

The Things We Write

Short stories, excerpts, and poems from the authors of Thomas-Jacob Publishing, LLC



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The Smokey Hollow Blues

by

Malcolm R. Campbell

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The Smokey Hollow Blues

POLLYANNA PUSHED OPEN the front door to her empty house on Tallahassee's north side before the airport cab was out of the driveway, dropped her suitcases in the dusty entry hall next to a shoe bench strewn with 18 months of unsorted mail, and already her office phone was ringing.

"Hoskins, dammit."

"Rough flight?"

"Too many old-fashionedes on too many flights, and now I gotta pee, Sergeant Lebow."

She flung the handset into a chair, stepped into the bathroom, slammed the door, and turned on the fan and the radio to keep Lebow from saying "You sounded like a horse draining itself into a washtub." When she was finished, she looked at herself in the mirror and wished she hadn't.

She poured three fingers of single malt into a dusty glass, and only after tossing down half of it and kicking off her shoes did she return to the phone. She heard him breathing. Crap, he was still there.

"What?"

"You sound like a hound dog pissing on a fire hydrant."

"You called just to tell me that?"

"No, captain," he said, maintaining the convenient cover story of their Marine reservist ranks, "I called because there's work to do unless you're totally out of shape from too much beach and booze."

"Too busy."

"We schedule these mandatory vacations to allow our personnel time to repair themselves physically and mentally, and top off their tanks with high octane ingenuity and grit for the next mission."

"Oh."

"What were you doing?"

"Teaching Shōtōkan karate at the dojo in Tokyo, but then you know this."

"The chief of station there knows every time you ate, drank, and took a leak," said Lebow. "He's not willing to lend his security protective service agents forever, especially one who speaks multiple Japanese dialects like a native."

"He told me that while we dined on seafood and kelp with hot sake and I told him that I was fluent in Floridian," she said.

"Time to cut to the chase," he said. "Our beloved CIA brass want you to put eyes on Smokey Hollow, especially the intersection of East Street and East Madison. And while you're at it, steer clear of Sgt. Vance McNaughton. He's more Klan than cop. Word is, he likes busting up stills in the Hollow and drinking the evidence."

"Smokey Hollow's an old neighborhood. Why would the KKK care about it?"

"Urban renewal's the new craze."

"Bulldozers rather than paved streets and fresh paint?" she said.

"But bless their hearts, the Klan wants to help. That means good old boys playing with matches to save the city a lot of money."

"When?" she asked.

“Wednesday night.”

“That gives me thirty-six hours to scope out the place.”

“See if your husband can help.”

“The bureau sent him down to Mims again.”

“Probably another dead end in the Moore murder investigation,” he scoffed.

“That’s what Gary thinks, not that the bureau cares what he thinks. So yeah, I’ll freshen up my Sparrow disguise and visit the hollow.”

Lebow laughed.

“What?”

“If that leads to trouble, I don’t want to be in the loop.”

“Plausible deniability’s your middle name,” she said, and hung up before he could make a crude joke about it.

When morning finally came, it seemed later than usual because Pollyanna’s sleep had been filled with dreams in which the Klan lynched her and threw the body in the St. Marks River to be borne thirty-six miles for the waiting sharks in Apalachee Bay.

Strong coffee woke her up without clearing away the prospective designs of fate for the Smokey Hollow operation. Nonetheless, she arranged her gear on their new queen-sized bed because Gary wasn’t in it: her grey wig, her faded Kitty Foyle dress, blue with white buttons and a white collar, the brown swagger bag purse with matching wedgie shoes and cloche hat, and the ratty beige sweater that concealed well-toned arms that couldn’t belong on a 75-year-old woman. The old black Nylon stockings did the same for her legs. She kept her CIA badge and ID card and the magic makeup that transformed her into that old woman in a Gucci Ophidia beige and ebony cosmetic case. The ambiance and hue of these items clashed with the garnet bedspread representing Gary’s obsession with the FSU football division of the Southern Baptist Church.

The black ankle holster with her .45 Colt Commander and the black thigh holster with her Smith & Wesson .357 were a perfect match. Pollyanna managed the handguns’ cleaning and lubrication with the dedication of a Swiss watchmaker.

By the time she left the house at 10 a.m. beneath a bright sun, even her best friends wouldn’t recognize her, and if Gary were just waking up or coming home drunk after a night of poker, he wouldn’t either. She drove down Magnolia Drive to East Lafayette, turned west, and left her Ford pickup in the parking lot of a lifeless bleach-white state office building and walked down into a small valley that, in spite of the wood smoke haze, blessed the senses with a cornucopia of everything in life that was holy.

Here were single and double shotgun homes and vernacular-style small businesses snuggled down with a counterpane of unpaved roads and footpaths, kitchen gardens carrying the distinctive scent of ripening tomatoes, clothes lines and boiling pots of laundry, kids playing, folks swapping yarns on shady porches, assorted fruit trees, and pecans rising up a northern hill enclosed by the Seaboard Coastline Railroad tracks and wood lots, a stream forced into a ditch to minimize flooding, and then to a beautiful two-story Queen Anne house with clapboard siding and wrap-around porches with simple balustrades. West of the house, and too close for comfort, the city—the barbarians at the gates.

Pollyanna walked slowly, sliding her feet as though she was hardly able to walk, following the sharp scent of the tomatoes. In some places, the yards had been swept clean and smooth, much better than the streets, and low voices flowed outward from open windows on a nearly nonexistent breeze. She was already sweating profusely beneath her sweater. The sun showed no mercy.

“You lost, Sugar?”

“Not yet.”

The voice was older than an unpainted barn with a “See Rock City” sign on the roof. Sparrow finally saw a lady in overalls and a red head scarf in a ladder-back rocker, deep in the front porch shade, her church fan working something fierce. A bucket of compost sat on the top step next to a trowel and a four-tine hand fork. A large vegetable garden ran along the right-hand side of the house; on the other side, carefully pruned guava trees laden with fruit filled the space from the street back to a clothesline and a chicken coop. The chickens were out, and everywhere.

“Are you just looking or handing out ‘Watch Towers’?”

Sparrow walked over to the porch railing, said “Never read a ‘Watch Tower’ so I’m looking and need directions to a café called Millie’s.”

“I’m Millie’s mother Josie,” she said, finally opting to smile. “Head on down the street and turn left. You can’t miss that red RC Cola sign in the window.”

“My name’s Sparrow but I don’t eat like a bird. What’s good there?”

“Easy answer: the cornbread. You can make a lunch out of that. Some folks like the Millie’s hotdogs in tomato sauce, but I prefer the fried chicken and collards if I’m eating heavy.”

“I’ll probably roll out of there,” said Sparrow.

“Yes, you will, yes you will. Millie can talk a person’s ears off, so watch the time and get yourself back where you came from before dark.”

“Rough neighborhood?”

“Lord, no.” Josie was whispering now. “More like rough visitors coming around tonight or tomorrow night if the rumors are true.”

“Thanks for the tip,” said Sparrow.

Millie’s Café was haint blue, so bright that the paint looked wet. Josie could have mentioned that. Inside, the walls were covered in a rainbow of pastels, a suitable backdrop for hundreds of black and white snapshots of the community’s residents. Millie stood behind one of the many mismatched tables, trying to level it off with old matchbook covers beneath the legs. She was all smiles even though Sparrow was her only customer.

“Welcome to Millie’s Café, the only place around with enough air conditioning to freeze your tits.”

“Are frozen tits on the menu?”

“Usually not. People tend to hoard them.”

“I know I would if mine hadn’t seen better days.” Now, Millie was staring at her. “What?”

“No offense, ma’am, but you’re the first white lady to set foot in this place in a month of Sundays and some days when I wondered if that would ever happen, I didn’t reckon we’d be joking about tits—not right away. Your accent isn’t from around here. Woodville, maybe, but I don’t think so.”

Millie didn't know how to stand still. While she talked, she wiped tables, stirred the unknown contents of misshapen pots on the stovetop, took a pan of cornbread out of the oven, and knocked the tit-freezing temperature back a notch.

"My accent is pure Apalachicola River country. Otherwise, your mother told me to come down here and try the cornbread."

"Old Josie, do you trust her?"

"Don't have to. I can see what you took out of the oven. Also, a bowl of collards if you can tolerate me pouring vinegar on them."

