stones were an integral part of the history of the little island nation. Her bright-blue eyes misted over with sadness when I explained how miles of stone fences lining scenic byways had been built by starving Irishmen during the Irish Potato Famine. They had cleared huge, heavy stones from English-owned fields all day for a few morsels of food that was plentiful, food that was not blighted like the potatoes the Irish grew in their own small gardens, food that was harvested and shipped to English tables across the Irish Sea. I told her the quaint stone fences and stone-walled houses began to look sinister to me after I learned the price the Irish had paid in erecting them. She wept silently over a people she would never know and over the cruelty of man toward man. The other rocks brought smiles to her face as I described where and how I obtained them. Her favorite was the story of how I stealthily pried a chunk of rock out of the mountainous base from which Edinburgh Castle seems to grow.

"I was afraid it would be *the piece* holding the whole castle in place," I said.

She laughed as we imagined my embarrassment and the explanation I might have manufactured had the centuries-old castle collapsed.

* * *

At first, we were all relieved when, in 2010, Mom was diagnosed with atypical Parkinson's disease. We had visions of Michael J. Fox, the actor who now personifies the disease, trembling but still sharp-witted, vital, and productive. That wasn't nearly so bad as the Alzheimer's disease we suspected when her memory began to fail. At the time, we didn't fully understand that Parkinson's doesn't always or exclusively involve major muscle tremor. In some cases, impaired

cognition is the most devastating symptom. As it became increasingly difficult for my mother to retrieve her memories, the truth of the situation became clear.

"I'm losing her," Dad said. "Every day, another little piece of her memory is gone."

That's not exactly how the disease works, but it's certainly the way it seems. Mom's memories are still there. Sometimes I can see her struggling to retrieve them. If I give her time and keep her focused on the task, she can occasionally get to them. But it's becoming harder and harder for her to do, and more often she simply gives up. Her frustration, embarrassment, and depression are palpable. She often proclaims herself "stupid," though she is not. I try to comfort her. I tell her she's just as smart as ever (which she is), and that the disease is affecting her memory. She shrugs and grins as if I'm speaking a language she can't understand. Mercifully, her confusion is usually short-lived. She soon forgets she was trying to remember something.

I get angry with Dad when he says she's not the person she used to be. I know I have no right to be angry with him. I have to remind myself that he spends every day and night with her, and caregiver's stress is exacting its toll on him.

It would be easier for both of them if he wore his hearing aids. At age 76, and after more than 50 years of working on big, loud diesel engines, he doesn't hear much unless it's shouted at him. But Mom's speech muscles, affected by Parkinson's disease, are too weak to produce a shout. She's physically weak, and he's vainly stubborn. As a result, they don't communicate. He has written her off as "demented" because he can't understand what she's trying to say and because he loses patience with her slow mentation. He pets and patronizes her instead of making an honest effort to hear her. In turn, she's furious with him and the disease that has robbed her of the "golden years" she should be enjoying. They should be traveling together. She should be collecting her own rocks in far-off places. She should be making new memories instead of

mining the deep recesses of her brain for old ones. None of this is fair to either of them, and none of it looks like Michael J. Fox, who smiles shakily for the camera and writes well-intended memoirs like *A Lucky Man, Always Looking Up, and A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Future.*

Nothing about this is funny, and Mom certainly doesn't feel lucky. Maybe she'd feel differently if she could remember what her toothbrush is for or how to take a shower. Maybe she'd be more inspired if the muscles that control her eyes worked well enough for her to read one of Michael's books. Maybe she'd laugh a little more if she could speak loudly enough to make herself understood by my obstinate, nearly deaf father.

To him, her thoughts have become as meaningless as her rock collection. Small, colored stones with names of places written on them collect dust like the memories trapped inside her mind. She plucks a stone from the bowl now and then and looks at it with wonder.

"Where did this come from?" she asks.

"Look on the other side," he answers. "Is there something written there?"

"Yes, but I can't read it."

"Here, let me look." He puts on his glasses and reads my careful handwriting.

"Oh, this one is from Chattanooga."

"Chattanooga? Where is that?"

"Tennessee. You remember Tennessee, don't you, darlin'? We went there a few times."

"We did? When?"

"We drove down the Blue Ridge Parkway when Jenny was a baby and the two older girls were teenagers. We went there with Mary and Richard to get our truck back after it was stolen

from the driveway. We went to a bluegrass festival there one time. Do you remember any of that?"

"I remember something about a creek. We picked up rocks in a cold, cold creek. But Jenny wasn't a baby."

"That's right," he says. "That was another time we went to the mountains. Jenny was older then." They both smile. She has rooted around in her collection of memories and found a nice one. For a few minutes, they enjoy reliving it before it slips from her tenuous grasp.

* * *

The summer she was diagnosed, Dad asked me to take Mom to see the antebellum homes along the Mississippi River between New Orleans and Baton Rouge.

"She's always wanted to do it, but it just doesn't interest me," he said. "Take her now if you can. Make some memories with her before it's too late, before she forgets who we all are."

I doubted she'd forget all of us, but I was happy to take the trip. I reserved a suite at Nottaway Plantation to use as our home base. Every day for a week, we toured at least one of the great homes. Mom loved the grounds at Oak Alley with its long double row of oak trees leading from the river to the manor house. I fell in love with the pastel colors of San Francisco House and its floor to ceiling French doors and open floor plan. We visited several other places, but we saved touring our home base for last.

Nottaway, by far, is the most elegant and luxurious of the homes along the Great River Road. It's oval-shaped ballroom on the second floor of the building's rotunda is a man-made wonder. Everything in it is white—the walls, the furniture, the drapery. The original owner

thought the white backdrop would display his wife and daughters to their best advantage in their colorful ball gowns. Located on the first floor of the rotunda beneath the unique white ballroom, is a gourmet restaurant. Its full-length glass walls afford diners a view of the beautifully landscaped grounds. Our last night there, Mom and I dined on sumptuous fried eggplant medallions layered with crabmeat dressing and topped with a rich cream sauce. We drank glass after glass of sweet iced tea and talked about all the places we'd visited. We fantasized about dancing in the white ballroom in richly-colored gowns with miles of lace and big hoop skirts. And we imagined what plantation life must have really been like before the Civil War. Mom, true to her empathetic nature, grew teary-eyed when she thought of the slaves who had suffered and died to make that way of life possible. The injustice inherent in the history of these glamorous homes was lost on neither of us.

We didn't collect rocks at Nottaway, Oak Alley, or San Francisco. Rocks that fall into the Mississippi River are ground to silt by the time they reach Louisiana. Instead, we collected memories. We wrote names on their undersides and stored them away in the decorative bowls of our minds. Now and then, I pick a memory from the collection and admire it. I see Mom strolling through the kitchen garden at Houmas House. I see her standing on the grand staircase at Nottaway. But Mom can’t retrieve similar memories. The last time I mentioned our trip, she grimaced. She remembered no details and only vaguely remembered going.

"It wasn't – was – *not real*," she said after a few seconds had passed. Then she shook her head in frustration. She couldn't find the words to say what she meant.

"What?" Dad asked. His tone was brusque. He thought she was confused, and it frustrated him. "Not real. Yes, Hon, it was real. You really did go on that trip."

"No!" Mom shook her head again.

"Do you mean it wasn't authentic?" I thought I understood what she was trying to say.

"Yes, yes!" She smiled at me. "That. It wasn't that - that word."

"What is she talking about?" Dad asked.

"She means it's all fake now, all touristy, not how the people actually lived."

"Oh," Dad said.

He didn't understand the mental gymnastics she had performed, but I did. She hadn't picked up a single rock and examined it. She had summarized the entire contents of the bowl.

* * *

Mother's Day of 2014 was just another day for Mom. She knew I was her daughter, but she couldn't recall my name. She called me "Number One" the whole day because she remembered, at least, that I am the firstborn of her three daughters. As I sat quietly beside her on the porch watching Dad work in the yard, it occurred to me that I would never hold another serious conversation with her. I would never again come to her with a problem and ask her advice. She could no longer follow the thread of a discussion. I realized I was glimpsing, for the first time, what it's like to be motherless.

Two weeks later, my husband and I took a 4,000-mile road trip from Louisiana to Maine and back. Our oldest son, Andy, and his two children accompanied us. We passed through 19 states along the way, and I picked up at least one stone in each of them. Those rocks are in a plastic bag on the counter in my kitchen. The names of the places where I found them are written on their flat surfaces. If asked why I collected them, I'd be hard pressed to give a rational answer.

Words, Fleshy and Meaningful

Mom shuffled into the kitchen at about four o'clock in the afternoon wearing red fleece-lined slippers that made soft scraping sounds as she shambled along. A red-plaid flannel shirt hung askew over her blue knee-length cotton night gown. Her short, silvery hair jutted and swooped from the top of her head like a rooster comb.

"Hello, Darling," Dad said when he saw her. "Edie's here. Come say hello."

She didn't say hello. She didn't even look at me. I visit them almost every Friday, and I feel her loss a little more each time. Now she almost never knows me and gets nothing lasting from my being there. But, for Dad, my visits are essential. In the two hours we'd spent together before Mom got out of bed, Dad had disburdened himself of the week's frustrations. He had spoken of how she slept too much, how she sometimes refused to eat or take her medicine, how she glared at him and accused him of hating her, how she wasn't the woman he married fifty-seven years ago. He cast off his pain in heavy chunks—some here, some there—while we drank coffee, discussed politics, and prepared dinner. His role is primary caregiver. My roles are listener and companion. We can do little else as my mother slowly succumbs to Parkinson's disease.

Dad approached his bride and gently kissed her forehead. Her mouth hung slightly open as if she had witnessed something stupefying. Her blue eyes, once so clear and alive, reminded me of the filmed over windows of an abandoned house. She raised her right hand, rubbed her thumb and index finger together. I imagined she was groping for words, fleshy and meaningful,

for a thought she couldn't articulate. When Dad embraced her, she muttered something I couldn't hear.

"I'm hurting your back? I'm sorry," he said, stepping away from her. "Here…" He pointed to a chair at the dining table and placed his hand gently on her back to guide her toward it. "Why don't you sit down? Would you like something to drink?"

The previous Friday he'd said pretty much the same things to her, and she had angrily pulled away from him.

"Don't tell me what to do!" She'd almost shouted at him.

Her eyes had flashed like lasers then, full of anger and something that resembled hatred. She'd sat, but not where Dad had suggested, and when it was time for dinner, she'd refused to sit at the table until Dad, exasperated, raised his voice. He hadn't been unkind, just authoritative, as one sometimes is forced to be when dealing with a child. More and more, that is how she behaves—like a child.

But this Friday, she sat where he suggested. He brought her a Coke and a glass of ice. He poured a little into the glass. She drank. Later, he poured more. When dinner was ready, she ate without resisting, but it was painful to watch. We'd made hamburgers, simple fare, easy to eat. She struggled with hers, holding it in her left hand while holding a fork in her right. She tried to use the fork to guide the sandwich to her mouth. The toppings slid out. Some fell in her lap. Dad tried again and again to convince her to hold it with both hands.

"Here, Hon," he said. "Give me your fork."

That did the trick. She grasped the bedraggled sandwich with two hands and began eating. We'd made Brussels sprouts as a side dish—admittedly an unusual hamburger accompaniment but one we knew she enjoyed. Dad returned her fork so she could eat them.

Earlier, while we were preparing dinner, Dad sang. He's always been a spontaneous warbler. It's one of the things I love about him. But his repertoire contains only snippets of songs, and this time a few poorly remembered lines of Johnny Horton's "Sink the Bismarck" made the playlist.

"Great song," I said. "What was that other song Horton made famous?"

Soon Dad chattered away about songs like Horton's "North to Alaska" and Claude King's "Wolverton Mountain" while I sautéed mushrooms and onions and fried hamburger patties. He spread mayonnaise on hamburger buns and punctuated his discourse by singing a line now and then, congratulating himself when he remembered the words. He playfully nudged me aside so he could get to the stove. I watched him wave aromas toward his nose and sample the vegetables. "This is gonna be so good," he said before singing another line of song. The creases in his forehead and around his eyes eased as he sang.

Once Mom was on track with her dinner, I pulled my iPad over and looked for those songs on YouTube. I found a black-and-white video of Johnny Horton performing "Sink the Bismarck" on the April 2, 1960, episode of the *Saturday Night Beech-Nut Show*. Dad smiled when he heard the first few bars of the music.

"Wow! You found that in your little box?"

He seemed in awe of my "little box," as he called it, which fetched the past and dropped it, like a dog dropping a stick, onto his dining table. As soon as one song ended, he suggested another.

We spent the entire meal that way—me searching for old songs, him straining to hear them. Mom, deafer now than Dad, sat across from me eating her food and gazing vacantly at the

two of us. Was she trying to hear and understand what we were doing or simply trying to remember who we were? I think she sometimes lives in a world of strangers.

Dad suggested some bluegrass music. He wanted to hear a song by an old friend, Mac Wiseman. The song was "Mary of the Wild Moor."

"I cry every time I hear it," Dad said.

I found it on YouTube, played it, and watched in amazement as tears filled his eyes. This was the man who had confided to my brother-in-law, "I was hard on my girls. I raised them like men." I could count on one hand the number of times I'd seen him cry.

"Play it again," he said.

I did. Five times, maybe six. The sound quality of the old clip was poor, and he struggled to make out the lyrics. I played it and replayed it until he was satisfied. Then we moved on to other bluegrass favorites. When he got up to clear the table, he convinced Mom to sit in his place so that she could see and hear the iPad.

At first, she stared at the screen with the flat affect, the mask, typical of Parkinson's disease. Then she tilted her head closer, turned it to the side, so that she could hear the music better. Dad and I glanced at each other but said nothing. A smile slowly spread across her face. Dad, who was behind her, couldn't see the smile, but he saw her head when it began bobbing in small, stilted movements to the rhythm of the music. He stopped putting away leftovers, moved a chair beside hers, and sat down. She turned to him, still smiling, and placed her hands in his.

"Your hands are cold," he said.

"Yours are warm," she replied.

Tears welled up in his eyes for the second time that evening. I looked away, fighting back tears of my own. When I looked at him again, he motioned for me to put my arm around her shoulders.

I read his lips. "She's cold."

We sat that way for a while, her hands in his, my arm around her shoulders, her head bobbing to the music. Then the song ended. Dad, determined to hang onto her mind just a little while longer, decided my "little box" was not loud enough. He went into the living room to put on a CD. Soon, bluegrass blasted from much more sophisticated speakers. Mom and I migrated to the living room and stood before the stereo system like penitents before an altar.

The altar, in this case, was music. Before Parkinson's ravaged her brain, my mother played the accordion, piano, banjo, and guitar. She sang beautifully. As a girl, she played gospel tunes in church with her father. Over time, music became a tie binding our family together. Dad sings and picks guitar a bit. My sister, Eileen, plays guitar. Jenny, the youngest, played piano, guitar, banjo and violin until multiple sclerosis robbed her fingers of their dexterity. She and Eileen sing like nightingales.