"That's almost a crime in these parts."

"I grew up in a fish camp south of Torreya. It's probably a crime there, too. My name's Sparrow—in case you need a name to write on the ticket."

"You want clabbered milk on your cornbread?"

"A little."

"White people!"

"Nice place, by the way. The color scheme, the photographs, the swear jars by the register. You could move Millie's up to Monroe Street and make a bundle."

"One-quart Blue Plate mayo jars aren't big enough for the swearing. My neighbors chip in to help pay for the phone and electric because I don't make a bundle. But shut your mouth: Monroe Street? West Hell, you mean. All kind of bad mojo and unhappy people up there," said Millie. "Nothing like being happy down here in the smoke. If the world was like this place, there wouldn't be no more wars or hunger."

"I believe you," said Sparrow as Millie set down a serving-plate-sized portion of food with a Mason jar of sweet tea. There couldn't have been more than a half teaspoon of milk dead center in the cornbread.

Before Sparrow could comment of that bit of whimsy, the phone rang from so high up on the wall that Millie had to use a stepstool to answer it. One might say she was petite enough to have purchased her denim dress in the children's section of the store. In contrast, her starched white apron was large enough for most of the doughnut-eating cops back in Torreya. And her hair! How many hours did that take, those straight, tight plaits?

"That was mother," stated Millie. "Wanted to know if I knew what you wanted."

"Other than lunch?"

"She didn't care about lunch, just figures the first white lady. . ."

". . .since a month of Sundays . . ."

". . .must be up to something. So, I told her you come from a fish camp and are signing people up for a mullet and hushpuppies pyramid scheme. She hung up on me after that."

"She's not altogether wrong about me," said Sparrow. "I'm gathering up secrets."

"Like what?" asked Millie.

She brought over a pitcher of tea, an extra Mason jar filled with ice, sat down kitty corner at the table, and leaned in close.

"Like a person named Millie who's going to show me how to plait my hair."

Millie started laughing and when it became apparent she couldn't stop without an intervention, Sparrow reached inside her swagger purse and extracted a mini liquor bottle filled with her friend Eulalie's best shine. She took off the cap and handed it to Millie.

“Drink.”

Millie wasn't shy about it chugging half of the precious medicine.

“Lord, that's good,” she gasped. “Have some yourself.”

Sparrow drained the bottle.

“That's better than we make around here,” she said. “Don't tell me got to drive all the way to Torrey to get a refill.”

“Okay, I won't tell you.”

“Lady, I don't know where to start because your hair saw too much sun and salt water when you were a kid. Soak it in Prell Conditioner for a couple of months and then we'll see if we can save it.”

“Oh.”

“Then you'll have to take a blood oath before I divulge all the secrets hidden away in plaits and braids.”

“Really?”

“In Smokey Hollow, people know that when I plait my hair, trouble's coming and that when I braid my hair, there ain't no threats.”

“What kind of threats?”

“Mostly the police. They come through regular busting up stills and shutting down policy games. Sometimes—like today—it's the Klan.”

“Josie told me to get out of here before dark.”

“Good advice,” said Millie. “You got any more of that shine?”

Sparrow fetched out another bottle.

“Is this enough?”

“No, but it'll do. Anyways, as I was going to say, I think the Klan will be here tomorrow night.”

Millie inhaled every last drop without coming up for air.

“Two or three guys, I think,” said Sparrow.

Millie leaned back, frowned, and said, “So there ain't nothin' accidental about you wandering through here today.”

“You got that right, but don't tell your mother.”

“What are you, some kind of police woman or meter maid?”

When Sparrow couldn't stop laughing, she took out the last mini bottle of shine and cured what ailed her. She glanced at the door and saw a crowd of people, waiting, it appeared.

“We're scaring off your customers.”

“I wondered where everybody was. One more thing. Check out a popular reverend named Clarence Thigpen. I don't think his eyes are watching God. Well, his Pyrex eye might be, but his working eye is more concerned about getting the right color people into heaven.”

“Thanks for the intel.” Sparrow put a \$20 bill on the table. “I've got more walking to do. I want to check out the corner of East Street and East Madison.”

“There's a wood yard there, a jook and the AME Church,” said Millie.

“That's where they'll be,” said Sparrow.

“How do we prepare?”

“Hoses and fire extinguishers.”

“They’re going to burn us out,” snapped Millie, “and we don’t have a lot of spigots in the Hollow to fight them with. Pains me to think what they might do here.”

“They can try,” said Sparrow. “For now, toss out those booze bottles and let your customers inside where they can cool off.”

Millie hugged her, thrust a mug of hot coffee in her hand, and said, “Come back again and we’ll drink clabbered milk on the house.”

Sparrow couldn’t help but smile as she pushed out through the impatient crowd. They watched her go, she felt their eyes on her, then lost track of their stares as she walked the neighborhood in a grid pattern until she found the right corner, thought that the wood lots would burn easy, then over to the Blue Lights Juke, and across the street to the AME Church that would demoralize the community if it fell to ash.

Pollyanna grabbed the Tallahassee *Democrat* off the front porch when she got home, skimmed through it, and found an announcement on an interior page about a Klan rally scheduled the following evening south of the fairgrounds. “All white people who are interested in white supremacy are invited to attend.”

Perhaps Willie the Weatherman at WCTV would forecast rain for the south side of town.

Since Lebow probably knew about the rally diversion already, she called Eulalie, her “older than dirt” best friend and conjure woman in Torreya instead.

“It’s your nickel.”

“It’s always my nickel.”

“Shug, you’ve been home twenty-four hours and finally you call me?”

“Duty called.”

“Dandelion tea would have sped things up.”

“I haven’t been sitting on the pot. I’ve been gathering intel in Smokey Hollow.”

“Sweet place. Sang at a jook there once or twice when old Razz volunteered to drive me over. The damn government’s goin’ to level that place, first with a big road coming through to take the rich muckety-mucks to the capitol to do their business. You ain’t callin’ about a road, though.”

“No, it’s the Kluxers again, looking to set a fire as their contribution to urban renewal.”

“Gary will help, won’t he?”

“Out of town down in Brevard County.”

“Husbands! Even Willie, though he’s matured with age. Lena wants you to know she’ll be there.”

“It’s 36 miles. What the hell is that kitty thinking?”

“You must’ve got your brains knocked upside down at that Tokyo Karate school. Lena will be spirit walkin’. People will think there’s a black cat there while she’s sleeping here on my lap.”

“Good.”

“If you get yourself hurt, Lena will come tell me and I won’t be happy. Might have to come out of retirement and hurt some people.”

“I’ll be okay.”

“See that you are.”

Dressed as herself, Pollyanna borrowed Gary's Shoebox Ford fishing car with legal, but bogus, North Carolina plates, and drove to a phone booth across the road from a massive megachurch where the reverend Clarence Thigpen's name was prominently displayed on the message board and called the police with an illegal electronic device that changed the calling phone number to one on a Monroe Street booth across from Lake Ella.

"Tallahassee Police Department, how may I direct your call?"

"Hi, my name's Eden Rivers and I'm looking for Vance who told me he's some kind of a sergeant up there."

"What's this in relation to?"

"Sexual relations—oh, and the expensive watch he left in my Tallahassee Motor Hotel cottage."

He answered with more bluster than the phone was designed to handle.

"Sergeant McNaughton."

"This is PI Rivers, calling to see if the police are investigating a potential Klan attack at Smokey Hollow tonight."

"So, there's no motel room or missing watch?"

"Of course not. If I said I was a PI, you would have ducked the call."

"What's your license number?"

She told him and then heard static on the line while he verified it.

"Okay, you have a valid Class C license. I have to tell you that the Klan is having a big rally tonight, so your information must be wrong. May I ask the source of your rumor?"

"Pastor Thigpen," she said. "I understand he's the Nighthawk of the local group."

After a pause, McNaughton said, "I wouldn't know. As the guys in the armed forces say, 'That's above my pay grade.'"

"Mine, too," she said and hung up.

She raised the hood on the Ford, then reached beneath the dash to a hidden switch that killed the power. That way, if any helpful men—such as police or clergy—came along and offered assistance, they'd end up stymied. Meanwhile, she had to just sit and wait. She hated stakeouts. She lit one of Gary's hidden Pall Mall cigarettes so, as the advertising claimed, she could reward herself with the pleasure of smooth smoking.

Pollyanna's call smoked the reverend out of his sanctuary first. He wore a plain business suit with a clerical collar and lit a cigarette out of a red and white pack as the sun or the holy spirit glinted off his glass eye. He started walking toward her when a squad car and a Mort's Tree Service pickup truck roared into the church drive and just about knocked him past the Pearly Gates.

Their hand gestures and facial expressions told her they were unhappy. They were yelling—cursing (except for the reverend)—but they were too far away to hear. Mort was an unshaven bear of a man, the sergeant was multiple-packs-of-cigarettes-a-day thin, and the reverend was holier than thou in every possible way. Whatever they had to say to each other didn't take long. The reverend seemingly dismissed them by turning around suddenly and striding back into the sanctuary. He slammed the door so hard, Pollyanna was surprised the vibration from it didn't ring

the steeple bell. The other two ground out their cigarettes in the driveway and burned rubber getting out of there.

Thank God there wasn't an ounce of chivalry between them for the maiden in distress across the road. She waited ten minutes, flipped the hidden switch, and drove back home where she was transformed into old lady Sparrow, today with a black sweater, black hat, and black umbrella.

She sent a fax to Lebow with a status update.

She called Gary's office and was told he was out of town, location classified. She laughed and said, "yeah, Mims, that's such a big secret it's in all the papers." That got her a dial tone.

She drove to the white government building's lot and backed into a parking space in case she needed to leave quickly.

She left her purse in the car.

Light rain was falling across Smokey Hollow from Pecan Hill to the railroad tracks in spite of the clear skies forecast from the weather bureau. Eulalie must have come out of retirement long enough to twist a few clouds into knots. She walked to the corner of East Street and East Madison, happy for the umbrella, and saw nothing out of place except for the growing puddles in the street.

Somebody at the jook was singing Muddy Waters' "I'm Your Hoochie Coochie Man," accompanied by a guitar and a harmonica. Sparrow walked over to the jook's open door where blues and smoke and the scent of beer flowed out into the rain. She stayed outside, content with the mood of the music in the heart of Smokey Hollow beneath her umbrella. An old man caught her eye and when she gave him a thumbs up, he brought her a bottle of Country Club Malt Liquor on the house.

"I'm Nat and we all want you to know that if you come inside, we won't bite."

"I like my Delta Blues with a rain chaser."

"We don't mind, though a Country Club back will get your feet tappin'."

Since she didn't want to dull her reflexes, she poured half a bottle's worth into his empty glass before he went back to where the others were standing and watching. He picked up a slide guitar, said something she couldn't hear, and they launched into "My Black Mama" by Son House. Their concert was, in fact, the blues of Smokey Hollow, a hundred kinds of hardship and a hundred kinds of joy. They were playing the elusive Geeshie Wiley's "Last Kind Words" when the Klan arrived in Mort's truck. So much for keeping your identity secret, thought Sparrow, as she closed the door to the jook and stepped back into the shadows.

The three of them were dressed in white robes and hoods and went to work right away unloading a half a cord of wood into the intersection. They had five jerry cans of gasoline secured to the tie-down anchors with a heavy chain. The sergeant—she knew it was him because of the twangy voice—sloshed half a can of gasoline onto the pile and tossed a lit match into it so that it was bright enough to throw light all over everything, including the reverend's Pyrex eye. Mort drove the truck ten yards away, but left the motor running and the headlights on.

They stood on the east side of the fire and waited as though they were expecting an audience to come together. Sergeant McNaughton whispered to the reverend who shrugged, walked back to the truck and returned with a bullhorn. He smiled before he spoke.

“We’re here tonight to continue the work of Jesus Christ, the governor, the city manager, and the city fathers. As you know, we placed signs throughout Smokey Hollow ten days ago ordering every one of y’all to vacate the premises so that urban renewal could take place. The government needs this land for a new road, for the long-planned expansion to the state government center, and probably a new park.”

“Give me that,” snapped McNaughton. “Everyone knows that shit. The bottom line is this. The city can’t figure out how to pay for all this—this slum—so we’re helping out by burning it down. Y’all had plenty of time to pack up. We’ll give you another thirty minutes to get out and be off down the road to French Town or Saxon Street or wherever you got people.” He looked at his watch. “The countdown starts now.”

While she sensed a few people with her in the darkness, the word “countdown” didn’t start a mass exodus of people out of the neighborhood. In fact, the cracking, spitting and popping of the bonfire was all she heard. And the endless rain.

Sparrow leaned her umbrella against the outside wall of the jook and shuffled out into the street on the west side of the fire.

“Jesus Christ,” said McNaughton to the entire neighborhood since he was still holding the bullhorn.

“False alarm, folks,” shouted Sparrow in a raspy voice the sergeant wouldn’t recognize, “it’s only me.”

“You’re in the wrong place, granny,” said Thigpen.

Sparrow frowned, looked around, said, “Are y’all Negroes inside those trick-or-treat costumes?”

McNaughton looked like he wanted to jump over the fire, but Mort held him back. “You know better than that,” McNaughton snapped.

“You make a good point,” said Sparrow. “That being the case, it appears that you men are in the wrong place.”

“We’re doing government work,” said the Thigpen.

“Nonsense, Pastor Pigpen, I go to your church.”

“Say what?”

“The glass eye gave you away,” she said. “Show me your work order and I’ll get leave.”

When Mort started scratching his ass, he let go of McNaughton who came around to Sparrow’s side of the fire. He came up close enough for her to smell the Schlitz beer on his breath. “If you don’t want me to tie you up and throw you in the truck, walk away.”

She put up her fists.

He laughed. “Oh, you’re Rocky Marciano now, are you?”

“Walk away, Vance, before I put you on the ground.”

“That tears it,” he was saying as he moved in on her and threw a wild punch.

Sparrow’s roundhouse kick hit him in the knee. He fell, screaming threats and profanity, and started to get up. Sparrow put him back down with an axe kick strike to his shoulder. Before he gained enough consciousness to move, Sparrow took a pair of Peerless handcuffs out her pocket and secured his wrists behind his back.

Mort watched her like a Panther ready to spring; he apparently thought her curses indicated some problem closing the cuffs and so he was tensing his upper leg muscles preparatory to leaping

over the dying fire when Lena ran across the road in front of him. He stopped short, nearly falling, as the reverend was saying “bad luck, Mort,” but instead of responding to the words or the omen, he pulled a .38 Police Special from his belt and quickly brought it to bear on Sparrow’s center of mass. He had forgotten—if he ever knew it—that Peerless handcuffs could be snapped shut with one hand, leaving the other hand free to pull a Smith & Wesson .357 from a thigh holster. She fired first. The round broke his wrist and the revolver fell into the mud.

Sparrow stood and looked straight into the pastor’s Pyrex eye. “What are your plans, Reverend?”

“To stop the bleeding, thought there ain’t much.” His words were hard to hear because Mort was screaming like a banshee.

“Good,” she said.

She walked around the fire and crossed Lena’s path. After retrieving Mort’s handgun, she watched Thigpen wrap the wound tight with a torn-off piece of Mort’s robe to stop the bleeding and, for the lack of anything else, serve as a splint.

“That ought to do it. The good Lord guided that bullet away from everything vital,” he said.

“We worship different gods,” said Sparrow. “The god of my heart taught me to be a straight shooter so I wouldn’t need to nag him or her for help with the details.”

“Her! That’s blasphemy.”

“Interesting point of view from a man wearing a Klan costume,” said Sparrow. “Are you armed, Reverend Thigpen?”

“No.”

She looked into the crowded darkness, shouted, “Does anyone out there have an extra pair of handcuffs?”

Five pairs sailed into view and landed next to Thigpen.

“See anything you like?”

“Not really, but we stand down.”

“Are there any other Klansmen on the property?”

“Nope. Everyone else is at the rally.”

“Put your hands behind your back, then.”

When his wrists were secure, she pulled Mort’s good wrist up close and linked it into the reverend’s restraints with another set of cuffs. Then she dragged the vociferously protesting Sergeant McNaughton and propped him up against his spiritual advisor.

“You’re under arrest, bitch, for assaulting a police officer.”