Though my sisters and I still enjoy singing together, we miss our mother's voice. In the past, we worked out four-part harmonies and sang simple country or gospel melodies. Sometimes we sang Irish ballads, which naturally lent themselves to harmony. After we grew up and left home, I think Mom and Dad missed our voices. They bought an RV and traveled to bluegrass festivals all over the South, where they met and befriended minor music celebrities like Mac Wiseman.

Mom doesn't remember Mac anymore, and this Friday she didn't remember me either. I asked if she knew who I was. She nodded, but she couldn't name me. This was something she

did, I knew, when she really had no clue. Before she'd become almost incapable of communicating, she'd often tell me that she vaguely remembered people's faces, but she couldn't remember who they were.

"It's so embarrassing," she'd said. She'd hid her inability to recognize people behind smiles and "how-are-yous" for as long as she could. Now, she mostly stares and says nothing.

But the music awakened something in her brain, something happy and beautiful. As we stood before the stereo, she began to notice pictures of her grandchildren on the living room wall.

"Who is that?" she asked repeatedly. She pointed to the infants, toddlers, and precocious young boys memorialized in a family portrait Eileen and I gave them for their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. Our youngest sons (we each have three) were only a few weeks old then. How innocent our little brood seemed, how untouched by time and trouble. And how strangely familiar Mom seemed to find them. Each time she pointed to a child in the portrait, I found his framed adult photo and brought it to her.

"Oh, he grew up to be a big boy," she said of my middle son, Brandon.

When she began swaying to the music, Dad, who'd been watching from the kitchen, stopped washing dishes. He dried his hands and hastened into the living room.

"Can I have this dance?" he asked.

She stepped toward him. He gently wrapped his right arm around her waist and took her right hand in his left. He led her stiff, bent, shuffling body around the room. I know it was a physical trial for the tough man who had raised his daughters like men. He had worked hard all his life, jousting with heavy tools against implacable, room-sized diesel engines. His back, like hers, is bent. His right foot, disfigured years ago when an engine fell on it, is a source of constant pain. But I didn't see pain in his face as they danced. He closed his eyes. His lips turned up at the

corners. I couldn't know what he thought or how he felt, but I imagined he felt the sort of bliss that comes from communion with the one you love.

I retreated to a chair in the corner, opened my iPad on my lap, and recorded them without their knowledge. Maybe it was wrong, but I wanted—I needed—to preserve that memory. When the song ended, Dad tried to dip Mom, but she was too stiff. He said something I couldn't hear. She said something in response. They laughed and parted.

For the first time in weeks, maybe months, they'd had a genuinely intimate moment, and the effect was magical. Between the musical interlude and Eileen's quiet arrival a little while later, Mom sat on a barstool in the kitchen and watched Dad finish tidying the kitchen. I tried to make the most of her rare lucidity. I found a picture of her when she was nineteen and asked her where it had been taken. To my surprise, she told me not only where and when but the entire backstory.

"I was mad," she said. "He was leaving, and I couldn't go with him."

It was a tentative start, and I had to tease the story out of her one disjointed sentence at a time. But I got it all eventually. Dad worked for Canulette Shipyard (later Southern Shipyard) located just north of New Orleans in Slidell, Louisiana when they were first married. In early 1963, he was tasked with piloting a navy tugboat from Slidell through the Panama Canal to Long Beach, California. He left Mom alone with Eileen and me for three weeks. At the time, I was four and Eileen was two. Mom hated being left behind with all the responsibility of the family and none of the adventure. She passed some of that time with her sister-in-law, Ellen, in New Orleans. But Aunt Ellen and her teenage daughter argued too much, so Mom found ways to escape. One day she took us to Audubon Zoo, where she had our picture taken sitting astride a

statue of a black bear. I knew that picture, but I'd never heard the story behind it. Nor had I heard the story behind the photo of our angry young mother.

After shutting down the kitchen for the night, we retired to my parents' bedroom. Mom crawled back into their king-sized bed. Eileen, typical of one who'd been the baby of the family for thirteen years until Jennifer was born, curled up beside her. Dad lowered his tired, twisted body into a chair and then propped his feet on the end of the bed. I took my place on the side of the bed opposite where my mother and sister lay.

Dad filled in the gaps in Mom's story. "Oooh," he said, his eyes darting mischievously from me to Mom and back again. "She was mad at me, mad as a wet hen."

He laughed and joked as he told the story of his trip to California: how there had been 30-foot seas in the Gulf of Mexico; how his deckhands had spent that portion of the trip retching; how they had spent the first few days in the Panama Canal at Cristobal repairing the damage done to the boat by the Gulf's battering waves; how ugly Cristobal had seemed compared to beautiful Panama City; how pristine and well-maintained the canal had been; how they had not been allowed to use radios or blow horns in the canal for fear of landslides; how friendly the sailors at the naval yard in Long Beach had been; how one of his crew had gotten drunk waiting for the flight home, had almost missed the flight, had fallen asleep shortly after the plane took off, had awakened, and had scarfed down enough of those "little bottles of gin" to get drunk and pass out again. The details rushed from him, popping and fizzing like the champagne he'd uncorked in the Officers Club in Long Beach. Dad became a young man again, twenty-four years old, strong, cocksure, and adventurous. He became the man who did what needed to be done for his family, even if it meant leaving them for three weeks.

"I was doin' my job," he said, unapologetically.

He came to life in a way I hadn't seen in a long time, in a way that reminded me of my mother's eyes before Parkinson's clouded them over.

Before I left, I showed my parents the video I'd made of them dancing. Mom, already receding into the opacity of Parkinson's, stared blankly at the screen.

"If we'd known you were going to make a video," Dad said, "we'd have dressed better." He smiled, pleased with his wit, pleased with the outcome of the evening.

Now, at home, I play that video over and over. I play it the way I played "Mary of the Wild Moor" for Dad. Just before it ends, my parents smile at each other like young lovers who reunite after a long separation. I freeze the frame and study it. Mom's face has emerged from behind its Parkinson's mask, her eyes are sparkling, and she is in the moment with Dad. I imagine them young and healthy. Mom is quick-witted and beautiful. Dad is vital and unbent. They are a couple again, not a lonely husband and the shell of his wife gazing at each other across a wordless expanse.

On The Secret Lives of Dads

I spend every Sunday at my parents' home. Well, not every Sunday. There are exceptions. But mostly, I spend Sundays there, and we do the same things every time. Dad goes over the grocery list he has compiled since my last visit. He explains carefully and in detail what brand and what size and how many of each item he wants me to buy. He does this as if Mom hasn't been sick for years, as if I haven't been doing their shopping since she became too confused to drive and shop for herself, as if Dad ever changes the brands he uses or the sizes he wants. He is so serious, so exacting, so regimented, it's all I can do not to laugh. Instead, I listen dutifully, and then I go to the store.

After I return and the groceries have been stowed away, we eat. Or if it's too early for dinner, Dad takes me for a golf cart ride around his three and a half acres. We visit his bee hives, his fruit trees, and his grape arbor. He shows me whatever busy work he's done since he saw me last. Then we eat. Then we do dishes. Then he settles in to watch *60 Minutes* with the volume turned up so loud I develop a headache. The routine is always, always the same, except for those moments when something extraordinary happens.

One week, in the course of dinner conversation, Dad recounted a time when, as an employee at Southern Shipbuilding just north of New Orleans, he and a number of others took a newly-built ship for a trial run in the Gulf of Mexico. The ship, contracted for by the United States government, was the largest Southern had built. According to Dad, a lot of "big wigs" were aboard.

"While we were out in the middle of the Gulf," Dad said, "we got a message from the Navy to stay put."

It seems President Kennedy and Nikita Kruschev were having a little disagreement over some missiles headed for Cuba.

"You were out there when that happened?"

"Yep. But here's the best part," Dad said. His face flushed slightly, his eyes glistened, and he grinned broadly. "Harry Bell was the captain, and that night, Old Harry dropped the anchor after all those big wigs had gone to bed. When the huge anchor chain started thundering over the side, I knew what it was. I was in the engine room, and the rumbling was so loud I heard it over the roar of the engines. The big wigs sleeping in their bunks heard it too, but they didn't know what it was. Everyone was nervous, see? So they all came running up on deck thinking we were being attacked. I came out and found every one of them huddled near the rail, shaking with fear, and wearing nothing but their drawers."

It must have been *some* funny sight. Dad slapped the dining table with the palm of his hand and laughed until tears flowed down his cheeks.

I didn't laugh. Until that moment, the Cuban missile crisis had seemed an obscure historical event: It happened, but in a peripheral, abstract way. Suddenly, the threat felt very real. Dad could have been caught up inadvertently in the start of World War Three.

I looked at the laughing man who earlier had seemed so old and serious, so cautious and inflexible. I tried to remember him as he had been in the early 60s—young and fearless. I wondered why I'd never heard this story before. I wondered if Mom had ever heard it. I wondered what other near misses he'd kept to himself.

Target Practice

I lifted the 16-gauge shot gun and aimed it at a line of empty beer cans set up on fence posts about 25 yards away. My eight-year-old arms were too short to place the butt against my shoulder in order to fire the weapon properly. I improvised. I wedged the wooden stock into my right armpit, looked down the barrel, and lined up the sights. My right index finger hovered lightly over the trigger.

Someone behind me said, "You're not gonna let her fire it that way are you?"

Daddy said, "Let her be. She'll learn."

I turned my face toward Daddy and smiled. I liked that he trusted me enough to do it on my own. He nodded at me and then toward the beer-can targets. I leaned my face over the stock, inches from the hammer, realigned my sights, and wrapped my finger around the trigger.

* * *

Growing up, my friends were always surprised at how young my parents were. According to Mom, Dad was a gangly 19-year-old when they first met. His sister-in-law had invited her cousins, including my mother, to a gospel sing-a-long, and Dad propped himself in the doorway of his brother's house to listen. Mom, just fourteen, took one look at the guy with the dark wavy hair that cascaded over his forehead and duck-tailed in the back and decided he was too cocky for her tastes. But that didn't prevent her from noticing that he wore a white tee shirt with a pack of Pall Mall reds rolled up in the sleeve and a pair of neatly pressed dungarees

with the cuffs turned up. It didn't stop her from saying yes when he asked her for a date. And it didn't stop her from saying yes when, two months later, he asked her to marry him. But teenage marriages, though not unheard of, weren't unregulated in 1957. My parents needed a little help. They got it from an unlikely source.

Grandpa Hartfield was dead set against the marriage. My grandmother—"Nanny," we called her—was in favor of it. She had her reasons. Grandpa was an itinerant preacher and farm worker with a penchant for alcohol. He cheated on his wife and brutally beat her and their four children. Mom, by the time Dad met her, had dropped out of school after moving with her family from Mississippi to Michigan to California where they picked cherries, apples, or whatever crop was in season. Mom's older brothers escaped familial dysfunction by joining the Navy. Her older sister married, though she and her husband were separated when my parents met. Only Mom remained at home, and neither of my grandparents wanted to lose her. But Nanny saw something in Dad that was missing in her own husband—something solid, reliable, and principled—and she believed Mom would be better off. So as strongly as Grandpa objected to the match, Nanny encouraged it. And when Dad came to take Mom away, Nanny not only let her baby go, she went with them to the courthouse and signed papers allowing my mother to marry.

Mom had been right about Dad. He *was* cocky. A diesel mechanic who had dropped out of school in eleventh grade, he'd learned from an early age the joy of taking things apart to see how they worked and then successfully putting them together again. He believed in learning from experience. That was usually a good thing because the nineteen-year-old man and his fourteen-year-old bride had very little experience and a great deal to learn. The learning curve became much steeper when I was born eleven months later, and, in many respects, we all learned together.

* * *

The squeeze of my finger set off a chain reaction that no one, especially Daddy, anticipated. The hammer clicked back as far as it would go and then sprang forward, striking the firing pin. The firing pin struck the center of the shotgun shell, creating a spark that ignited the gunpowder compressed inside. The burning gunpowder rapidly expanded inside the shell, forcing the shot, or "BBs" into motion. They raced through barrel of the gun and scattered from its opening. Newton's law, the one about equal and opposite reactions, took over. As violently as the small, round projectiles shot forward, the gun itself kicked backward. The butt, not resting against my shoulder as it should have been, failed to transfer the recoil energy into my body. Instead, the smoothly polished wooden stock slid easily under my arm, and in a split second the hammer of the gun slammed into my face just below my right eye.

* * *

By the time I was eleven, I had become skilled at driving the ancient pickup truck Dad had bought cheap and overhauled. It was a miracle of antiquated technology that had a standard transmission with the gear shift mounted on the steering column. Instead of a key ignition, it had a spring-loaded starter pedal located just to the right of the accelerator. And, of course, it had a clutch and a brake. Altogether, it required two feet working four pedals to make it go. Before I was big enough to reach all those pedals, I sat in Dad's lap and steered. Eventually, I graduated to driving it myself, but not without popping the clutch and killing the engine a thousand or so times. False starts, yes, but I learned from them. And when I turned fifteen, unlike all my friends

who got learner's permits, I came home from the Louisiana Department of Motor Vehicles with an official driver's license. Dad handed me the keys to my very my own used car, a gigantic Oldsmobile Delta 88. Stirred as equally by pragmatism as by pride, he sent me straight outside to change one of that behemoth's tires. If I were going to drive alone, he explained, I needed to be able to take care of myself.

* * *

I was aware that something had gone terribly wrong. I felt a sharp sting and the warm gush of blood on my face, but I was too surprised by the way my parents' friends cried out to understand fully what had happened. Daddy was the first to respond. He ran over and took the shotgun from my hands, passed it to someone—I don't remember who—and swept me into his arms. People were shouting. A woman was crying. But Daddy remained calm. He quietly told me everything would be okay and then dispatched Mama to get peroxide and bandages. She ran inside ahead of us. Somebody held the screen door open and Daddy carried me inside. He laid me on the sofa and took the medical supplies Mama brought. Gently—oh, so gently—he pressed a wet washcloth to my face and held it there until the bleeding stopped. His face was calm, his voice strong and unwavering when he told me to lie still and relax, but his eyes belied his courage. I saw fear there, something Daddy rarely showed.

* * *

About the time I mastered driving Dad's old pickup truck, I also mastered driving his aluminum, flat-bottomed fishing boat. Together, we ran trot lines and checked hoop nets he'd set out in the West Pearl River a few miles east of our home in Slidell. The Pearl River, which forms the southeastern boundary between Louisiana and Mississippi, branches to form the West, West Middle, Middle, East Middle, and East Pearl Rivers before emptying into Lake Pontchartrain. A savvy river rat knows the small, natural channels which connect the five rivers. My dad was one such rat. Often, we launched his boat at Indian Village Landing on the West Pearl and motored upstream to Mill's Bayou. We turned into the shadowy bayou and cruised along for a quarter mile or so until we came to Friday's Ditch, a treacherous link between the West Pearl and West Middle Pearl.