“Sorry,” she said, “I thought you a common criminal.”

He scoffed, said, “We’ll see about that when the police get here.”

“I *am* the police, but I’ll cede jurisdiction to the FBI who will arrive shortly to carry y’all off to the county incinerator—the cremator, as folks around here call it.”

Somebody opened the door to the jook and the words to W. C. Handy’s “Careless Love” drifted outside to mix with the rain:

Love, oh love, oh careless love

In your clutches of desire

You’ve made me break a many true vow

Then you set my very soul on fire

The song faded into the night while she jogged to Mort's truck, secured the gasoline, turned off the engine, and locked the doors. Then she walked through darkness so intense, she couldn't imagine there were quiet homes along the way, just some old hound dog barking up a fit down by the Seaboard tracks. She returned to the scene of the crimes in her Ford with the red light flashing on the dashboard, making the neighborhood look like it was losing flowing blood from unseen wounds.

The blood would flow far into the future. It brought tears to her eyes thinking that Eulalie wouldn't be around to see the day it was staunched.

She checked the prisoners who said they had to pee. She made them go in the woodyard where they sounded like horses draining themselves into a washtub, but only after they removed their hoods and robes which she put in a black garbage bag—unfortunately for evidence rather than disposal. Millie brought them water and cornbread which they let sit for a while until hunger and thirst forced them to swallow their pride and partake of anything brought to them by a Negro. Sparrow ate half the cornbread while they watched, then bought several bottles of Country Club and gave one of them to Millie.

"Tell me," said Millie, "is a wide road coming through our community?"

"Within a couple of years, and that won't be the end of it."

"We're going to be waiting for the promised land for a lifetime."

"Many lifetimes," said Sparrow.

"What kind of defense did you use against Vance?" asked Millie.

"Shōtōkan style Karate. I learned the basics when I was a Marine in Okinawa and found that it fit my Zen way of thinking."

"Zen and good mojo are probably the same, so teach me," said Millie.

"Seriously?"

"I'm weary of being a powerless black woman in a white man's world. My fear for my personal safety is as regular as breathing."

"You're more powerful than you think, with a well of women's wisdom and strength that holds your people—all people, actually—together," replied Sparrow. "I'll be happy to teach you as long as you keep making cornbread and collards."

"When do we begin?"

"Now."

-The End-

Author's Note from Malcolm R. Campbell

Smokey Hollow was an African American community just east of Tallahassee, Florida's capitol building. Founded in the 1890s, it was destroyed by the systemic racism of urban renewal in the 1960s. You can learn more about the community at Tallahassee's John Gilmore Riley Center & Museum for African American History & Culture and from *More Than Just a Place: Part II of the Smokey Hollow Story* by Julianne Hare and Althemese Barnes, sold in the museum's gift shop.

The characters who appear in this short story are fictional as are the events portrayed with the exception of the urban renewal projects championed by multiple levels of government. "The Smokey Hollow Blues" is an attempt to re-imagine what could have happened in a vibrant community while keeping our memories of that special place alive.

Pollyanna, Eulalie, and Lena previously appeared in the novels of my Florida Folk Magic Series:

[*Conjure Woman's Cat*](#), Florida Folk Magic Stories, Book 1

[*Eulalie & Washer Woman*](#), Florida Folk Magic Stories, Book 2

[*Lena*](#), Florida Folk Magic Stories, Book 3

[*Fate's Arrows*](#), Florida Folk Magic Stories, Book 4

Boxed Set: [*Florida Folk Magic Stories, Books 1-4*](#)

They can also be found in my short story, "Haints in the Woods," which follows next. "Haints in the Woods" is from the collection [*Widely Scattered Ghosts*](#).

Haints in the Woods

by

Malcolm R. Campbell

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For my two inquisitive granddaughters, Freya and Beatrice

Haints in the Woods

SO, MY CONJURE woman was fit to be tied.

“Sweet kitty, I’ve been married four hours and my groom’s done run off. Lena, I don’t reckon Willie needs all afternoon to fetch a quart of Borden’s Milk for flapjacks from the Mercantile. By now, he’s met a dark dusty butt down in Estiffanulga for a few hours of jelly and juice.”

She spat a long stream of tobacco juice into the dead cookfire’s frying pan with no flapjacks in it to emphasize her point of view. Then she went back to sipping her homemade moonshine and singing Sister Rosetta Tharpe songs. Folks always said her voice was just as pure now as it was a half century ago when she sang at the jook.

Nobody pays much attention to a black cat’s opinion, but to my way of thinking, lonesome has its limits. Like a broken record, Eulalie got stuck on “The Lonesome Road,” belting it out as truly mournful as she could over and over, lingering long on the word “weary.”

Praise the good Lord, as the deacon would say, for Pollyanna chose that moment to drive her grey Ford truck through the busted section of the wrought iron fence into the back yard.

She wore her favorite green capri pants, black blouse, black sling-back sandals, and a wide smile that showed off her new black lipstick and matching nail polish.

“Young people,” whispered Eulalie.

Pollyanna came up to the porch with an Alligator Supreme orange crate chuck full of who knows what covered over in butcher paper.

“Did you see a soused sinner riding his hinny back home?” asked Eulalie.

“Why, is one missing?”

“I was just telling Lena that I think Willie’s sharing jelly and juice with some dusty butt miles away from where he’s supposed to be.”

Pollyanna set down the orange crate. “I don’t even know what that means.”

“Sex and booze with a ho,” Eulalie said.

“Holy shit.”

Pollyanna slumped down into the sagging couch with a fading smile. When Eulalie handed her the Mason jar of shine, she wasn’t shy about drinking her fill.

“I ain’t really po’ moufin’ my brand-new husband,” said Eulalie. “I’m hopin’ he is a soused sinner today.”

“I know I’m repeating myself, but holy shit.”

“Beats bein’ among the dead. I threw the bones an hour ago, and they said he’s with the dead. Then Lena went lookin’ for him on a spirit journey, and she saw nothin’ but ace-of-spades blackness. As you white folks sometimes say, we’re on tenterhooks.”

“I can drive to the Mercantile and ask Lane if Willie’s been there,” said Pollyanna.

Eulalie smiled. “Thanks for offerin’, but we already know he came and went there and that he ain’t jawbonin’ with Lane, Rudy, or Jessamyn. Best thing you can do now is distract me with whatever you got hid in that crate.”

“I drove over to Sears Roebuck in Tallahassee and got you what I would have got you if you’d taken time for a bridal shower.”

“Kid stuff, those showers.”

Pollyanna pulled aside the butcher paper and fetched out a pale green nightgown like a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat.

Eulalie looked like she'd seen a ghost.

"Chile, Willie can 'bout see through that."

Pollyanna leaned into Eulalie so they were eye to eye. "That's the point, ain't it?"

"If I put this on, I'm either turnin' the lights out or he's wearin' a grocery sack over his head." She looked at the tag and actually giggled loud enough to embarrass even me because she was acting young enough for a bridal shower. "Charmode Aravel with Rayon: this ain't no fancied-up flour sack."

"Next," said Pollyanna, "we have a tube of Cashmere Bouquet red lipstick."

Eulalie puckered up her mouth like she was sucking on lemons and sipped on her moonshine before she said anything.

"I ain't painted up my face since I sang the blues at the jook. I always wore red and kept my hair unruly because the hotter I looked the bluer the blues painted up the walls and the hearts of the men who were half-listenin' while they drank cheap beer and played dangerous cards."

"I bet you were one classy chassis," said Pollyanna.

"Thank you. Here, take a sip."

Eulalie opened the tube of lipstick and made a mark on the back of her hand. "It still don't clash with dark brown sugar. Even so, lips like cherries might scare the hell out of Willie, assumin' that no-good man ever gets hisself back home."

"I have an idea," said Pollyanna.

"What's that?"

"Grab another swig first and promise not to hit me."

"I promise. You know, this is my best batch of shine in ages. Okay, I'm ready."

"Rather than painting your mouth. Draw an arrow on your tummy pointing downward so Willie will know where to go if he gets lost."

Pollyanna slid away on the couch, but there was no need. Eulalie laughed so hard she had tears in her eyes.

"You're plumb shameful," said Eulalie.

"Thank you."

While grey fog slithered out of the woods on the far side of the creek, they passed the Mason jar of shine back and forth so many times there wasn't much left but fumes.

"Next," shouted Pollyanna as she tried several times to get her hands down beneath the butcher paper in the orange crate. I could tell she was fighting off laughter, the kind that would trash the afternoon. "Okay, the ad for this perfume claims that 'even in the dark, he'll know it's you.'"

Eulalie snatched the bottle of Revlon's Intimate, removed the cap, and passed it beneath her nose. "This'll make me smell like a secret garden, better than those dusty butts in Estiffanulga who smell like catfish." She dabbed an extravagant amount at the base of her neck. Made me want to sneeze. Made Pollyanna raise her eyebrows. As for Willie, he still wasn't home, but if the first thing he did when he stepped up onto the porch was cough, he wouldn't be soon forgiven for whatever he done wrong, including dying.

"If this was the first time you shopped for a Black lady, you done good."

"You're welcome, but there's one more thing," said Pollyanna. "This one's from my

grandmother, may she rest in peace. Last thing she told me before she died was that her tenth blue-on-white double wedding ring quilt draped over the old Singer was waiting for me to find a friend worthy of those hundreds of tight stitches. That would be you.”

When Pollyanna draped the quilt around Eulalie’s shoulders, my conjure woman snuggled down into it as though she just discovered the fog had chilled her.

“Oh. You dear sweet chile, even my mama never found this kind o’ beauty in her sewin’ room. Scooch over here and let me give you a hug.”

They held each other as though they were mother and daughter and then covered their hug with the quilt and leaned back sleepy and content into the cushions of the sofa. With her white foundation makeup, black lipstick, and coloring the color of the incoming fog in her hair, Pollyanna looked like a young woman who had died before she was ready. She loved her disguises, found them a necessary component of going about town causing trouble.

“This quilt surely warms a body, Shug,” said Eulalie. She ran her old hands through Pollyanna’s hair. “I hear my mama talkin’. She say everythin’ will be all right. I don’t know how. But, I ain’t gonna sass Mama. I wish you’d known her. Then you wouldn’t be scared of the world or this malicious fog that’s creepin’ into our yard on little cat feet just like the poet man said. Sorry, Lena, that’s what he said. See how it slides along low to the ground. Missus snake couldn’t go no better. This ain’t no normal fog off the river. I can see that now that I’m warm ’neath this perfect quilt. If you sleep while Lena sleeps, I think y’all can find my Willie and bring him home.”

When I awakened in the dream world, Pollyanna was waiting for me. From past experience, I knew she also could travel as a spirit and communicate with thought speech. At my suggestion, we stopped at Joe Moore’s tree where he presided as the magical heart of the forest.

“*Klan haints are out and about,*” he said. “*Willie don’t mind them, but his hinny does. Won’t budge no matter how much Willie pulls on the halter rope. They’ve been trapped beside that short leaf pine next to the service road for hours.*”

“*Who stirred up the haints?*” asked Pollyanna.

“*The Baptist Church moved their coffins out of the low place in the graveyard where they were laid to rest. Preacher says there was a flooding problem. Greed, more likely when a builder handed out enough money to buy the land for homes on the tainted ground.*”

“*So the Klan is riding again,*” I said.

“*Can’t hurt nobody,*” said Joe Moore, “*but hinnies, horses, and some people scare easy.*”

We flew to the service road which ran alongside the railroad tracks, a place where violence had been done. Where the howl of wolves and haints invaded even the spirit world. I saw Willie trying to sweet talk Minny back out onto the road. Minny was having none of it, fair spooked. I saw no haints, just a blur like rain on a window. The only creature there who looked like a haint was Pollyanna.

“*The real haints are flying in a circle, all in white robes,*” said Pollyanna.

“*We need to fetch CW,*” I said.

“*Afraid so,*” she said. “*Those Klan bastards are screaming at Willie like he knows them and put them in the ground.*”

“*He probably does,*” I said.

Pollyanna and I awoke at the same time on the porch where Eulalie slept so peacefully beneath her new quilt it was nearly a sin to wake her and tell her there were haints in the woods.

“Eulalie, wake up. Willie needs your help,” said Pollyanna.

Eulalie opened her eyes like she was too old to open her eyes, took a deep breath, and flung off the quilt.

“Haints can be a real pest like palmetto bugs, mosquitos, and fire ants,” she said.

She went inside to her altar where she crumbled basil, boneset, and dried Solomon’s seal root into a small mortar and ground the mix into a fine powder. She poured the mixture into two-penny nail sack from the mercantile and handed it to Pollyanna.

“Throw this mixture on the ground in front of the haints,” she said. Then she wrapped the chain on her brass pentacle of Jupiter pendant around my neck. “You probably won’t need this, but better safe than sorry.”

En route to the service road, we stopped in a swampy patch of woods near the creek where she found a winter-bearing hawthorn with bright red berries. She cut off two fair-sized branches with her pruning shears and carried them like swords.

“Haws and haints don’t get along well,” she said as she pushed through the underbrush toward the service road.

There was Willie, pulling hard on the halter rope that connected him to Minny, the only hinny in the county and the most stubborn daughter of a female donkey and a male horse in the panhandle. Minny was braying with gusto but there was little to hear either because she had grown hoarse or because the Klan haints were screaming curses and taunts as they flew in a crude approximation of a ring shout circle.

Eulalie ran smack dab into that devil’s circle. She raised her arms as high over her head as she could reach and crossed those haws into the ghostly cold hurricane like a giant X. Close behind her, Pollyanna scattered her herbs on the ground, working outward from the hinny’s thrashing feet. And then came a beautiful silence that must have covered the world from Coowahchobee Creek westward to the Apalachicola River. Even Minny had nary a discouraging word to say.

I jumped up on Minny’s back and whispered into one ear and then the other to make doubly sure she understood that haints can’t do nothing to nobody, especially a brave hinny whose first duty is to make sure her two-legged human gets home safe, sound, and sane. My chiding seemed to settle her more than the silence.

“Next time, lose the hinny and run home with the milk,” said Eulalie.

“Yes ma’am,” said Willie. “There’s one good thing, though.”

“What in the hell might that thing be?” shouted Pollyanna. She gave him a good shove to make sure he was paying attention.

“Those haints brought enough of a chill with them to keep the milk from souring up,” he said proudly.

Eulalie scowled in a way that left no doubts whatsoever how little she cared about that. In fact, she turned her back on us and stormed off toward the house.

“I guess I’ll be sleeping in the outhouse tonight,” said Willie as he coaxed Minny into a slow walk.

“Why?” asked Pollyanna.

“We ain’t got no doghouse.”

“So much for the wedding night passion pit tradition,” said Pollyanna. “Come on Lena, let’s run ahead and talk to her and find out how bad things are.”

“Much obliged,” said Willie.

When we caught up with Eulalie, she said, “Is my sinner man back there talkin’ like a wet rag ’bout me?”

Pollyanna laughed until she began coughing and all that made her so red in the face even the gathering dusk couldn’t conceal it.

“Your reaction tells me all I need to know,” said Eulalie.

“He thinks he’d be sleeping in the dog house tonight if you owned a dog house.”

“There’s one thing men folks can’t never put into their reckonin’ ’bout women,” said Eulalie. She stopped and fetched out her Havana Blossom chewing tobacco and stuffed a fair-sized wad into her mouth. She offered the pouch to Pollyanna. “Want some?”

“Tried it once and threw up.”

“Takes practice. One thing, though. If you chewed good scrap tobacco, you’ll never choke on your own spit when somethin’ tickles your funny bone.”

“If I had a piece of paper, I’d write that down.”

“Don’t sass an old lady.”

“No ma’am, I won’t. Now, what’s that one thing men don’t know about a woman?”

Eulalie put the pouch back in her pocket and spat a healthy stream of used up juice into a palmetto thicket. No snakes emerged.

“They don’t know the good Lord changes her when she say ‘I do’ at her weddin’. Before that, she worries regular, like a normal person thinkin’ ’bout a friend. After she say them words, she frets intolerable hard.”

“I’m never getting married, Eulalie.”

“Yes, you are.” She spat a stream of tobacco juice into the creek as we crossed the old wooden bridge into her back yard. “Today I worried more about that ol’ man bein’ dead than I did when he run off to the war. I also worried about him bein’ tetched. I done told him that when Minny spooks, all he needs to do is walk away and she’ll follow.”