Friday's Ditch was aptly named, being wide enough in most places for only one boat to pass. I believe (though I have no documented proof) that "Friday" referred to Friday Porter, the freed son of a slave woman and her white master, David Porter. Around the turn of the nineteenth century, the Porters settled upriver from Indian Village Landing on a branch of the West Pearl now known as Porter's River. David Porter had a several other children with his white wife, Sarah (nee Bostwick). One of them, Sarah Ann Porter, married John McKinney, my great-great-great-great grandfather. Thus, my own family tree contains both white and black Porters. Most of the black Porters settled near Indian Village, and one of them, Mr. Willie, lived for years in a shack at the landing until a hurricane came along and washed it away. Mr. Willie survived that hurricane. We often found him seated on a camp stool at the landing where he once lived, a fishing pole in one hand and a can of beer in the other. He was an old, long-legged, wrinkled up raisin of a man with a shiny, dark brown pate. "How's it going, Mr. Willie?" Dad always asked. Sometimes they talked about the weather. Sometimes they talked about hunting.

Dad always asked if he'd caught anything that day and shared our catch with him when he hadn't. Mr. Willie's dead now, of course. I didn't know then that he was a distant cousin. I learned it years later while doing genealogy research. Dad didn't know either. Mr. Willie, like much of our family's history, simply slipped into obscurity. I suspect Friday's ditch is still there, though, like me, it probably doesn't look much like it did when I was a girl.

* * *

Kneeling beside the sofa, Daddy slowly removed the washrag from my face while Mama peered over his shoulder and fired off questions. "How bad is it? Does she need stitches? Did it damage her eye?" I started to cry, but Daddy hushed me, told me my tears would sting the cut on my face. He inspected the jagged, horizontal gash that lay about a half inch below my right lower lid. It was a quarter inch wide and an inch long. He dabbed my face with peroxide until all the blood around the wound was gone, then taped a bandage over the laceration. I lay there until he and Mama said goodbye to all their guests. The visitors took turns patting my shoulder and telling me what a brave girl I was. I didn't feel brave. In fact, the more they said it, the less courageous I felt. My face hurt, Daddy looked scared, and Mama looked worried. What had I done wrong?

* * *

I considered Friday's Ditch the ultimate test of river "ratness." Its fast current and narrow, winding course made it a navigational challenge, even for Dad. I was determined to "run the

ditch," and prove to myself and my male cousins that I was as brave and capable a boat operator as they were. Every time Dad ran the ditch he taught me things—go slow here, speed up there, mind that submerged stump, and work with the current, not against it. One day, when I was about eleven, he said the words I'd been longing to hear. "Are you ready?"

We swapped places in the boat before we entered the ditch from West Middle. Dad had me idle the outboard motor while he listened for anything coming from the opposite direction. At last, he nodded and told me to go. I revved the motor and steered into the churning water.

I wound my way up Friday's Ditch with little trouble. The brown, marshy water bubbled past gnarly cypress roots and palmetto plants. Stumps jutted toward the sky and submerged logs thrust skeletal branches into the primordial gloom created by a canopy of moss-draped cypress trees. The place smelled both fishy and earthy with a tinge of hydrocarbon exhaust fumes left by previous boaters. Dad mostly kept his eyes on the channel, pointing out obstacles as he saw them, but sometimes he glanced back at me and smiled. I saw the pride in his face, and it made me happy. He'd wanted a son, but had had only daughters. I substituted as best I could.

As we neared Mill's Bayou, the current became swifter, the ditch narrower. On the left, near the junction of the two channels, stood a giant bald cypress tree. If I could make it past that tree, I'd be out of Friday's Ditch. But the current and my anticipated triumph conspired against me. We got crosswise in the stream, and I, in my excitement, overcompensated. The next thing I knew, we were motoring up one side of the tree. The boat listed hard to starboard, and I was sure it would capsize. Dad wheeled around in his seat, told me how to make a few quick corrections, and the boat miraculously slid out of the ditch upright. Safe in Mill's Bayou, I cut the engine down to an idle. Dad and I looked at each other with eyes like Mason jar lids. At first, I heard only the sound of blood pulsing though the vessels in my head. Then I heard our laughter—

relieved maniacal laughter—a shared reaction that was both equal to and the opposite of our earlier terror.

* * *

The sun hung low in the sky when Daddy called me out to the back yard. I stood beside him, trembling. He held another shotgun, my mother's 20-gauge Browning. He pushed a shell into the semi-automatic side-loading chamber. I jumped when it slammed shut. He knew I was scared, but I had to shoot again, right then, that day. If I didn't, he explained, I'd always be afraid. Mama and I watched as he set up another can on a post behind the house and then walked back to where we were standing. She wrapped her arm around my shoulders, pulled me close, and lifted my chin to look into my eyes. "You can do it," she said.

* * *

I was scared the day I came home from the hospital. As sometimes happens in families, Dad and I had grown distant during my later teenage years. Ironically, I had tried to exert the independence he had instilled in me, and he had tried to keep me tethered to the family. We argued. I slammed a lot of doors. He smashed his fist through the paneling in our living room. Eventually, I revolted, made a tactical error, and now faced a complicated future. I didn't know how Dad would react to my pregnancy. Nineteen, unmarried, and with only a high-school education, I wasn't sure what to think of it myself. My uncertainty was compounded by the fact

that I had become pregnant the first and only time I'd had sex, and the father of my child had no interest in either of us.

The previous three days in the hospital had been a blur of blood tests and sonograms performed to rule out an ectopic pregnancy. Finally, my obstetrician, Dr. Caire, asked me to walk with him, away from my semi-private room, to a place where we could talk confidentially. He laid before me the first of many choices I'd have to make in the coming days. My pregnancy was not ectopic. I would, if all went well, give birth normally. Abortion was legal, but he did not perform them. He urged me to consider giving my child up for adoption, yet he offered to refer me to a doctor who would perform an abortion if I wanted one. Though Dr. Caire, a big man with a broad, gentle face, seemed very kind to a scared girl with limited resources and a morbid dread of disappointing her father, he could have saved his gentle pro-life sales pitch. Frightened as I was of an uncertain future, I was confident about one thing: I wanted my baby.

* * *

Daddy must have decided I'd learned enough from experience for one day. Instead of allowing me to repeat my mistake, he taught me how to properly fire Mama's smaller shotgun. I watched him raise it and position the butt firmly against his own shoulder.

"When it fires," he explained, "your shoulder will absorb the energy from the recoil."

"I'm sorry for not doing it right the first time." I realized, finally, what I'd done wrong.

"No." Daddy shook his head. "It's not your fault. I should have stopped you. I just didn't think you'd get hurt."

His confession frightened me. Until that day, I'd had complete trust in his judgment.

"I'm scared, Daddy."

"I know. But you're also brave. You just need to prove it to yourself."

He stood beside me, helped me raise the gun and position it properly against my shoulder. Then he stood behind me. I felt the comforting warmth of his hands on my shoulders.

"Will it kick?"

"A little, but not as bad as the 16-gauge."

I looked down the barrel, lined up my sights, and hovered my shaky index finger over the trigger.

"Don't flinch," he said. "Keep your eye on the target and squeeze."

* * *

Facing my dad was much harder than deciding to keep the baby. Mom broke the news of my pregnancy the day I went into the hospital, but Dad never came to visit me there. Though he didn't say why, I knew he had been trying to make sense of his own equal and opposite reactions—unconditional love and an outraged sense of morality. It wasn't the pregnancy that bothered him. It was the fact that I'd had unmarried sex. As old-fashioned as abstinence sounds today, he had expected it from me, and I'd let him down. My failure rocked the foundations of his deeply moral world. Until then, he had complete faith in my judgement.

Mom said little on our ride home from the hospital, so I didn't know what to expect when I got there. I walked to the back of the house where I found Dad stretched out on the king-sized bed he shared with Mom. His hands were crossed over his chest and his hazel eyes were fixed on

the ceiling. His jaw muscles flexed in and out, in and out, in and out as he repeatedly clenched and unclenched his teeth. I sat on the floor and rested my head against the edge of the bed.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered into the cavernous silence.

"I know."

Then the tears came, and I wept uncontrollably. Soon, I felt his warm hand gently stroking my hair.

"Your mother and I discussed it," he said, when I had no energy left for crying. "If you want, we'll take your baby and raise it as our own."

I lifted my head and looked into his eyes. I was surprised and saddened by the tears I saw pooling in them. When I slid my right hand into his left, he closed his fingers—roughened by years of turning wrenches—around mine and held them firmly, gently.

I'd been facing tough decisions for days. Some had been easier to make than others. The option Dad proposed was one I hadn't imagined. I considered it, but only briefly. I knew in my heart what I had to do, frightened as I was.

"I appreciate the offer," I said. "But I couldn't live that lie for the rest of my life. I couldn't pretend to be the big sister. I'd have to leave here and never come back."

"Are you sure?"

I took a deep breath and straightened my back. "This was my doing," I told him without flinching. "And I have to take responsibility for it."

He smiled then, and I felt, once again, his comforting support behind me.

An Easy Death

It's noon on Friday. I've just walked in the door to my uncle's house when his daughter, Laura, grabs me by the elbow, whispers into my left ear. "Check his pulse. His skin is cold and sweaty. Check his pulse, please!"

I nod, then make my way through the living room to the opposite side of the hospital bed set up behind a pair of brown leather rocking recliners that have been pushed much too close to the matching sofa. I stand between the bed and a long wooden table positioned against the wall between the living room and the bedroom Uncle Billy, until recently, shared with his wife, Helena. Formerly the repository of photos—images of children and grandchildren, the old wedding photo, the happy couple and their life chronicled in Kodachrome— now the table is strewn with medicine bottles, syringes, and tissue boxes. I stand beside the resting place of a much loved man—a son, a brother, an uncle, a husband, a father, a grandfather—a man I've known for as long as I can remember, a man battling cancer and losing. I stand beside his resting place, but not his final resting place. That comes later.

Laura looks at me expectantly from across the room. Mechele is watching, but less obviously than her younger sister. Helena is chattering away to my parents and others who have come to see Uncle Billy for the last time.

The oxygen machine drones. My uncle, his mouth agape, gulps at the air. His skin is, indeed, cool and moist as I gently slide my fingers along his wrist seeking a pulse. *Is it there? Wait, I feel it. Is it my own pulse?* My heart is pounding. I loosen my grip, move my fingers lightly along the inside of his arm to find a pulse I'm sure is his. I exhale, just then realizing I've

been holding my breath. It's slow, his pulse, but still surprisingly strong. I know he won't last much longer. His heart is winding down like a clockwork toy. His gasping respirations—agonal, as they're called in medical parlance—are agonizing to watch. His chest gives a shallow, desperate heave with each one. There are so few of them it's almost, but not quite, a relief to see movement at all. Not quite, because I know I must give a medical report, like the old paramedic that I am. I must tell the family—his family, my family—what they already know but don't want to hear.

I squeeze into a place on the crowded sofa between Laura and Mechele. Laura, still small and athletic in her mid-thirties, looks almost like a teenager with her long blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail. She can't sit still. She chews her nails and glances from my face to her father's again and again. Her bright-blue eyes plead for good news. Mechele is a rock. Her dark, curly hair hangs serenely around her gently smiling face and cascades carelessly over her shoulders. Her Caribbean-blue eyes express the depth of character she will need in her new role as immediate-family leader. Laura hopes her father will live. Mechele hopes he'll die easy.

My cousins huddle close. I speak quietly so their mother won't overhear. I explain how Uncle Billy’s agonal respirations, his slowed pulse, and his cool, moist skin are signs that his body's systems are failing. I tell them it won't be long. I don't tell them, because I’m sure, but not sure enough, that he could die any moment.

More family and friends arrive. Everyone hugs. Helena pulls chairs in from the dining room for her new guests. They talk.

"It's strange to come in and not find Billy in his recliner smiling and making jokes," Dad says.

Everyone laughs.

"True," Helena says. "He always had a sense of humor." She glances over her shoulder at the dying man and then smiles at Dad. "He was a good husband and father. Always played with the girls. Always had them laughing."

I remember him playing with me as a child. He teased me relentlessly, but his teases were good natured.

“Where is Mommy?” I had asked when he babysat me.

“She went fishing in an airplane,” he’d said. His soft blue eyes had lit up as he’d said it—beacons of mischief, his eyes.

“Oh, Uncle Bill!” I’d said, exasperated.

I remember him recording three-year-old me singing on his old reel-to-reel tape recorder. I wonder if those tapes still exist. I remember crying whenever he played Floyd Cramer’s piano masterpiece, “Last Date,” on that same machine. The melody implants in my head. It becomes my sad, fitting, inner soundtrack to his death and the grief that haunts me afterward.

I notice Helena speaks of him in the past, as if he has already passed, and it surprises me, though he's been terminally ill for months and unconscious since Monday. I realize she has had plenty of time to prepare. I wonder what they talked about during those final months in the wee hours when sleep wouldn't come.

Apropos of nothing, Dad remarks on Uncle Billy’s skin, always a bit ruddy, the presumed genetic signature of believed, but unproven, Native American ancestry. I don't see the ruddiness now. I see pallor, jaundice maybe. I see him breathe less and less often. I see his lips turn gray. I see the moisture on his forehead gradually disappear. I see the others laughing and talking as if nothing unusual were happening only a few feet away. I see Laura bite her nails and Mechele smile indulgently at her mother's attempts to be entertaining.

Then something tells me to go back to his bed. Some voice says, "Go now!" Maybe it's years of experience in the dying business. Maybe it's instinct. Maybe it's God. I don't know. I only know I must go, and so I rise, walk around the bed, touch his skin and find it dry. I slip my fingers between his wrist and the bed linens and feel for a pulse. I don't find it at first, but then it's there, slower and much weaker. It's there, and then, like the last drops of water trickling from a faucet, it ebbs away. Is he dead? No. He gasps, now just four times a minute, but it's still life and he's still clinging to it. His heart is simply too weak to produce enough blood pressure to create a pulse.

I don't know why, but now the others are silent. Is it the expression on my face? I look up to see them staring at me—my parents, my cousins, my aunt, her guests—all of their eyes seem to ask the same question. I look at Laura and Mechele and nod. I step out of the way and tell Helena it won't be long. I guide her into the space I just vacated. She takes her husband's left hand and caresses it. The girls stand opposite their mother. Laura cries. Mechele wraps her arms around her sister and croons her comfort. Mechele is a rock.

No one speaks. My uncle gasps. Seconds pass. Against all logic, I will him to gasp again. He does. More seconds pass. He gasps. I begin to wonder if I spoke too soon, because the oxygen machine continues to drone.

I sit on the sofa between my parents. Dad looks at me with red-rimmed eyes, moist but not welling. He whispers, "Is he going?" I nod. Mom stares at the scene, trying to make sense of it. Parkinson’s disease has diminished her mental competence, which will lead to an unexpected horror. Mom will relive her brother’s death over and over in cycles of remembering, grieving, and forgetting. But that comes later, too.

Right now, I realize my own cognitive disconnect—the oxygen machine drones whether Uncle Bill gasps or not. And I realize he is gone. And I realize—this is the worst—I realize I'm the only one who knows.

I rise from the sofa, take a spot beside the bed, beside my aunt, across from my cousins, across from my parents, across from the whole world it seems, and I coax a breath that never comes. My trembling fingers grope for a pulse I know they won't find. I speak the words that make my heart hurt.

"He's gone."

"Twelve twenty-three." Mechele says softly.

A tear rolls down my cheek.

"Thank you," she whispers to no one in particular.

Memory Matters

Memory is a way of telling you
what's important to you.
~ Salman Rushdie

I see it all so clearly. It's a cold morning in 1960, and I'm wearing flannel pajamas with feet in them as I peer over the wall that separates the kitchen from the bedroom I share with my parents, the only bedroom in the small house my dad is building for us, little by little. The half-finished wall reaches just to the top rail of my baby bed. On the other side is the kitchen table. And on the table is the carcass of a freshly slaughtered hog. As Dad carves through flesh and bone, a red stain blooms on the paper covering the table, and the sharp aromas of blood and fat mingle in my nostrils.

This is my earliest memory, and I believe I remember it perfectly. But do I? It *had* been a cold day. I'm sure of that much because, as I would learn from experience when I became old enough to help, Dad always waited for cold weather to slaughter a hog. Even in the days before global warming, temperatures rarely turned cold in south Louisiana before late October. My sister was born in early December, so Mom, who was wrapping cuts of pork and putting them in the freezer, should have been unmistakably pregnant. I should remember her that way, but I don't. And because I don't, I question my memories—all of them.

In November 1963, just a few weeks after my fifth birthday, I stand in our new living room, the most recent addition to our work-in-progress house. Mom is with me; I sense her standing

behind me as I stare at the black and white console television's rounded screen and its snowy images of President Kennedy's funeral procession. I hear a man talking. Years later, I'll know that man is Walter Cronkite. Little John-John salutes his father's flag-draped coffin as it rumbles past on a caisson drawn by a team of horses. John-John is slightly younger than me, but I know he is sad. I know, because his daddy is dead. I would be sad too if my daddy was dead. I press my fingers to my forehead like John-John.

Did it really happen that way? I envision myself standing in front of the television watching the procession. But did I watch it live? Did I watch a replay on the evening news? Did I see John Kennedy, Jr. salute his father that day, or have the annual November assassination rehashes implanted a false memory in my mind?

Memory, or the way memory works, became important to me when my mother was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. She began having noticeable memory lapses two or three years earlier. She forgot where she'd put things; she forgot how to print documents from her computer; she forgot the names of things. Dad, my sisters, and I initially feared she might have Alzheimer's. Our relief that it was *only* Parkinson's was short-lived once we did our homework. We read informational brochures and perused websites, including those of the Parkinson's Disease Foundation[6] and the Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson's Research[7]. Alzheimer's, we learned, is fatal, but Parkinson's is not. At least not directly. People with Parkinson's may linger for years with debilitating symptoms. Most usually die of aspiration pneumonia or bronchitis because the muscles that control swallowing and coughing become weak and fail to

[6] http://www.pdf.org/
[7] https://www.michaeljfox.org/

block food and liquids from passing through the trachea into the lungs. Many others die of head injuries or major bone fractures caused by falls. But Mom didn't present with the typical neuromuscular symptoms—the shaking and jerking most people associate with the disease. She had no trouble eating or drinking, nor was she prone to falling—not at first. Instead, she forgot things, forgot people's names, and eventually forgot people. Her forgetfulness worsened at an alarming rate. Within months of her diagnosis, Dad claimed he was "losing her."

"I'm telling you," he insisted. "She's not the woman I married."

Six years later, Mom can't walk anymore. She sleeps in a hospital bed with the side rails up so that she doesn't fall out. Though we spoon feed her, sometimes she swallows badly and chokes on her food. Worst of all, her beautiful, brilliant mind is a dry and dusty ghost town haunted by thoughts she can no longer articulate. Dad was right. The woman we knew is lost. Her shell remains, animated only by our memories of her and by Dad's determination to keep her fed and physically healthy.

I am fifteen and my mother is pregnant. The unplanned pregnancy is a delightful surprise at first, but it becomes difficult for Mom in ways I don't completely understand, something to do with spinal arthritis and her bladder, something I learn from overhead snatches of adult conversation. Two months earlier, my paternal grandmother, who lives next door, suffered a massive stroke. She is bedridden now, incoherent and near death. Mom waddles back and forth between our house and my grandparents' house every day, keeping both homes clean and cooking for my grandfather and for us. The baby is due in mid-May, and Mom's belly is huge. Her feet and hands are swollen. This evening, she uses her puffy fingers to brush a wisp of hair

from my grandmother's forehead and to tenderly wipe the dying woman's face with a damp face cloth.

"There, now. That's feels better, doesn't it?" Mom speaks so softly I barely hear her.

She completes the bed bath, replaces my grandmother's dirty gown with a clean one, and tucks the invalid snugly into freshly laundered bed linens.

"Take these back to the house," Mom says, handing me the dirty sheets she had removed from the bed. "I'll wash them tomorrow." She places a light kiss on my grandmother's brow and turns out the light.

"Mr. Frank," she calls out to my grandfather who is watching TV in the living room. "She's clean and fed. I'll see you in the morning."

My grandmother lingered two more days and then died while I was at school. We buried her on a beautiful April afternoon in 1974. Mom went into labor that night and my baby sister arrived the next morning, more than two weeks premature. Both mother and infant suffered major complications. Yet I don't remember Mom complaining about taking care of her mother-in-law during that high-risk pregnancy. Caregiving was simply something she did. It was as much a part of her ethos as her immaculate housekeeping and her refusal to leave home without wearing lipstick. So when her own mother became ill, my mother nursed her until she died. And when my dad's oldest sister became an invalid, my mother cared for her, too. She took each of them into her capable hands and comforted them to the end.

I'm standing in the foyer of Talley's Chapel, a small church in rural St. Tammany Parish, Louisiana. I can see my father-in-law's flower-topped casket on its stand before the altar. Mom

and my mother-in-law are standing a few feet behind me. My in-laws, who had lived apart for years, maintained a strained relationship until his death in 1994. His eldest sister, Ms. A, treated my mother-in-law with thinly-veiled disdain during the early years of the marriage, and became openly spiteful after the separation. As she enters the chapel, Ms. A approaches my mother-in-law. With her grown daughter at her side, Ms. A loudly mocks my mother-in-law for the weight she has gained since they last met. The room goes silent. Heads turn. My mother-in-law, speechless, blushes with embarrassment. Mom smiles sweetly at Ms. A and then, with the speed and agility of a ninja, rebukes the cruel woman with a few softly spoken words that only those standing very near can hear. Ms. A gasps and recoils. Ms. A's daughter, clearly abashed by her mother's viciousness and my mom's quick-witted comeuppance, takes her mother by the arm and leads her away. My mother-in-law smiles and thanks my mother.

I never learned what Mom said to Ms. A that day. "I can't stand a bully," was her only comment about it. Mom had no patience for abusers, especially those who mistreated children or animals. She championed the underdog, and my mother-in-law, who endured years of emotional abuse by her husband and his family, is one of many who admired my mom's combination of cunning, courage, and kindness.

I often wished my mind worked as nimbly as Mom's, and I wanted to understand what went wrong with it. Soon after enrolling at the University of New Orleans to finish work on an undergraduate degree started thirty-five years earlier, I approached a neurology research professor, Gerald LaHoste, with questions about Parkinson's disease. Dr. LaHoste explained to me how Parkinson's works. As I understand it, a thin layer of cells called the *substantia nigra* ("black substance" in English) lies deep within the brain and works as a sort of cognitive

gatekeeper. For example, if Mom wanted to print an invoice for work Dad performed for a customer, a message would be sent from one part of her brain to another asking for printing directions stored in memory. The information request would be evaluated by cells in the *substantia nigra* and sent to the appropriate area of the brain where the memory of how to print an invoice was stored. That memory would be retrieved, sent to the *substantia nigra*, and then forwarded to the part of the brain from which the request originated. With the memory at the fore of her consciousness, Mom could then print the document. But Parkinson's disease gradually destroys *substantia nigra* cells. At first, information sending and retrieving slows. Then it becomes erratic. Eventually, it fails completely. I wanted to know what caused the gradual demise of the *substantia nigra*. Dr. LaHoste explained that though many theories are being researched, few answers have been found. The top two contenders are blows to the head and long-term exposure to pesticides. Heredity may also play a small, statistically insignificant (so far) part.

While meeting with Dr. LaHoste, I described the many times my mother had sustained head trauma: the time, as a child, when she put a firecracker in her mouth, pretending it was a cigarette, and her sister lit it; the time when another student hit the top of her head so hard with a book that Mom developed chronic headaches and had to drop out of school; the time Mom and I were involved in a car accident and she had to go to the hospital by ambulance; the time, while working in the garden, Mom stepped on a rake that rose up and smacked the side of her head, knocking her out and leaving her with a huge black eye; and the time, when playing volleyball with the neighbors, Dad swung his muscular right arm out to hit the ball and clobbered Mom's head, knocking her unconscious yet again. Were there other times during her tumultuous childhood with an abusive, alcoholic father when she had been hit in the head? If so, she never

mentioned them. But she did mention cruel beatings. Blows to the head were possible. Exposure to pesticides was possible, too. Her family had moved about the country doing migrant farm work when she was young. Mom picked cherries and apples up north and numerous fruits and vegetables in California. In fact, her family had just returned from California when she and Dad first met.

Maybe head injuries caused Mom's Parkinson's disease. Maybe exposure to pesticides. Maybe both or neither. Dr. LaHoste couldn't say, and research remains inconclusive.

I'm eight or nine years old and out of school for the summer. Dad and I take a ride up the road to the local filling station.

"Do you want a Coke and a candy bar?" Dad says.

I hop out of the truck and run inside. Mr. Gant, the proprietor, is standing behind the counter as I make my way to the soft drink dispenser, a 1960s state-of-the-art marvel stocked with glass-bottled beverages lying on their sides with their name-stamped metal caps facing outward. Coca-Cola, 7-Up, Dr. Pepper, Barq's Root Beer, and Barq's Red Cream Soda—they're all "Coke" to us the way they're all "pop" to Northerners. I reach in and pull out an ice-cold root beer. The remaining bottles clink and clatter down their slanted rack until the next bottle rolls into the space mine had occupied. Before closing the drink machine's narrow glass door, I grab one of the cold Snickers bars Mr. Gant keeps on a shelf below the bottles. Dad, who has entered behind me, chats with Mr. Gant while I sit on the tailgate of Dad's truck, swinging my legs and guzzling my drink. It's a hot Louisiana day, and the root beer is cold and sweet.

"Can I have another?"

"Yes," Dad says. "But it won't taste as good as the first one."

He was right, of course. Dad's logic was grounded in the fundamental truth of seconds: The second helping of Sunday dinner is rarely as scrumptious as the first; the second kiss is rarely as sweet as the first; and the second cold drink on a hot summer day is rarely as satisfying as the first. When it comes to fundamental truths, Dad is always right.

Or so it seems. No one is *always* right, but it's important, I think, for children to have someone who represents wisdom, someone to whom they can turn for answers. For me, that someone was Dad. I have a full playlist of memories of him, and most involve life lessons. Of Mom, not so many. And now that she suffers from what her doctor terms "end-stage Parkinson's dementia," I can't hope to add meaningful memories to that small library. I visit her weekly, and my visits consist mostly of me holding her hand and nodding in response to her incoherent muttering.

These days, I wonder if Mom held my hand when I was a child. Did she hold it when we crossed the street to keep me from running into traffic? Did she hold it to comfort me when I was scared or sad? I don't remember her doing any of those things, and I want to understand why. I've asked my sister, the one born just after I turned two, if she remembers Mom holding our hands. She doesn't. I've asked Dad. *Of course*, he assures me. *Of course she held your hand*. But he can't summon a specific memory of it. As a creative nonfiction writer, I am obsessively concerned with truth-telling. Where is the line between fiction and nonfiction? How does one creatively present "just the facts, ma'am"? I'd like to say my mother held my hand when I was young. I'd like to believe she got down on the floor and played with me. I'd like to remember us having tea parties together. But I can't.

René Descartes, in his *Treatise of Man,* hypothesized that the mind—or soul—and the body are dual entities that interact with each at other via the pineal gland in the brain.[8] Science has since disproved his pineal gland theory, but mind and soul continue to be hotly debated topics among scientists, philosophers, and theologians.[9] If the mind's (soul's) form—or formlessness—is so difficult to understand, what of memory, a function of the mind? What does it mean that we remember some things and not others? Do we only remember the things important to us, as Salman Rushdie suggests? Maybe the things we don't remember are just as important or even more so for different reasons, as Virginia Woolf suggests.[10]

It's the afternoon of my fifteenth birthday, October 2, 1973. I've just driven home from the Department of Motor Vehicles. It's my first time behind the wheel with a valid driver's license. Excited, I throw open the car door and dash into the house to show my newly earned credentials to Dad. I want him to be proud of me. I always want him to be proud of me. But Dad simply nods and motions for me to follow him back outside.

"If you're going to drive around alone, there are things you have to know," he says. "What if you get a flat tire? You'll have to know how to change it yourself. So, let's do it. Take a tire off the car and put it back on."

Mom, who'd taken me to the Department of Motor Vehicles to get my license, sits on the front steps to watch. I glance in her direction, hoping she'll rescue me. Instead, she smiles wryly and gives me a look that says, "Get on with it."

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[8] See Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pineal-gland/
[9] See Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/neuroscience/
[10] Woolf, Virginia, "A Sketch of the Past." *Moments of Being: A Collection of Autographical Writing*. 2nd ed., edited by Jeanne Schulkind, Harcourt, 1985 and 1976, p. 69.

Dad was my teacher. Mom, I now realize, was my role model. With Dad, it was always about how and why a thing should be done. With Mom, it was always about having the strength and wisdom to do the right things for the right reasons. She didn't teach fundamental truths. She modeled them—on the periphery, in the sickroom, in the entryway of the church, from the front steps. Mom showed me how to be a woman of courage, a woman of principle, a woman who loves.

It's Sunday, and I'm at my parents' house for my weekly visit. Mom sits in her wheelchair on the porch with her back to the sun. Its warmth penetrates her shoulders, and, judging by the hint of a smile on her face, she seems to be enjoying it. She opens her eyes when I call out to her and looks for the source of the sound. At first, she appears dazed, but then her gaze locks onto my face and her faint smile broadens gloriously. I take her right hand in mine and caress it. She closes her eyes again as if this small kindness brings her comfort, and I wonder, as I often do, if a memory of me occasionally flickers in some window of her ghost-town mind before fading like the flame of a guttering candle.

Acceptance Dawns Over Lake Pontchartrain

How long since I watched
the sun rise? Too long,
I think as early morning creeps
into the last hour of darkness
upon the eastern sky.

McCartney croons from Pandora's box
a reminder of my loss.

Mother, Marie,
will you comfort me?

"Let It Be," Paul advises.

A nail-tip sliver of sun appears
above cypress trees and blooms
a fiery dandelion. Sky-blown seeds
sprout kaleidoscopic on the lake
I must cross to see her.

“In my hour of darkness . . .”

Mother, Marie,
has forgotten me.

"Let it be."

Coming Out

At 8 a.m. I staggered down the hall from our bedroom on the way to the coffee pot. I gasped when I spotted Andrew sitting at the dining table. In the dimly lit room, my not-yet-opened eyes thought he looked more like a ghost than the man I married. And he wasn't supposed to be there. Something was wrong.