“Men!” exclaimed Pollyanna in a momentary fit of exasperation. But then she said, “Eulalie, how come those haints didn’t follow us home?”

“Mama don’t allow no haints ’round here.” She tossed the two hawthorn branches on the ground so that they landed in a big X. “We like the Boy Scouts: prepared. Them haws across the creek, barn stars painted on the side of the house, my fiery wall of protection, and hexes scattered from here to Aunt Hagar’s front door. No haint’s gonna dare mess with me and mine.”

Eulalie left a pile of Lance Toast Chee orange peanut butter crackers on the porch for Joe Moore as thanks for his help. She lit the cook fire and started a pot of rosin baked potatoes and set out the frying pan for a mess of Apalachicola River catfish.

“You want to stay for dinner?” she asked Pollyanna.

“Not hardly,” said Pollyanna. “I’m tempted, but honeymoon nights aren’t the best time for guests.”

She got into her pickup and backed out of the yard like she was in a hurry to go somewhere, anywhere far away, any place without newlyweds, haints, or whatever was bound to happen next. If I’d had my druthers, I would have gone with her, south to the old fish camp where she lived, where there were no haints or crazy blues.

When Willie got home, he tied Minny to the porch railing and ran into the outhouse, but not

for long.

“When a damn cottonmouth’s asleep where I need to do my business, the last thing I want to do is piss her off.”

“Leave Nagaina alone,” snapped Eulalie as Willie stomped into the woods with more attitude than the circumstances warranted.

Eulalie straightened the quilt on her way inside the house. I sat there watching the cook fire for all the good that would do. Minny was watching me as though she thought I had answers to the unresolved questions of the day beginning with why the haints chose today to go marching into the woods, were we going to drink the sacred quart of Borden’s milk, and will things always go this way? I had no clue about the haints or the milk, but the answer to the last question was “yes” quite simply because things had always been this way and the words “I do” weren’t the kind of spell that would change those things. Those things were the simple fact that Willie and my conjure woman had a very long history of acting like an old married couple long before they were married.

“Sweet kitty, how do I look?”

There was no right answer to a question like that. Her hair was combed like she was going to church, her lips were Cashmere Bouquet red, her scent was excessive Revlon Intimate, and her scandalous attire—the color of innocent springtime leaves—was Charmode Aravel with Rayon. I couldn’t help but think that if there was any haints lurking in the woods, this uncommon sight would scare them back to the relative safety of their coffins in their new digs at Torrey Memorial Cemetery on Jackson Street.

But she caught my eye, allowing her to ask again with thought speech.

“You probably think I look like a cheesy dame,” she said.

“Why no, of course not.”

“What then?”

“A blushing bride.”

“You really know how to sweet talk a girl,” she said and smiled a bright lipstick smile.

The sound of breaking glass was unmistakable. Apparently, in a state of shock, Willie had dropped the milk bottle. When it hit the sheltering stones ringing the cook fire, it shattered and put out the fire.

“I’ve died and gone to heaven.”

“Old man, after the worry you caused me with that haints-in-the-woods nonsense, there’s going to be hell to pay once we snuggle beneath this quilt.”

“Lena,” said Willie, “best you leave while you still can.”

I walked down the road to the Sanctified Church’s cemetery where the ambiance of old oaks and Spanish moss allowed the dearly departed to forever rest in peace.

-The End-

About Malcolm R. Campbell

Malcolm R. Campbell is an author of magical realism (*Conjure Woman's Cat*, *Eulalie and Washerwoman*, *Lena*, *Fate's Arrows*, and *Florida Folk Magic Stories*) and fantasy (*The Sun Singer*, *Sarabande*, *At Sea*, and *Mountain Song*).

His work has appeared in *The Lascaux Prize 2014 Anthology*; *Spirits of St. Louis: Missouri Ghost Stories Anthology*; *Quail Bell Magazine*; *A View inside Glacier National Park: 100 years, 100 Stories*; *Future Earth Magazine*; *The Smoking Poet Magazine*; *Nonprofit World Magazine*; *Nostalgia Magazine*; and *Living Jackson Magazine*.

He previously worked as an insurance company's training materials designer, a police management school's course materials developer, a mental health department unit manager, a technical writer, a grant writer, a corporate communications director, a railway museum's volunteer collections manager, and a college journalism instructor.

His fantasy novels were inspired by Glacier Park Montana where he worked as a bellman and from a tour of duty aboard an aircraft carrier during the Vietnam War.

He grew up in the Florida Panhandle, a wondrous place often called "the other Florida" and "the forgotten coast," that was the perfect environment for growing up and learning about writing and magical realism.

Campbell lives on a north Georgia farm with his wife, Lesa, and their two cats.

Links to all of Campbell's work through Thomas-Jacob Publishing, LLC can be found on the [Thomas-Jacob Publishing, LLC website](#).

Whiskey Business

by

Melinda Clayton

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Whiskey Business

AUBREY T. WILKINSON, JR. stepped through the tinted glass door of The Whiskey Business Bar and Grill and blinked, momentarily blinded by the cool darkness inside. Having hoed the garden for three hours in the hot August sun of an unbearably humid Tennessee afternoon, he needed a drink—a *real* one—but he'd made a promise to his sweet Maggie nigh on forty years ago, and although she was no longer with him, he didn't intend to break it now.

"Afternoon, Aub," called Traci from behind the bar, where she stood bent over, elbows propped on the aged walnut bar top, thumbs busily tapping away on her cell phone. "What's got you here so early today?"

"I'm meeting an old friend for an early dinner," he hollered back, then gestured at the phone. "Ain't you supposed to be working?"

"I am working," said Traci, before pocketing the phone in her apron and giving her ponytail a tweak. "Working to get my sorry ex to pay the child support he owes. Jimmy's big toe is about to poke a hole in his shoe, and Lord knows, I can't afford new ones right now. Not with the refrigerator blowing up like it did."

"It blew up?" Aubrey hoisted himself onto a red-leather-topped barstool, taking care to guard against whacking his bad knee in the process.

"Well, in a manner of speaking." She released a breath, blonde bangs lifting slightly in the puff of air. "It sparked, at least. And popped. And now it doesn't work." Reaching across the bar, she placed a tall glass of ice water onto a coaster, lemon on the side just the way he liked it, before producing a rag from somewhere and wiping down what seemed to Aubrey, at least, to be a perfectly clean spot of wood.

"Honey, I've got an old refrigerator on the back porch. Haven't used it since Maggie ... Well." He paused a moment to pull a handkerchief from his back pocket, swiping at his nose before continuing. "It's just sitting there. It's nothing to look at, but it works. Why don't I load it up and bring it to you this evening? What time do you get off work?"

"Aubrey." She didn't look up, but the incessant wiping stilled, and he could see her fingers tighten on the rag, knuckles turning white from the pressure.

"What time, honey?"

She closed her eyes a beat before answering. "I get off at seven."

The rag began moving again, and he watched her work her way down the empty bar, a thin young woman—too thin, really—who looked older than the twenty-two years he knew her to be. If a person didn't know her, they might not have noticed the catch in her voice, but Aubrey had known her since she'd been knee-high to a grasshopper, as Maggie would have said.

Or, perhaps more accurately, he'd known *about* her. It was her daddy he'd actually known. Hell, he'd arrested him often enough. Tracy (with a "y") Thompson had had a thirst for beer and a taste for violence. He'd also had a wife and two kids. Now, Maggie was the only one left, a good girl who'd had to start life way back before the starting gate.

She needs it, Maggie. He often found himself thinking things to Maggie, or praying, or whatever it was. It was hard to stop talking to someone just because they couldn't answer, and besides, sometimes Maggie *did* answer. Like now.

I know she does, Aubrey heard her say back. Take her some tomatoes and green beans. And anything else you have time to pick. She has a hungry child to feed.

Sitting alone at the bar, Aubrey chuckled. Once upon a time, he'd chafed at Maggie's propensity for giving him chores, but he missed it now. He really did.

Above all things, Traci Thompson hated accepting charity. Unfortunately, life had put her in a position that meant charity was sometimes needed if she wanted to survive. Fortunately, she knew good people who, if they knew she was struggling, were always quick to help.