I've often thought his breakdown was my fault, though I know it wasn't. At least, not all of it. I think he was predisposed to it by the trauma of his childhood. He is the second of six children, all boys except the last. All of them had been abused by their father in one way or another. They had all witnessed their father brutalizing and berating their mother, too. But she doesn't like to talk about it. When pressed, she says she doesn't remember.

"I guess I blocked that out," she says.

Andrew doesn't block things out. He marinates in them until something ignites a fire inside of him and they come boiling to the top. He keeps a tight lid on his emotions, venting just enough now and then to prevent a catastrophe. But such vigilance is exhausting, and, ultimately, impossible to maintain.

He sat slumped over the dining table with his head in his hands. His shredded psyche, so raw and tender, hemorrhaged pain in tears that punctuated the early morning silence in loud drops on the dining table’s polished surface. Each drop was a hammer-strike driving nails into the coffin of the man he used to be. I haven't seen that man since he left for work on August 27, 2008. I live with another man now. I call him the post-apocalyptic man.

"What are you doing home?"

No answer.

I turned him around in the chair like a child and then lifted his face so I could look into his eyes. Terror.

"Baby, what is it? What happened?"

No answer. He dropped his gaze. Tears hit the floor.

I sat in front of him and put my hands on his knees.

"What's wrong? Please tell me,"

"I can't do it anymore," he whispered at last. "I can't go back there. I'm done."

Then the trembling started. First, it was just in his hands, but soon his whole body shook. I watched in horror as the tears dried up and the sweating began - an awful malodorous flop sweat that can only be produced when mind and body are stressed beyond their limits.

"Done" had such a frightening ring to it. The end. Over. Finished. But what did it really mean? It meant our lives would never be the same. Only, I didn't know that then. It took a while for me to fully understand. Isn't it funny how you can get up one morning and everything you dreamed of and worked toward and everything you believed possible is "done"? Well, no. It's not funny. At all.

And I hadn't even had a cup of coffee yet.

* * *

How had it come to this? I've asked myself that question over and over since that morning of September 3, 2008, two days after Hurricane Gustav plowed into south central Louisiana. I don't think anything in particular caused the breakdown. Instead, I think a perfect storm of circumstances came together to push him over the edge. Like Hurricane Gustav, and Hurricane

Katrina three years earlier, my husband's emotional cyclone had been forming somewhere off the radar grid for a long time, waiting for just the right conditions before moving in and reshaping the landscape of our lives.

At the time, he was a paramedic at Angola, Louisiana's state prison, a position I had helped him get in 1998. I had a friend in administration who agreed to hire him as soon as I called. We had just moved back to Washington Parish from central Louisiana where I had taken a job as a paramedic instructor five years earlier. During those five years, our oldest son had grown up and married. It was hard leaving him behind, but it made sense for us to move back home. I had resigned my teaching position and Andrew was working as a paramedic and safety rep offshore. He could do that no matter where we lived. All the rest of our family lived in Washington and St. Tammany Parishes, and moving back home would put us closer to our aging parents in case they needed help. We bought a house on 16 acres of land way out in the country and moved in June. In August, the layoffs came and suddenly we had a house we couldn't pay for. By October, we were desperate. I took the first work I could find as a temporary receptionist in a small office in Mandeville. Andrew couldn't find a decent job anywhere nearby. We both knew Angola was a horrible place to work, but it was a state job that came with great benefits and above average pay. I pressured him into taking it.

He disliked Angola from the first. After ten years, dislike had morphed into pathological loathing. He fought the urge to quit every day, while I propped him up after every shift and sent him back into the fray. We needed the money, of course. But I had major health problems, and we needed the insurance more.

Angola borders on the Mississippi River northwest of New Orleans and houses among its 5,000 inmates some of the most dangerous people in the world. When hurricanes threaten New

Orleans, officials ship prisoners from Orleans Parish Prison to Angola for safe-keeping. Unfortunately, it took Katrina to teach them to move prisoners out of harm's way after hundreds of inmates found themselves neck-deep in water with no way out. In 2008, as Gustav approached from the Gulf of Mexico, other prisons between New Orleans and Angola emptied their cells as well. Soon, Angola's inmate population surged to 8,000. The warden called in every employee, even those whose homes and families lay in Gustav's projected path. Those already at work, like my husband, were forbidden to leave.

If Orleans Parish officials had learned lessons from Katrina, so too, had prison employees and inmates. It's never good to have 8,000 nervous prisoners in one place, and they had plenty to be nervous about. Angola was not built to accommodate that many people. Overcrowding instantly became a problem, especially for petty criminals thrown into a frightening mix of murderers, rapists, and armed robbers. Many displaced inmates had families in the potential path of the hurricane. They had no way of letting their loved ones know they had been moved to Angola and no way of knowing if their families were safe.

Employees fared no better. They went days without sleep. New arrivals, men and women from parish prisons, had to be processed and given medical examinations. Places had to be found to house them. Special care had to be taken to protect them from the predators living among Angola's inmate population. All the while, many employees worried about their own families, whom they were powerless to help.

My husband was at Angola when the bus loads of new inmates began arriving. Because we lived 120 miles away, he stayed in employee housing during his alternating two- and three-day tours of duty rather than commuting back and forth. He usually worked the night shift, from

5 p.m. to 5 a.m., and was due to come home the morning after the evacuations began. On Friday morning, August 28, he called to tell me he wasn't coming home.

"I want you and the kids to pack up and leave," he said.

I had already considered my options. I couldn't go west to our son's house in Pineville, about 200 miles away. Forecasters were predicting a westward track for Gustav, one that would impact Pineville and Angola more than our home in Washington Parish. I could go north or east, but that would mean staying in a hotel, which we couldn't afford, and the boys and I could be stuck there for days if the hurricane forced road closures.

"I'd rather stay here. It won't be as bad as Katrina."

"You don't know that. Please. I would feel so much better if you left."

"Don't worry. We'll be fine. I'll keep a close eye on the weather. If it looks like we're going to take a direct hit, I promise I'll leave. Besides, the way it looks now, you'll be worse off than us."

"I don't think we have much to worry about. Except maybe flooding. The river is already rising from storm surge and if we get a lot of rain the levee could break."

He had to go then. A bus load of inmates had just pulled through the gates.

"I love you," he said. "Stay safe."

"I love you, too. And I will."

He was understandably worried. Though three years had passed, memories of Hurricane Katrina were still fresh in our minds. Even 90 miles north of New Orleans her effects were devastating. Our property didn't flood, but it sustained significant wind damage. Trees and power lines went down everywhere. It took a couple of days for the National Guard to clear nearby roads well enough for us to venture from home in search of food, water, ice, and gasoline. We

waited in long lines as guardsmen and relief volunteers distributed bottled water, tarps, and MREs (military Meals Ready to Eat). Mosquitos soon invaded the area and, despite the dangerous heat, it was impossible to leave doors and windows open to the West Nile-packing invaders. The National Guard came to our rescue once again. Big gray planes flew over farms and fields spewing insecticides that annihilated the little parasites. I hate to think of what happened to other less troublesome creatures.

The National Guard could do nothing about the insufferable heat, though. I stood in the street and cheered as the utility truck rumbled up to our house.

"Oh, I'm so happy to see you!" I shouted to the linemen. "I'd give you all hugs, but I'm too sweaty and smelly."

"That's okay," one man said. The whole crew laughed

"How about a bottle of water, instead? I've got some on ice."

"No, thanks. We have our own."

And with that, more than three weeks without air conditioning came to an end. The local cable TV provider never restored service to the area. I suppose it wasn't worth it to run fiber optics all the way out to the boonies. As a result, discreet little satellite dishes soon sprang up on rooftops like blades of grass on a fire scorched prairie. Telephone service was the last to be restored. By then, it had been three months since Katrina came to call.

We considered ourselves lucky. Many people had suffered far worse, but it was more than that. I lived. In spite of a life-threatening heart condition, I survived Hurricane Katrina and all the physical and emotional stress that came with her. In a way, her timing couldn't have been better.

* * *

For years, I had been plagued by a number of medical problems. By the summer of 2001, I had been diagnosed with mitral valve prolapse, gastric reflux disease, severe hypothyroidism, and fibromyalgia. I had undergone surgery eight times. The year before my hypothyroidism was detected, I gained 100 pounds. Despite taking whopping doses of thyroid replacement hormones, I continued gaining at an alarming rate, eventually topping out at nearly 400 pounds. Ironically, the weight gain may have saved my life.

One day at work, I noticed I was having chest pain. I had experienced chest pain from time to time since I was a teenager. When it became more pronounced in my twenties, I went to see a doctor. He ran a few tests and ordered an ultrasound of my heart.

"You have mitral valve prolapse," he told me. "It won't kill you. It'll just make you wish you were dead."

MVP, it turns out, was the trendy new diagnosis of the late '70s and early '80s. It was an especially popular condition among women.

"We think as many as 75% of women have it," he said. "They just don't know it because it's often asymptomatic."

Lovely.

He handed me a prescription for Inderal and sent me home. I took it for two weeks and stopped when I could no longer think clearly enough to take care of my son, who was only two years old at the time. The treatment was worse than the condition, it seemed. Figuring the chest pain wouldn't kill me, I ignored it—for 20 years. Finally, the pain got so bad I thought maybe it

would kill me after all. I decided it was time for another trip to the doctor. By then I had switched doctors, and this new guy took my complaint much more seriously.

"It's probably nothing major, but I want to send you to a cardiologist."

"Why?"

"Well," he said, "ultrasound technology has advanced quite a bit in 20 years. We now know many people previously diagnosed with MVP never actually had it."

I turned out to be one of them.

"Also," he continued, "recent studies have given us better insight into how symptoms of heart disease manifest themselves in women. Twenty years ago, we compared women's symptoms with men's. They're not the same, and the differences are important."

"What a surprise." Sometimes, I'm such a smart ass.

"Well, yes," he said, laughing.

I liked this guy.

"And, well . . . you're 42 now, not 22. That's still young. But it's also old enough for us to be more concerned. And you're very overweight. That's a major risk factor."

Very overweight? Smart, funny, and polite. I was in love with my doctor. Why couldn't I have met him 20 years earlier?

One failed treadmill test and an angiogram later, I found myself flat on my back with the cardiologist telling me I had a congenital defect in my left main coronary artery, the one that supplies blood to the hardest working part of the heart. He had hoped to put a stent in it to open it up, but the narrowing was in a bad spot. He couldn't place the stent.

"I'll be sending a heart surgeon to see you," he said, walking beside the stretcher as his team wheeled me back to my room.

"What? Why?" The anesthesia from the angiogram was still wearing off, and I wasn't sure I heard him right. "Do I have to have heart surgery?" I was suddenly terrified.

"Yes," he said. "If you want to live."

Tears rolled down my cheeks. I couldn't believe this was happening. My mother walked along the other side of the stretcher. She reached out and took my hand gently in hers. In those pre-Parkinson's disease days, before dementia set in, Mom was always there when one of her three daughters needed her. When we reached my room, she stayed with me while Andrew spoke to the cardiologist in the hallway.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I feel like this is my fault."

"Oh, Mother, why?"

"I was so young and stupid," she said. "I must have done something wrong when I was pregnant with you."

"I don't think so, Mom. It probably would have happened no matter what you did. You heard what he said. It's genetic. Something fouled up in the genetic code at the moment of conception."

I don't think I convinced her. I do think, however, the excessive weight I was carrying had created a strain my heart couldn't handle. The strain led doctors to discover the birth defect. I might have up and died like one of those athletes with undiagnosed heart problems who drop dead on the basketball court. Like Pistol Pete Maravich, for example. Lucky me, my fat saved me.

But this little brush with death was only the beginning.

Two days after the angiogram, I returned to the hospital for open heart surgery. My terrified husband and I spoke very little as the admissions clerk asked all the standard questions:

"What is your date of birth?"

"Have you ever been a patient here before?"

"Why are you being admitted today?

"Who is your doctor?"

"Do you have your insurance card?"

I sat in a wheel chair clutching my chest. My stress level was much too high, and nitroglycerine tablets weren't helping. At last, the papers were signed. The clerk wrapped brightly colored plastic bands around my wrist. They bore my name, my allergies, and a barcode. I was now a number in the system, but, happily, the staff never made me feel that way. They were all very caring and nurturing.

In the ICU, a small army trooped in and out of my room to accomplish the disrobing, full body scrubbing, body hair removal, and head-to-toe painting with Betadyne solution required for heart surgery. Any little microbes existing on my skin either died a valiant death or went running for cover on someone else's body. More storm troopers came to start IVs, perform EKGs, and draw blood. In short, it seemed like they perpetrated upon me every degradation known to man all in the name of pre-operative prep. Of course, I'm exaggerating, but I was scared beyond reason. As a paramedic, I was very aware of the risks associated with heart surgery. I didn't know if I would wake up a few hours later or how much pain I'd be in if I did.

Thank goodness for that pre-op sedative someone slipped into my IV right before they whisked me off to surgery. Otherwise, the grim faces of my parents, sisters, and children would have made abject terror seem like such an inadequate description of what I was feeling. I cried all the way to the operating room. Andrew held my hand and cracked dumb jokes that we were

both too scared to remember later. He tried to make me laugh as we waited outside those menacing double doors—the doors of no return I called them.

"Ready to go?" A perky little woman in a blue scrub suit grabbed the rails of my stretcher and began pushing it toward those doors.

"Wait! Wait!" I turned my tear-filled eyes toward my husband.

He bent over and whispered in my ear. "I love you. I'll see you on the other side."

"Okay," I sobbed.

The blue-clad woman patted my hand. "Aw. Don't worry. It'll be okay," she said.

Andrew kissed me and whispered again. "Promise me you'll come back. I can't live without you."

"I will."

"All right, then," said the blue-clad lady far too cheerfully. "Let's go. There's a room full of people waiting for you."

I looked back at my husband as I passed through the scary double doors.

"I'll be waiting on the other side," he said. He waved goodbye just before the closing doors shut him out.

If I had known how painful the other side would be, I'd have tried my damnedest to die on the operating table.

"Wake up," a voice called to me from the fog. "Breathe."

Huh?

"Breathe! That's it. No, don't go back to sleep. You have to breathe so they can take this tube out of your throat."

Huh?

"Breathe, baby. Breathe!"

My husband was calling me back. True to his word, he was waiting for me on the other side. I followed the sound of his voice out of the land of Nod.

When I opened my eyes there were more tubes sticking out of me than when I went into surgery. How was that possible? And there was so much noise. The respirator beside the bed wheezed oxygen into my lungs through the tube in my throat. Vacuum pumps made nasty sucking noises as they drew blood and other fluids from my chest through two huge chest tubes. A jazz ensemble of monitors beeped and chirped in a syncopated rhythm behind my head. And my left arm throbbed beneath a bandage that went from wrist to elbow over the incision through which my radial artery had been harvested.

The pain in my chest was the worst. A big bandage covered the 8-inch incision that ran like a zipper down my chest. Beneath the sutures, wires and staples held my ribs and sternum together. I felt as carved up as a side of beef. I felt dehumanized. But those feelings came later. Initially, I felt a whole lot of pain and heard a familiar voice urging me to breathe. So I breathed. A smiling nurse removed the tube from my throat, the respirator stopped wheezing, and I went back to sleep.

For days, I simply drifted in and out. I remember some things. Others are gone forever. Mostly, my memories of those first few days are like an avante garde movie in which images flicker across the screen for a few seconds with black frames in between. Morphine quickly became my new best friend. The physical therapist who insisted I had to get out of bed and walk became my new worst enemy. Why wouldn't she just let me die?

I'd like to say this fixed all my problems, but that would be a lie. I did, eventually, get back on my feet, and after six weeks I was back at work. For the next couple of years, I got along well enough. But in 2003, the chest pain returned and I went back to the hospital for another angiogram.

"You've developed a great deal of scar tissue," my latest cardiologist informed me.

"Scar tissue?"

"Yes. It's wrapped around your bypass grafts creating a kink and limiting blood flow. Look at your arm."

I held out my left arm so the scar on the underside of it was visible. It's about a half-inch wide and runs from elbow to wrist, an unsightly place marker for the missing radial artery.

"You see how thick and irregularly shaped that is? That thick, white scar tissue is what we call keloids. It seems you have a propensity for forming them. Now your chest is full of them, and they're strangling your bypass grafts."

"Oh, God! Not more heart surgery!"

"No, no," he said. "Nothing like that. We'll just do another angiogram and put a stent in it. It will be simple compared to heart surgery."

Wasn't that what the first cardiologist said right before they split me open?

Over the next couple of years, I had so many angiograms and stent insertions I lost count. By the time Katrina set her sights on the northern Gulf Coast, I was living from stent to stent. She claimed my job as she swept through the region, but it didn't really matter. Before long, I would be totally disabled. Ironically, that fateful August of 2005 I was doing a little better and actually hoping the latest stent would do the trick. The others had failed because of scar tissue. Every time one was inserted, my body tried to seal it off. It had become a vicious cycle, one that

was slowly rendering the grafts useless. But when Katrina hit, my latest stent was new enough to get me though the stress and hardships created by the storm. So, yes. We were lucky in many ways.

But our luck didn't hold out long. From December 2005 to August 2006, I was hospitalized eight times. Finally, with my family gathered around to hear the verdict, my cardiologist handed me a death sentence.

"There's nothing more we can do to save your grafts. They're completely closed off. You need new grafts."

I groaned. "I don't want to do that again."

"I understand," he said. "But if we don't do it you will die."

No one else said a word. They simply stared at me in the same way we all stared at the TV when the towers collapsed on 9/11. Horror, disbelief, and profound sadness commingled on their faces. I decided right then I never wanted to see that look again. I felt guilty for putting them through this.

"I'll have the heart surgeon come see you," he said as he turned for the door.

Here we go again.

It was Friday. The heart surgeon didn't show up until Monday. I spent the weekend trying to decide what to do. It seemed simple enough to everyone else: Have the surgery. But none of them had endured the pain of the first surgery. None of them had lived through the intervening five years wondering every day how much longer their hearts would hold out. None of them really understood—none except my husband. Because my hell was his hell. What I didn't realize, or what I didn't see because I was so absorbed with my own problems, was that he was living through his own version of hell.

The surgeon and the cardiologist tag-teamed me on Monday. It seems they had held a little conference without me and decided I wasn't a candidate for heart surgery after all. The whole weekend spent agonizing over a decision had been for nothing. I was furious.

"Well, first of all," said the surgeon, "you're anemic. We couldn't possibly do the surgery until we fix that problem and it could take weeks, maybe months."

Anemic? How'd that happen? Why hadn't anyone noticed it before? I never got answers to those questions.

"But the real problem is the scar tissue," he continued. "Your chest is full of it. We'd have to cut through all of that, actually remove a lot of it, just to be able to get to your heart. It would take too long and you would lose too much blood."

Oh, joy!

"And even if we could get it done, you'd probably end up right back where you are now because of new scar tissue. It just doesn't make sense to operate."

That was a relief . . . sort of.

"So, what do I do now? Just die?"

"Well . . ." The cardiologist gave the surgeon a furtive glance. The surgeon shuffled his feet a bit and took a deep breath.

"Yes. Except there is one last thing we could try."

I didn't like the vibes they were sending.

"What?" my husband asked. He had been silent until now, but he had reached his limit. The vents on his tightly closed lid were about to blow. I could read it in his face.

"We could try putting a stent in your left main coronary artery at the point of the defect."

I felt like I was being scammed. The cardiologist I'd seen five years ago had told me that was impossible.

"Technology has come a long way since then," said the cardiologist. "I think I can do it."

"You think?" my husband blurted.

"Yes. But before we decide, I want to send your records to my mentor, the cardiologist who trained me, for a second opinion. If I can't do it, he probably can."

I thought about this for a minute. I wanted to know whether scar tissue would form inside my left main artery like it had in the bypass grafts. At least a little blood was getting through there, but if scar tissue closed of any stent they might insert, I'd be screwed.

"That won't happen. This is a much bigger blood vessel. It's like the difference between vermicelli and penne pasta," the heart surgeon chimed in.

Food references? Really?

"Besides, we can use a different kind of stent, a self-eluting stent," the cardiologist continued. "They're impregnated with a slow-release medication that keeps them from becoming occluded."

Still unconvinced, I asked about the risks of doing it versus not doing it.

"If we do it," said the cardiologist, "the greatest risk is perforating the left main coronary artery. You could bleed to death on the X-ray table. If we don't do it, you will die."

Death and death. Great options. Well, we all have to die some time. And hadn't I wanted them to let me die before? After all I had been through, I wasn't really so afraid of dying. It would almost be a relief. Mostly, I was concerned about making my family suffer. I looked around the room and there were those scared, sad faces, the ones I never wanted to see again. This time they were all silently crying.

"Ok. Talk to your mentor," I said. "I really don't have much choice."

It had been almost a year since Hurricane Katrina changed the world. But for my family and me, this day was our turning point. It took two stents to finally get the blood flowing. The first one developed scar tissue within three weeks. The second is still patent after ten years, but I know it will eventually fail.

Stents, like people, can only endure so much.

* * *

While Gustav inched his way toward Louisiana, Andrew inched his way toward a complete mental collapse. As a little boy he had learned to keep his mouth closed and his emotions to himself. Anything he loved or cared about, his dad killed, broke, stole, gave away, or belittled. When I came into his life, he finally found someone he could trust, someone who wouldn't bludgeon him with his own good-heartedness, someone and something beautiful and precious that his dad couldn't take away. He did everything in his power to make me happy, including taking that job at Angola. As the years went by and my health problems intensified, so did his problems at work. But he kept his mouth shut and his emotions to himself, and I was too preoccupied with staying alive to notice he was falling apart.

How does a junkyard owner train a dog to be mean? He ties it up and beats it. My father-in-law had effectively tied up Andrew’s psyche and beaten it. He’d watched his father beat his younger brother so badly that his mother had to put a gun to the man’s head to make him stop. He’d lain on the sofa starving because his father wouldn’t work and refused to allow his wife to

accept donations of food from friends and family. He'd seen his father manipulate his hunting buddies into giving up two portions of the hunt by taking Andrew along.

Andrew grew to hate anyone and anything that reminded him of his dad, anyone who used strength and low cunning to overpower and manipulate other people. Angola is full of people like that. It's only natural he would dislike many of the inmates. They are, after all, people who do despicable things. But the ones he really resented were his co-workers, the petty little men and women who used the bureaucratic civil service system to lord over each other in carefully staged games of cat and mouse. Andrew is an honest man who tells the truth and follows the rules. But at Angola, the rules kept changing and the truth was never really the truth. He simply didn't understand how the political game was played and he had no interest in playing it.

About the time I became officially disabled, he was offered a promotion. He didn't want the responsibility, but he took it to make up for my decreased income. That's when I began to notice cracks in the lid he kept on his emotions. He often came home angry at his coworkers. I tried to help him, but I didn't understand what was happening. The stories he told seemed too bizarre to be true, and I thought he must have been mistaken.

Then, a week before Gustav headed our way, he came home so furious I was frightened. The previous shift, he had caught one of the women he supervised stealing drugs from the drug cabinet.

"I wrote her up," he told me. "I had warned her before. They weren't narcotics, just B-12 injections. But we still have to account for them and she knew better. When I confronted her, she lied and said they were for an inmate. I checked the inmate's chart. B-12 had not been ordered."

Andrew soon learned from his supervisor that the woman had filed sexual harassment charges against him. He was less hurt and surprised that she had done it than by his boss's response.

"He completely ignored my report about her stealing drugs and believed every word she said!"

"Why would he do that?"

"Because she got all the other women on my crew to say I harassed them, too."

"Why would they do that?"

"Because I make them follow the rules."

He told me about how the women would often sneak off and watch videos in the staff lounge or talk on the phone with their friends when they were supposed to be working. When I caught them, he made them go back to work.

"Don't the guys do that, too?"

"Hell, yeah. But they don't cry harassment when I make them go back to work. They know they can't get away with it."

He described an incident in which a male employee was fired because a female employee claimed he'd said something inappropriate. Andrew didn't know if the man had actually been guilty, but he knew that crying sexual harassment was the most powerful tool Angola's female employees had. They did it because they could. Or so he believed.

"They don't have to prove anything," he said. "All they have to do is make the accusation."

I thought about the times I'd been harassed. The feminist in me wanted to refute his belief. But I'd seen women in the workplace cry wolf to get what they wanted. And I'd met the women on my husband's crew. I believed them capable of anything.

Eventually, he calmed down and the betrayal he felt finally surfaced.

"I just can't believe my boss took her side."

Andrew considered his supervisor a friend. They had worked together for years, and when the man had been promoted into a new position, he promoted Andrew into his old one.

"How could he believe I'd do something like that? I'm telling you, babe, there's no one at that damned place I can trust."

Two days later, he went back to pull a three-day shift. When he came home, he was deeply conflicted.

"They did a so-called 'investigation' while I was home and decided I was guilty of sexual harassment. They're demoting me and taking my crew away from me."

"Oh, baby! I'm sorry."

"It's a formality. My boss told me he knew I didn't do it, but they had to make it look good to get the women off their backs. I'll get my lieutenant's bars and my crew back eventually."

"You're kidding?"

"Nope. I told him to kiss my ass and handed him a transfer request. I don't want to work in EMS anymore. I'll take my chances as one of the guards. I won't work with that back-stabbing bunch of two-faced liars anymore. I'd rather spend time with the inmates."

It would mean a cut in pay, something we could ill afford, but I knew he had to do it. I asked how his boss had responded to the transfer request.

"He just put it on his desk and told me to go."

Two days later he went back to work. By then Gustav was in the Gulf of Mexico and New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin was calling it the "mother of all storms." Bureaucratic wheels began turning and people became pawns in a giant game of chess with Mother Nature.

The next time I saw my husband, he was the post-apocalyptic man.

* * *

For reasons I can't remember, my husband took my car to work that last time and left me his truck. The day before Gustav made landfall, I sent the two sons who still lived at home to the nearest gas station to top off the tank. On the way back, the youngest, Justin, who was then 18, pulled out in front of a car at a stop sign. No one was hurt. Though the truck was drivable, its front end was badly damaged. Both boys had their own cars, so we still had transportation. Nonetheless, the accident added to the stress of anticipating a major hurricane. My husband called later that day to check on us and became quite agitated when I told him.

“Aw, fuck! Why the hell did you let him drive my truck? He never pays attention to what he’s doing.”

I thought he overreacted. After all, Justin had recently graduated from high school with honors and a full-paid ROTC scholarship to LSU. He was a good kid, and Andrew’s accusations were unfounded. I wrote off his outburst to exhaustion. He had been at Angola five straight days with almost no sleep under very stressful conditions. I expected he'd calm down once he’d had some time to rest. I deflected his repeated insistence that we evacuate.

"We're fine here. Actually, you're in more danger than we are. What's going to happen there when the power goes out and you have 8,000 inmates roaming around in the dark?"

"Oh, don't worry about that. We've got massive backup generators. Besides, we're so far north we won't get much of the weather."

"You're no farther north than we are."

"True."

"So, stop worrying about us. We'll be fine."

"I hope so. I love you. I couldn't bear it if anything happened to you."

"I love you, too," I told him. "Keep your head down and your eyes open."

"Always," he said. "You have to in this hell hole."

The next night, Gustav came ashore south of Baton Rouge and made a bee line for Angola. We got some wind and rain and lost power for about 24 hours, but the worst of the storm passed to our west. When my husband called me the next afternoon, he seemed tired, but okay. The generators had done their jobs, the levees had held, and Angola was safe.

"I'm not sure how soon I'll be home," he said. "We have to stay until they get all these extra inmates back where they belong. Some of the prisons they came from got hit pretty hard."

"Ok, babe. I'll be here waiting for you. Get some sleep if you can."

"I wish."

"Maybe you can tonight. The worst is over now."

But I was wrong.

* * *

At 8 a.m. the next morning I stumbled down the hall from our bedroom on my way to the coffee pot. Before I got there, the world changed forever. How do you repair a broken man? The short answer is, you don't. You try. You try everything you can think of. You plead, you bargain, you cajole, you cry, you get angry, you get frustrated, and then you give up. Finally, you accept what you cannot change. But none of that happens overnight.

That morning, I called the office as soon as it opened and made an appointment with our primary care physician. By then, my husband's sadness had been replaced with white-hot anger. He was shaking violently and sweating profusely. He was also pacing and chain smoking. I managed to get him to the doctor's office, but getting him to sit in the waiting room was beyond my skills in crisis management. He didn't have the patience to wait. Finally, he jumped up and left. I didn't follow. I didn't know what to do. I was scared.

When the nurse called his name, I followed her to the examination room and explained the situation. I explained it again when the doctor came in. He wanted to know what had happened at Angola.

"I don't know. He won't tell me."

"Is he a threat to himself?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Is he a threat to anyone else?"

"Maybe."

"Is he a threat to you?"

"I'm not sure, but probably not."

"And how are you holding up? This can't be good for your heart."

I was touched by his concern. It made me cry.

"I want you to know that you don't have to stay in this situation," he said very gently. "If you want to leave, there's no reason to feel guilty."

"I know that, but I won't leave him. When I was so sick, he never left my side. After I had my heart surgery I was too weak to pull down my pants and sit on the toilet when I needed to go. He did that for me. Then he waited outside until I called him to help me stand up and pull my pants back up."

I grabbed a few tissues from a box on a table in the examination room. I wiped my nose and went on.

"You don't know how bad it was. He held me up when I was too weak to stand. He helped me in and out of the shower and washed me when I was too weak to wash. He dressed me when I was too weak to dress. He fed me and brought me my medicine and whatever I wanted to drink. He slept in a chair next to our bed until my chest healed so his movements wouldn't cause me any pain. He never abandoned me. There's no way I'm turning my back on him now."

"Ok. But just remember if it ever gets too bad, you don't have to stay."

"I know."