Aubrey Wilkinson was one of those people, and his wife Maggie had been, too. On a freezing, ice-covered January morning eight months prior, Aubrey had awakened to realize Maggie had passed on sometime during the night. He didn't do anything right away. He couldn't, he told Traci later, as he sat at the bar and sipped lemon water. Doing something meant she'd be gone, *really* gone, and he just wasn't ready for that yet. "It took me a good two hours to pick up the phone," he'd confessed.

They'd held the wake at Whiskey Business. Well, not a wake exactly, because the body wasn't there, but all of Maggie's friends were. Aubrey and Maggie had been patrons of Whiskey Business for as long as anyone could remember. They didn't drink alcohol, but they loved the Friday night special—loaded nachos—almost as much as they loved to dance to the live bands. Reggae was their favorite, but they'd dance to most anything, even the music ("That's not really music," Maggie had once remarked) played by Traci's favorite grunge band.

Traci finished wiping down the bar and glanced back to where Aubrey sat quietly smiling to himself. Even when he'd come bursting into the house, he and that other cop, Bob, or maybe Bill—she no longer remembered—hauling her dad out onto the porch, cuffing him while he cursed them to hell and back, Aubrey had been kind to her. When she'd started working at Whiskey Business last year, he and his wife had always tipped way beyond the standard percent, and more than once, Maggie had been known to stuff a twenty-dollar bill into her apron pocket.

"I know how it is," she'd said. "I've spent many a shift on my feet, too. This isn't for them to count at the end of the night. You stuff this in your bra, honey, where they can't get at it."

The memories brought with them a swell of emotion, not something Traci needed in the middle of a shift. What a hell of a day it'd been, waking to a hungry toddler, a busted refrigerator, and no food to be found. Thankfully, the lunch rush was over and the dinner rush hadn't yet begun, affording her some time to collect her frazzled emotions.

Or so she'd thought, but then the bell above the door tinkled its deceptively merry greeting, and she looked up to see none other than her sorry, no-good, lazy-ass, lying cheat of an ex-boyfriend sliding onto the bench seat of Table 1.

Earl Walker wasn't sure exactly what he planned to do once he entered Whiskey Business. All he knew was that he was sick and tired of the constant harassment from the courts, from the police, and most especially, from Traci.

After all, it wasn't his fault she'd gotten pregnant; he more than half suspected she'd done it on purpose to try and trap him. She'd known he didn't want to settle down, wasn't interested in a long-term relationship, and damn sure didn't want a baby. He'd hadn't told her in so many words, but if she'd had half a brain in that scheming little head of hers, she'd have figured it out by about the third time she caught him out with the McDivitt girl—Jenny? Jenna? Janey? Hell, whatever her name was, there was only one reason anyone ever went out with Jenny/Jenna/Janey. And everyone knew what that reason was, even Traci.

But no, nag and cry, nag and cry, that's all she ever did. And now she thought he should be responsible for the little brat? Hell, no. The minute she'd kicked him out, she'd lost that privilege.

Earl Walker wasn't a man to be trapped, something Traci was apparently going to have to learn the hard way.

No, he didn't know exactly what he planned to do; he'd just let things unfold and see where they took him. But what he did know was that he'd enjoyed seeing the fear on Traci's face when he'd walked through the door. He slid into the back booth, the one closest to the door, and waited to see how Traci would react.

Traci didn't know exactly what Earl planned to do, but what she did know was that it wouldn't be good. Nothing about Earl Walker was good, a lesson it had taken her a heartbreakingly long time to learn. She sucked in a deep breath and picked up a menu. She supposed she'd have to treat him like a customer, since it was looking as if he planned to be one, or at least to pretend to be one, and she couldn't afford to lose this job.

Between trouble finding reliable childcare, and trouble in the form of Earl Walker showing up to her places of work and acting like an ass, Traci was quickly running out of places to work. Poor Mr. Johnson over at the Pick & Save had tried harder than most to keep her employed, but after several weeks of Earl storming into the store, yelling and cursing at Traci and knocking over Mr. Johnson's carefully designed displays, even he had to let Traci go.

As difficult as it was for Traci to once again be without a paycheck, she hadn't blamed Mr. Johnson. Earl was bad for business, whether that business was a daycare center (where she'd been able to have Jimmy with her all day until Earl showed up and trashed the nursery), a car wash (where Earl damn near carjacked a 1998 Corolla from a man who'd smiled at her) or a dollar store. After two years and twice as many jobs, Traci had learned that having a raging maniac of an ex-boyfriend storm around and terrify babies and threaten customers was a sure-fire way to become unemployed.

This was Earl's first visit to Whiskey Business, one of his first stops after his release from prison, and after a year with no contact, Traci had almost thought this was a job she might get to keep. That hope was cracked earlier in the day with his texts, and it was shattered now, broken to bits and blown out the door as soon as he'd opened it. While he looked fairly calm at the moment, Traci knew there was no way that was going to last.

She was halfway across the dining area with his menu when the door jingled again. The older man who entered looked vaguely familiar, big and burly, a man who could have held his own back in the day, and maybe even now. In spite of that, he looked friendly, smiling at her even as he waved to Aubrey up at the bar.

“I’ll be right with you,” said Traci, dropping Earl’s menu on the table in front of him without a word before hurrying back to the bar.

Aubrey stood to greet the newcomer, first shaking his hand, then pulling him in for a hearty pat on the back. “It’s good to see you, Bill. How’ve you been? How’s Patty?” He gestured to the dining area in front of the bar. “Let’s grab a table, why don’t we?”

“We’re fine, and a table sounds good,” said the man named Bill, releasing Aubrey’s hand with one final shake. “Lead the way.”

“Window okay with you?”

“Window is fine.”

Aubrey led them to a booth directly across from Earl, who sat with his head tipped back against the vinyl seat, watching them through slitted lids.

No sooner were they seated than Traci arrived with their menus. “I see your friend made it,” she said, sliding one in front of each man.

“Traci, this is Bill Frazier. He was my partner on the force for years before we both retired.”

Traci looked at Bill more closely. “Hey, I remember you. You came to our house with Aubrey whenever my daddy needed arresting again. You had a lot more hair back then.”

Bill laughed. “That’s quite possible,” he said. “Aubrey and I arrested a good many daddies—and mommas, too—when they needed arresting. And I had a lot more hair back then. No hard feelings, I hope?”

“That’ll depend on how much of a tip you leave,” said Traci with a wink. “Can I get y’all something to drink? Or are you ready to order? Aubrey knows our menu from top to bottom by now.”

“She’s right,” said Aubrey. “This is the place I used to talk about, the one where Maggie and I would come dancing on Friday nights. Traci,” he said, turning to her, “Bill will probably need a minute, so while he decides, I’ll take another water with lemon.”

“I’ll do the same,” said Bill. He looked up at Traci. “How much of a tip do you think water is worth?”

Traci glanced out the window at the sun beating down on the asphalt parking lot. “On a day like today? I’d say fifty percent, at least.” She smiled. “I’ll be right back with those waters.”

When Traci left, Bill turned serious. “How are you doing, Aubrey? I know the last few months have been hard on you. She was a good woman.”

Aubrey looked down, rubbing at a scar on the old Formica tabletop with an index finger. “I do better when I don’t have to talk about it,” he admitted, glancing back up at Bill before adding, “and yes, she was.”

“Understood,” said Bill. “But if you change your mind ...”

“I know,” said Aubrey. “I appreciate it.”

“Now what’s good here to eat?”

After Traci had dropped off their waters and taken their orders, Bill leaned forward, voice low. “What’s that guy’s deal?” He tilted his head slightly to the right, toward where Earl was sitting with a frosty mug of what Bill presumed was beer. Traci was there too, head down, writing on her order pad.

Even from a distance, Aubrey could see the tension in the way she held herself. “Not sure,” he said, “but he’s been tracking her pretty hard, hasn’t he?”

“He hasn’t taken his eyes off her the whole time we’ve been sitting here, and she doesn’t seem to be enjoying it.”

“Could be her ex-boyfriend,” said Aubrey. “I’ve never met him, but I understand he’s a real piece of work. Mean and lazy. Never has paid child support, won’t even claim the baby. I noticed she looked scared when he walked in, but you came in right after, so I didn’t get to ask her about it.”