I called my husband on his cell phone and convinced him to come back inside. He had been chain-smoking in the parking lot. The doctor prescribed several anti-depressant and anti-anxiety medications and got him an appointment with a psychiatrist. I thought he'd be all right in a couple of days. The medicine would make him well.

Again, I was wrong.

* * *

I spent the first year sitting on the sofa where I could see him. I was afraid Andrew would try to kill himself or go back to Angola and try to kill someone there. He arranged his laptop on the dining table and took up permanent residence in the same chair he'd been sitting in when I found him crying. With the help of some very powerful anti-psychotic medications, he retreated into his head and onto the internet. There, he could sort out his thoughts and talk to strangers, people who had no stake in his life. If they pissed him off, he could stop talking to them or unfriend them if they were on Facebook. We went every week to see a therapist and once a month to see the psychiatrist. She diagnosed him with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) though exactly what trauma had triggered it, only he knew. Our sessions with the therapist all went something like this:

"So, how are you doing today, Andrew?"

"About the same."

"Is the medicine helping?"

"Not really."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I can't stop thinking about it."

"About what?"

"Everything."

"Can you be more specific?"

"No."

Then it’s my turn.

"How do you think he's doing?"

I describe how Andrew spends all his time either web-surfing or sleeping. He won't go out with me. He won't shower. He won't shave. He rarely eats. When he talks, it's through gritted teeth like he's always angry with me.

"Are you sleeping a lot?" he asks Andrew.

"Sometimes. Sometimes I can't sleep."

"Well, it's okay to sleep. It's the mind's way of healing."

"How long?" I ask. I know I'm impatient, but I'm worried about him, our future, and our marriage.

"I don't know how long. These things take time."

"Is there anything you want to talk about today?" he asks Andrew.

"Nope."

"Ok. Then I'll see you next week."

Andrew used sick leave, annual leave, and comp time until it ran out. Then he was fired. The only thing that kept us from losing our home was the disability insurance policy we had taken on the mortgage. When the job went, the health insurance went with it. It took two years, but he finally got disability retirement. It didn't include health insurance, but by then the shrink visits were down to every six months and we visited the therapist monthly.

By the start of year two, I had gone from watching to waiting—waiting for him to snap out of it and waiting for him to finally explain what had happened—and wondering what I was going to do. At last, reality set in. I wasn't getting my husband back. He had mellowed a bit. He didn't shake as badly. He talked to me a little more. He took a shower now and then. He would even go out to eat from time to time if I picked a quiet restaurant. But he still couldn't tolerate noise or even small groups of people for more than a few minutes. He still slept 10 to 16 hours a

day. He still chain smoked and sweated that awful flop sweat. He still obsessed about killing people at Angola, though he seemed to have focused that desire on his supervisor.

I noticed only one significant change. He became interested in rock collecting. Sometimes he would go out by himself and walk along creek beds picking up rocks. Often, he'd sit in the gravel at the end of our driveway and cull rocks looking for God knows what. His friends on the internet sent him rocks from all over the world. Soon, our dining room was filled with rocks. It still is. I can't move them. I can't touch any of the detritus that has accumulated around his safe space. It upsets his carefully maintained emotional balance.

I finally understood what the doctor meant the day he told me I could leave whenever it got too bad. My husband had checked out of our old life and he had taken me with him. He had constructed a fantasy world with massive fortifications around two rooms. He lived safe and secluded in one. I lived lonely and bewildered in the other. Occasionally, he let me peek through the door between them. When I realized he was never coming out, it made me sad. It also gave me the courage to do what I had to do. I knew, with my heart problems, I was wasting precious time. Each day was a gift I was squandering.

I made up my mind. I was coming out of my husband’s neurosis.

* * *

A serendipitous thing occurred when my husband lost his health insurance: I suddenly became eligible for Medicare. One of the great things about the federal government is that it understands obese people are healthier and, consequently, less expensive to maintain, if they lose weight. They don't judge. They don't care how you got that way. They just want to spend less money

taking care of you. Because surgical intervention is the fastest, most effective way to make that happen, Medicare pays for it. So the first step I took out of my husband's mental illness was having gastric-bypass surgery in November 2009. The procedure, performed laparoscopically, involved bypassing most of the stomach and a portion of the small intestine. A small pouch was created from the remaining portion of my stomach and the truncated small intestine was connected to that pouch. Once it was done, I could eat only very small portions, most of which went unabsorbed because the small intestine, where most absorption occurs, had been shortened. The weight really started coming off. In just six months, I lost about 200 pounds.

The effects were dramatic. I not only looked and felt better, I *was* better. I no longer needed medication for gastric reflux. I got off all my heart medications except prophylactic baby aspirin and the occasional dose of nitroglycerine for stress-induced chest pain. My thyroid replacement hormones had to be reduced, too.

By Christmas 2010, two months after the surgery, I felt well enough to begin thinking I could go back to work. I wanted a job with benefits that would cover my husband so he could get better mental health care. We simply couldn't afford for him to see the psychiatrist and therapist enough to do him any good. In January 2011, I started submitting employment applications, but nothing panned out. Then one day, I passed a couple of people having a conversation in front of Walmart. I was parked nearby, and I had time to hear what they were saying as I placed my purchases in my car.

"How's the job search going, Bob?" asked a middle-aged woman.

"Not good," Bob answered. He looked like an average forty-something. "I found out there were more than 20 people applying for the job, a bunch of college kids straight out of school, mostly."

"But you have lots of experience. That should count for something."

"Yeah. I've been doing that kind of work for 20 years. But the job market is really bad right now, and if they can get a college grad with no experience willing to work for a lot less money, they'll take 'em. I have experience, but no degree. I didn't stand a chance."

I was stunned. He just described *me*! I realized if I wanted to get a good-paying job in this economy, I was going to need a degree. I knew it wouldn't guarantee me a job, but it would even the playing field a bit. But how could I afford it? And where would I go? There were no universities nearby.

I went home and started researching.

* * *

There is a bias in this country against people who benefit from "entitlement" programs like Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid. Somebody out there, and I haven't figured out who, has sold the middle class on the idea that "entitlement" recipients are lazy moochers who sit around on their fat asses smoking dope and breeding more children in order to get more handouts from them, the only ones paying taxes. Maybe there are people like that, but most of the people I know don't want to be "welfare" recipients. Unless you're making an awful lot of money on the side (and maybe some do, but I've never met them), welfare life is not very satisfying. Another great thing about the federal government is that it recognizes the fact that most people who can work will work if it means getting off the welfare dole. So there is a program for people on Medicare disability called "Ticket to Work." If your circumstances change, and you think you might be well enough to go back to work, they make it possible for you to try without giving up

your benefits. They'll even pay to send you to school, because they know it's cheaper in the long run than paying disability benefits for the rest of your life. Ticket to Work turned out to be my ticket out of my husband's post-apocalyptic world. I went to see a vocational rehabilitation counselor, told her I wanted to get my degree and why, and filled out a stack of papers. She sent me to the room next door where a very nice woman administered a set of computerized aptitude tests.

"Good news," the nice lady told me when she printed out the results. "I can recommend you for any bachelor's program you want. In fact, if you want to go on and get a Master's or Ph.D. when you're done, I can recommend you for that, too."

"Wow!"

"Yes, wow! Have you decided on a major?"

"Uh, no. I like everything," I said.

"Well, good luck!"

I went back to the counselor and showed her the results.

"Great. Here's what we can do for you . . ."

I enrolled at the University of New Orleans in the fall of 2011 as a sophomore transfer student. I had taken a few classes over the years and the admissions office accepted 34 of my credits. I was on my way. I just had to get out of the house first.

"You're doing *what*?" Andrew asked.

"Going to college in New Orleans."

"Are you planning to drive that far every day?"

I told him that I planned to live in the dorms during the week and come home on weekends. I would cook several meals for him when I was home and put them in the freezer. I promised we could talk on the phone and online every day.

“It'll be okay," I said.

"But why?"

"Because I want to go back to work, and this will help. Because if I can get a job with benefits, maybe you can get the help you need. Because I can't spend the rest of my life on the sofa watching you withdraw deeper and deeper into yourself. Because I need to be around other people. I need to get out. I need to live."

I could see the hurt on his face. I could see the conflict. And I could see something else, too.

"You know I could never say no to you."

He got up from his spot at the dining table and took me in his arms. He kissed me gently, and brushed a lock of hair from my forehead with a shaky hand. He lifted my chin and looked deep into my eyes. It was the closest we'd been in ages.

"I want you to do this, he said. "And when you do, I'll be cheering you on. I'm proud of you."

For a moment, he stepped out of his little world into mine. If he could come out for a moment, maybe he could come out for good. Maybe.

* * *

I completed my undergraduate degree in 2014 and I'm on track to complete my MFA in writing in December of 2016. I don't live in the dorms anymore. I have an apartment on campus where Andrew stays with me sometimes. Before smoking on campus was banned, he got to know our neighbors. Their children watched for him to come out to the courtyard to smoke, then they swarmed around him and begged him to play. He pushed them on tricycles and played peek-a-boo or catch. The little Saudi Arabian boy and girl who lived in the apartment above ours couldn't speak a word of English, but they communicated with him just fine. He often stood on the ground below their balcony while they threw shoes and toys over the rail. He tossed them back up. The kids giggled hysterically when he missed.

Watching Andrew play with the neighbor's children reminded me of how he played with my sons when they were young. He had loved them as if they were his own, suffered when they unfairly compared him to their biological father, and tried his best not to let his hurt feelings show. He had unselfishly provided for them financially when their own father hadn't, and went to their little league games, plays, and band performances when their own father begged off. Watching him with the neighbors' children helped me as much as his interaction with them helped him. I caught glimpses of the man he had been before developing PTSD—a man who laughed and joked and knew how to have fun—and he became a little less anxious.

Now he parks his truck just off campus so he can smoke. He has made friends with a few campus police officers who stop by to chat and smoke with him. We go down the street to the campus night spot to have drinks and eat bar food at least once every time he visits. Sometimes we drive over to Morning Call in City Park for beignets. It's almost like normal. Almost.

Our actions often result in unexpected consequences. Without me in his world, Andrew was lonely, so he took a chance and followed me out. And though he still maintains his fortress,

it's more of a retreat when things get too stressful than a permanent abode. But the big breakthrough occurred when the story of Hurricane Gustav finally came out.

"What happened that night," I asked for the hundredth time. I really didn't expect an answer.

"Ms. Dottie died." he said." She used to work in the infirmary, but she got too sick to work anymore so she quit. Her husband, Mr. Bill, worked with us in EMS. They lived in an employee house on B-line."

He reminded me of all that had been going on at the time—the sexual harassment allegations, his demotion, his request for a transfer, and the arrival of Hurricane Gustav.

"On top of all that, my boss put another lieutenant on my crew, but he left me there, too. Nobody knew who to answer to. Nobody knew who was in charge. It caused all kinds of trouble and infighting. The women and men squared off against each other. The men took my side. The women kept stirring shit. I couldn't wait to get out of there."

"I had no idea."

He hadn't wanted me to worry, so he kept his mouth shut. That didn't stop him from worrying about the boys and me as we waited for the hurricane to make landfall. "

"What if something had gone wrong? What if you had had a heart attack or something? I was worried sick about you."

"I'm sorry."

"I just felt so helpless. Then the hurricane finally came through. It was a rough night, but nothing we couldn't handle. But by then I knew I was too burnt out to keep working in EMS. I was tired of the bullshit and lies, and I was tired of the sick people and the death and dying. I

wanted out. But I couldn't get out because you were sick and we needed the money and the insurance. I was trapped."

I hung my head. How had I missed all of this?

"What did Ms. Dottie have to do with it?"

"That night, the night after Gustav, we got the call around 10 o'clock. We took off in two ambulances to their house. When I walked in and saw her lying there dead, my mind snapped. All I could see was you. You were dead."

He put his face in his hands and sobbed.

I touched his hand. "It's okay, Babe. I'm right here. I'm not dead."

After a few minutes he dried his eyes.

Two ambulances responded, he explained. The other paramedic took over and worked the code. They brought her back to the emergency room and tried to save her, but it was no use.

“Mr. Bill was so pitiful. And I could do nothing. I stood outside the E.R. and smoked for the rest of the night. When my boss got there early the next morning, I told him I was leaving. I knew I'd never go back."

"Why didn't you tell me this sooner?"

He looked down at his hands.

"I was afraid I'd lose you. Afraid you'd stop loving me. Afraid I had let you down."

He raised his eyes again, looked me straight in the eyes, and made the confession he'd been trying to make for so long.

"I'll never be the same again. Can you live with that?"

"Do you love *me*? I'm not perfect either."

"Oh, God, yes!" He pulled me into his arms. "More than you'll ever know."

"Then I can live with that."

There Be Mountains

By the time we reached Nashville, I'd had enough mountains. Not the mountains themselves, but mountain driving. Yet the trip had been my idea.

"Let's go to the Ozarks," I'd said. "We've never been there, and you could look for rocks."

I wanted to go someplace cool, and late September in northern Arkansas seemed perfect. The leaves would just be changing, and there'd be little chance of snow. I needed a break from the stress that hung over our marriage as oppressively as the heat and humidity that hung over our home in southern Louisiana. And, to be truthful, I was willing to try almost anything to get my husband back. It was 2009–one year after Andrew's diagnosis with post-traumatic stress disorder and two years before I fully understood its consequences.

For almost a year, Andrew's only interest had been rock collecting. His doctor was okay with the trip. She thought it might be therapeutic. He was okay with it, too, as long as he didn't have to be around other people. By my reasoning, if picking up rocks in the driveway helped, finding them in mountain streams would surely cure him.

We stopped in Memphis our first night on the road. The city is situated on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi River. That night, the river resembled a black ribbon embellished with glittering, sequin-like bridges. Our room offered a view of a pedestrian plaza where tourists mingled naively with pimps, hookers, junkies, and dope dealers. The enticing aromas of fried catfish and barbecue floated across the city on a wave of syncopated blue notes that made me hungry and a little homesick. Even the sounds of gunshots fired a few blocks away were

reminiscent of a night on Bourbon Street. New Orleans had schooled me for Memphis, but it hadn't prepared me for mountain driving.

The next morning, we crossed the Mississippi and drove west through Little Rock. Just before reaching the Oklahoma border, we turned north toward Fayetteville. Until then, we'd only seen mountains in the distance. They were sleeping dragons on the horizon—marvelous to behold but dangerous to awaken. Now we were in the middle of them. The farther north we drove, the more intimidated I became. Soon, my fear called up images of roller coasters.

* * *

Today, the University of New Orleans Research and Technology Park is located at the end of Elysian Fields Avenue. But in the 1970s, when I was a teenager, that space was occupied by a New Orleans landmark, Pontchartrain Beach Amusement Park. For decades, Pontchartrain Beach had been the hip place to be on weekends and during the summer. It boasted several roller coasters, but the largest and, in my mind most frightening, was the Zephyr. Its wooden superstructure creaked and groaned as a chain-driven mechanism hoisted cars full of excited people to the top of the first and highest peak. The cars paused before gravity snatched them from the sky. I stood outside the safety fence and watched for that moment, the one before the plunge. I still shiver thinking about it. I like to know what's coming, and I like having options. That moment, that seemingly eternal moment, when they were poised at the top of the track, Zephyr riders had only one option: straight down.

A whoosh of hot summer air sent my hair flying as the Zephyr passed. Riders' arms flailed like pine branches in a hurricane. Their faces twisted grotesquely under the influence of

tremendous gravitational forces. Some riders laughed. Some cried. And, judging by the gut-turning stench left in their wake, quite a few of them vomited.

My younger sister, Eileen, was a Zephyr fiend. As soon as the bars lifted releasing her from the car, she lined up for another turn. She pleaded with me to ride with her, but I always shook my head. “No way. It’s too high,” I said, “and too rickety.”

One day when we were there with a large group of friends, Eileen proposed a sort of “training wheels” approach to roller coaster riding. Maybe if I rode the Galaxy, a much smaller, metal-framed coaster at the other end of the park, I’d get over my fear and ride the Zephyr. I wasn’t excited by the idea, but I was willing to give it a try. While waiting in line for another turn on the Zephyr, Eileen enlisted a few of our friends to her cause. “Make sure she gets on that ride,” she said. They formed a circle around me and escorted me down the midway.

When the ride ended, I fell out of the car onto the platform. My legs had gone all rubbery, and I couldn’t walk. My escorts laughed at first, but they were kind enough to haul me over to a bench and wait with me until I recovered.

Pontchartrain Beach closed in 1983, taking with it the Zephyr, the Galaxy, and a host of other rides I didn’t enjoy. Steep inclines, hairpin turns, and sheer drops were not my idea of fun. Mentally, I turned out the lights, locked the gates, and walked away from those rides like I was last thrill-seeker to exit the park. Two days into our road trip, the gates had been flung wide open.

* * *

I tolerated driving in the Ozarks because they weren't too high and because we didn't drive much after we settled into our cabin at Stonewind Retreat. The cabin turned out to be a yurt, a 700-square-foot round, double-walled tent mounted on a redwood deck. Andrew took one look at it and said, "We're staying in a circus tent?"

He unlocked the door and held it open for me as I pulled my rolling suitcase over the threshold. I hesitated. The pristine hardwood floor shone like glass, and I was afraid of scratching it. "Oh!" I said. "This is beautiful."

After deciding it was safe to go on, we pulled our luggage past a full kitchen, a full bath, and a laundry room on our right. We passed through the cozy living room centered on a gas fireplace and stopped in the bedroom area. Tired after a long day of driving, we flung ourselves on the queen-sized bed and snuggled into its nest of down comforters and overstuffed pillows. Overhead, the exposed beams supporting the tent's conical top met in the middle like the inside of a round-cut diamond. Wooden lattice work lined the inner wall. Only the rolled up flaps tied above the outer wall's plastic windows suggested we were inside a tent. I had booked us into rustic luxury.

"You did good," he said.

Andrew had been a paramedic for more than ten years. He'd often needed time and space to unwind after the terrible things he'd experienced. But I wasn't prepared for that final emergency call, the one that broke him. He came home a changed man – a man who craved peace, quiet, and a sense of security. I was relieved that he felt safe here.

We soon settled into a comfortable routine that included dinner on the deck with views of the valley 1,000 feet below and hazy mountain peaks in the distance. After dinner, we savored coffee as the sun disappeared in a blaze of pinks and reds. Later, the moon and stars shone

brightly in the velvety darkness and lit our naked dash in the chill night air from the hot tub to the fire inside.

Andrew spent our week in the Ozarks inspecting stream beds and outcroppings for interesting stones. After breakfast, outfitted with a heavy-duty backpack, bottled water, a couple of sandwiches, a small shovel, and his rock hammer, he headed down the mountain and disappeared into the woods. Hours later, he returned smelly, dirty, and smiling. He emptied his backpack, one rock at a time, and carefully arranged the contents on the deck rail. Then he lit a cigarette, took the coffee I offered, and explained in detail how he'd acquired his treasures. One day, we drove north into southwestern Missouri and found a shallow creek beneath an interstate highway bridge. Rivulets flowed, cool and clear, over a bed of water-sculpted rocks that rendered Andrew oblivious to the graffiti on highway stanchions, the roar of vehicles passing overhead, and the detritus of previous human visitors. He waded into the ankle deep water and crisscrossed the stream while picking up stones that met criteria only he understood. After picking up a few rocks to take back to Mom, I quickly lost interest. He, engrossed in his rock collecting soon forgot I was with him. After that, I chose to stay near the yurt while he hiked our mountain looking for rocks in places he hadn't explored earlier in the week. I used the time alone to write or look for colored leaves. I imagined pressing them into a book when I got home, keeping them as mementos of our time in the mountains. But when do things ever turn out as we imagine?

At the end of the week, Andrew loaded about two hundred pounds of stone into the back of our car. I stuffed a small collection of poems I would never let anyone read and not one brightly colored leaf into my suitcase. We had arrived too early to see the leaves change color. Still, it had been a pleasant week, and we vowed to return one day.

If we had stuck to the original plan, we would never have gone to Monteagle. But we were almost back to Memphis when I looked at the map and said, “There’s no reason for us to go home yet. Why don’t we go to Kentucky? We’ve never been there, either. Maybe they have different rocks.” Minutes later, we turned north.

We cut across the southeastern tip of Missouri, hugging the western bank of the Mississippi as we went. This was cotton country. Great snowy fields of it dominated a landscape dotted with farmhouses, big metal barns, and cotton gins.

“You know,” I said. “I expected to see colored leaves, not snow.”

“Life is like that sometimes,” Andrew said with all the sarcasm he could muster.

I smirked at his smart-ass humor, though I secretly enjoyed it, and went back to admiring the fertile river valley. I didn’t care if the leaves hadn’t turned. The roads were flat and straight, my over-stressed husband was cracking jokes, and our problems seemed as distant as the mountains we had left behind.

We crossed the river into northeast Tennessee that night and made a loop through southern Kentucky the next day. We looked for blue grass and thoroughbreds, but they were as hard to find as colored leaves. Parks and creek crossings were plentiful though, and we stopped at many of them. Eventually, Andrew determined he had collected enough pieces of Kentucky. He was ready to see how much of Tennessee he could haul back to Louisiana.

The topography of Tennessee changes dramatically from west to east. The low, flat Mississippi Valley gradually gives way to rolling hills and then mountains. Real mountains. Tall ones that make the Ozarks seem stunted.

I realized my mistake in Nashville. When we turned south from Kentucky into central Tennessee, I felt safe. The mountains, I thought, lay farther east, in places like Gatlinburg and

Knoxville. And my map, a traveling companion with absolutely no sense of loyalty, was silent on the matter. It never grabbed me by the collar and said, "Look where you're going, lowlander! There be mountains ahead!" But those jagged peaks on the horizon spoke to me. Loudly.

When I climbed into the Galaxy's shiny silver car all those years ago, my entire body trembled. I gasped when the chain mechanism engaged with a jerk and the train began to move. It rose slowly, bumpily, up a steep metal track. It paused at the top, and I saw Lake Pontchartrain spread out for miles to the north and east. I saw the entire amusement park in all directions. And I saw the track disappear from in front of me. That moment just before the little train plunged down and down and down and then turned sharply, throwing me against the inside of the car, and then rose again to the next peak, and then plunged again, turning, rising, plunging, screeching to a stop – that moment, for many years, remained the most terrifying of my life. I had run out of options. I had only one place to go – down – and could cling to only one thing – hope. Riding the Galaxy again was out of the question. And the Zephyr? Not a chance. The thought of it made my heart race and my skin turn cold and clammy. The view from Nashville had the same effect.

The next morning, we set out again, climbing steadily until we reached the summit in the town of Monteagle. When we stopped to refuel, I got out of the car and looked around. We were high. Too damned high. The Cumberland Valley stretched for miles, just as Lake Pontchartrain had done years before. I massaged the center of my chest to relieve the tightness I felt growing there and considered our options. We could go back to Nashville or go on to Chattanooga, but we'd have to go down either way.

Traveling I-24 from Monteagle to Chattanooga is notoriously dangerous. Johnny Cash knew that. He wrote a song called "Monteagle Mountain" about it. Every trucker who drove the route knew it. And, of course, the locals knew it. But we didn't. Not at first. Then we saw the

signs. Signs for truck inspection stations and runaway truck ramps. Signs announcing the steep six percent grade ahead. Signs warning us not to rely too heavily on our brakes.

Freight trucks lined up for mandatory brake inspections before beginning the descent. As we passed them, I thought of the 200 pounds of rocks in the back of our car. I imagined the car smashed against the side of a mountain. I saw our shattered bodies, covered with sheets, lying beside the road. I heard a police officer and a paramedic talking over us.

"What caused the accident, Officer Jones?"

"Probably all those rocks they were carrying, Paramedic Smith. The brakes couldn't handle the extra weight."

I suggested leaving the rocks behind, but Andrew drove on. "Relax," he said.

Relax? I hated him so much I wanted to fly across the seat and strangle him. I hated him all the way down the mountain. I hated that he was calm when he should have been freaking out. I hated that my chest hurt and his didn't; I was hyperventilating and he wasn't. I hated that he loved roller coasters but came unglued around people. I hated that he had PTSD and I couldn't make him right again. And I hated him for reminding me that it is entirely possible to hate the person you love.

The highway felt like a tunnel with its top and one side blown away. To our left, the mountain formed a wall of striated limestone replete with cuts made by road builders. There was no room for error. If we veered left, we'd eat a mountain. If we veered right, we'd use the laughably low guard rail to launch ourselves into nothing but clear, blue sky. I grew dizzy looking at the nothingness and imagining how long it would take to hit the bottom.

"Keep your eyes on the road," Andrew said.

Shut up, you bastard. Oh, how I wanted to say that!

The speed limit dropped from 70 miles per hour to 60, to 50, then 40. Down and down and down we went, twisting right, curving left, rising briefly and then falling again. We descended one mile, then two.

"Slow down." I said it softly, trying not to seem irrational.

"What? You don't think this is fun?"

"Please, slow down."

"I'm driving the speed limit."

"I don't care. Slow the fuck down!"

He laughed at me then, which only made me hate him more.

"Hush," he said. "And stop stomping that imaginary brake on your side of the car. You'll put your foot through the floorboard."

I didn't utter another word until we reached the bottom. Partly because I was angry but mostly because I was too damned scared to talk.

At four miles, we passed a disabled 18-wheeler. Black, acrid smoke poured from its brakes. We breathed through our mouths and drove on. At six miles, the road grew steeper and curvier. Andrew applied the brakes sparingly, but there was little more he could do. He hadn't touched the accelerator since we started down the mountain.

Then, when I was certain we'd crash, the land flattened, the road straightened, and we burst through a grove of trees into the Tennessee River Valley. The river paraded the late afternoon sun before us in glittering red, orange, and gold shards. I'd seen sights more beautiful than this, but at the moment I couldn't remember any.

My left hand shook as I extended it toward my husband, who was, once more, my best friend. He took it gently in his right and held it until I recovered. In that moment, I caught a fleeting glimpse of the strong, confident man I had married.

"Do you want to stop somewhere?" he asked.

"Give me a few minutes. I'm not sure I can walk."

"No problem." He laughed softly and squeezed my hand. "By the way, have you noticed the trees?"

I hadn't thought about the trees since Nashville. I'd been too busy worrying about the mountains. Now, I looked—really looked. They weren't spectacular yet, but they hinted at it. And the hint was enough.

Epilogue

In June of 2014, shortly after I received my bachelor's degree and because this was the graduation gift I most desired, our eldest son, Andy, agreed to drive my husband and me to Maine for lobster fresh from the ocean. We spent thirteen hours on the road the first day of our "Maine Lobster Quest." We started smack in the middle of Louisiana, drove straight across central Mississippi, and then headed for the northeast corner of Alabama. It was all good until we got to Tuscaloosa, where we became ensnared for three hours in a parking lot on I-20. The cause of this delay? An accident had happened in a construction zone, and a car had run out of gas before getting past it—a traffic jam triple play.

The situation wasn't as miserable as it might have been. I had just taken the wheel to give Andy a break before we encountered the Great Wall of Traffic. So, while I skillfully navigated the impasse at a harrowing one mile per hour, he took a nap. Andy's eleven-year-old son, Aidan, entertained the rest of us with his shenanigans from a second-row captain's seat in the cushy Chrysler Town & Country minivan we had rented for The Quest. Three hours of alternately creeping forward or idling at a dead stop gave us an opportunity to practice the nearly extinct art of conversation.

"Oh, no!" I said, looking far ahead. "We're getting very close to the mountains."

"Don't you like mountains, Grandma?" Aidan asked.

"They're beautiful, but I don't like driving in them. I get scared"

"Why?" To Aidan, the idea of rollercoastering through Appalachia sounded like a rollicking good time.

"I just don't like it. It makes me crazy. In fact," I continued, "I wrote in my blog that fear of mountain driving morphs me into something like a rabid Pit Bull."

"What? A rabbit that eats bulldogs? Pawpaw you'd better sleep with one eye open tonight to watch out for that rabbit!"

Aidan giggled wildly. His sister, Alena, rolled her eyes the way teenagers do, but she couldn't help laughing. Andrew, my husband, caught my attention in the rearview mirror. We both laughed. I knew Andrew had been struggling with the claustrophobic aspects of his PTSD as well as jonesing badly for a cigarette. I'd been monitoring him, as was my habit, and I saw him tapping his fingers on his knees, frowning at the sea of cars, and fidgeting in his own second-row captain's seat. We'd been too long on the road without a break, and Aidan's hilarity provided welcomed stress relief.

Aidan is a genuinely sweet child, quick with a hug and a smile and happiest when cuddled next to his dad on the sofa. To me, he looks more like my youngest son, Justin, than Andy. Aidan and Justin inherited my mother's clear-blue eyes and my father's face-spanning grin and charming personality. Andy and Brandon, my middle son, are more like Mom and me—introspective and deeply empathetic. Andy and Brandon have Dad's hazel eyes. I have my paternal grandmother's grey-blue eyes—eyes like the "steelies" boys of my era shot when playing marbles. I think our eyes are like tea leaves: I can read my family's past, present, and future in them.

Aidan—the blonde-haired, blue-eyed, winsome jokester—is the future descended from the past. Like a honeybee colony's latest generation, our family's ethos survives in him. I watch him in the rearview mirror as he laughs. I am in awe of all he is and all he may become. I hope

he never fears mountain driving. I hope he never faces life's bulldog-eating rabbits. I hope he is this happy forever. I hope.

Vita

Edith “Edie” Talley was born in Picayune, Mississippi and raised in Slidell, Louisiana. She obtained her Bachelor’s degree in Interdisciplinary Studies from The University of New Orleans in 2014. She joined The University of New Orleans Creative Writing Workshops graduate program to pursue a Master of Fine Arts in creative nonfiction writing. She served as the editor-in-chief of *Driftwood* in 2012-2013, the managing editor of *Ellipsis* in 2014-2015, and as an associate editor of *Bayou Magazine* in 2015. She is an award-winning journalist, and her prose and poetry have been published in several anthologies.