“Worth keeping an eye on,” said Bill. “Something about him doesn’t feel right to me.”

“Once a cop, always a cop. And yeah, I agree. If that *is* the ex, I imagine he came here to cause trouble. Back when Traci was working at the Pick and Save, he came in and completely trashed the place, turning over shelves, throwing things. Made the local news. I heard he scared the customers half to death, and Traci, too. He was arrested and charged with felony vandalism.”

“Class D?”

“No, E.”

“That’s it? Sounds like it should have been at least a D. That’d have kept him out of Traci’s hair a little longer.”

“Yeah, well, it’s a dollar store. It’d be hard to break more than a thousand dollars’ worth of stuff in there. She was texting him when I got here today, first time I’ve ever seen that. Said they were fighting over child support.”

“Would she have invited him here? Maybe to figure it out in person?”

Aubrey shook his head. “No. Look how hard she’s working to avoid him. And with as many jobs as he’s caused her to lose, I imagine the last place she wants him to be right now is here.”

“Do you ever miss it?” Bill asked, switching gears faster than Aubrey could follow. At his confused look, Bill continued. “This. Putting pieces together. Chasing bad guys.”

Aubrey thought a moment before answering. “I haven’t had time to miss it. First there was Maggie’s illness, and then ...” He shrugged. “Retirement hasn’t exactly been what I’d expected.”

“I’m sorry, Aubrey.” Bill shook his head as if to clear his mind of insensitive comments. “I’m an idiot for even asking.”

“No, Bill, it’s a natural question.” Aubrey smiled. “We gave ’em hell, didn’t we?”

Bill laughed. “That we did, my friend.”

“Maybe if things had been the way I expected them to be, I’d be bored out of my mind. A man can only fish so much.”

“I have to admit, I haven’t done much fishing either, but for different reasons, obviously.”

“And what’re those?” Relieved at the change in topic, Aubrey pushed his empty water glass aside, making a mental note of how long it was taking Traci with their orders. He wondered if it had anything to do with the angry-looking man across the aisle.

“Well, that’s what I wanted to talk to you about. Remember Brian Stone, the defense attorney in Memphis who worked the Lewinsky case?”

Aubrey searched his memory. “Oh!” He snapped his fingers. “GQ-looking guy, very spiffy, but had a reputation for winning cases. If I remember right, he’d been friends with the defendant and his wife. Quit after that case, didn’t he?”

“That’s the one,” said Bill, “and he did quit for a year or two, but he’s back now, and he’s got me doing a little work for him.”

“What kind of work?”

“That’s what I was hoping to talk to you about. I could use some help.”

Traci had been standing inside the walk-in freezer long enough to freeze her feet, but she couldn’t seem to make herself leave. She didn’t know how a person was supposed to react after being told they were going to be killed, but she supposed freezing to death was as good a reaction as any and probably less painful than whatever Earl had in mind.

To be fair (even in the midst of her fear, Traci felt compelled to be fair), he hadn’t exactly said he was going to kill her. What he’d said, after she pulled out her order pad and asked what he wanted, was, “I want you dead. But until that happens, I’ll take a basket of hot wings.” And then he’d smiled that awful smile of his, the one that wasn’t a smile at all. It was hard to believe she’d ever thought he was handsome.

The thing was—the thing that made Traci stand in the freezer with aching toes—Earl had a way of getting what he wanted, so if he wanted Traci dead, she figured it was just a matter of time until she was. It wasn’t an if, it was a when, but the *when* was anybody’s guess. What was she supposed to do now? The dinner crowd would be arriving soon. She didn’t think Earl was stupid enough to try anything inside the bar. No, that wasn’t quite it. He was definitely stupid enough, but having just gotten out of prison, she assumed—hoped, at least—he wouldn’t be in a hurry to go back in. If that was true, she was at least safe until the end of her shift, when she walked out into the parking lot alone.

“Traci! Where the hell are you, girl? Orders up for Tables 1 and 2!”

That was James, the fry cook, and since Traci couldn’t afford to lose yet another job thanks to Earl, she figured she’d better shag her ass out of the freezer and back to work. *Shag your ass*. That had been an Earl term, and as she exited the freezer and closed it behind her, she took some small comfort in the fact that she was safe—*probably* safe, at least, which was as good as it was going to get—for at least the next three hours.

Traci grabbed a bar tray and reached first for Bill’s platter of burger and fries, and then Aubrey’s order of loaded nachos. Even with Maggie gone, knowing there was no way he could eat an entire order, Aubrey still always ordered the nachos. Traci almost had time to smile at the thought, but before the corners of her mouth could lift, she felt the bar tray slipping. She lunged forward, trying desperately to save it, but her fingers were so damn *cold*, her reaction time so slow, she wasn’t going to be able to stop it in time. In slow motion, she watched the dishes slide to the floor, white porcelain shattering, refried beans splattering her shoes, ears ringing ... and then all hell broke loose.

“Fourteen years old, you say?”

Bill nodded. “And doesn’t weigh a buck twenty soaking wet.”

“If the cameras caught him, they had to have caught the perp, too. Unless the kid *is* the perp.”

“And that’s possible,” agreed Bill. “But Brian doesn’t think so. Either way, we need the answer.”

“How many hours of film are we talking about?”

“Depends on how many cameras we can find,” said Bill. “Could be hundreds.” He gestured toward the server station with a raise of his chin. “Looks like Traci’s getting our food—”

“*Right and low, Bill! Now, now, now!*”

Before the words had time to fully leave Aubrey’s mouth, the men had sprung into action.

Earl Walker was getting tired of waiting. Traci was always so damned slow; that was one of the things he’d hated about her. Now here he sat, half-starved from his stint in the joint, with his belly gnawing away at his backbone while he waited, once again, for Traci to bring him some goddamn food. If he had a nickel for every time he sat hungry while waiting for Traci, he’d be a rich man.

He slouched lower against the back of the seat to relieve some of the pressure the Sig Sauer P365 was exerting against his spine. He wasn’t supposed to have firearms, of course, but what the cops didn’t know wouldn’t hurt them. Or maybe it would. He allowed himself a small snicker as he glanced at the two old guys across the aisle. Hell yeah, they were cops. Or had been, anyway. He could smell pigs from a mile away. And then Traci, flirting with them like that, smiling and winking. Who the hell did she think she was?

Two of the things he hated most in life, Traci and cops, all in the same place at the same time. It was almost more than he could stand. What had he ever done, he wondered, to deserve the way the world treated him?

But wait. The thought flitting across his mind had him sitting straight up in the seat. Maybe this wasn’t the world being a sorry bastard again. Maybe this was the world throwing him a bone. Two of the things he hated most in life, he thought again. All in the same place at the same time, and him just so happening to have a gun in his pants. *Well, I’ll be damned.* It was almost as if fate had handed them to him.

He didn’t want to go to prison again. *Wouldn’t* go to prison again, he’d make sure of that. But if he acted quickly enough, he wouldn’t have to. The Sig Sauer had a modified double-stack magazine capable of 10+1, with the “1” already in the chamber. There were only—he counted. Traci and the two old guys, and at least one cook in the back. He could shoot each one twice, if he had to, and if he played his cards right, he’d be long gone before the dinner crowd started to arrive.

As if on cue, Traci appeared, tray in hand, but Earl was no longer interested in hot wings. In one fluid motion, he reached behind his back, grabbed the pistol from his jeans, slid from the booth, and stood.

He raised the pistol and had just enough time to squeeze the trigger once before his left knee exploded and he went down.

Then the world went dark.

Traci didn't initially realize she'd been shot at. The crashing platters drowned out the sounds coming from the front of the dining area, so it was James' piercing "What the hell!" that pulled her attention up, away from the mess on the floor.

"Traci, get down!" he yelled from the other side of the serving station. "Some motherfucker just shot a hole through my goddamn vent hood!"

Traci barely had time to register what he'd said before she heard Aubrey's voice. "Traci, it's okay! It's okay. You're safe. But I need you to call nine-one-one right away."

Earl. My God, she thought. He did it. She stood frozen in place, unable to move.

"Traci." This time it was Aubrey's friend. Bill, she remembered. "We have him down. He's not going anywhere, at least not on his own. His knee is pointed the wrong direction, and he's knocked clean out. But he won't stay out forever. We need you to call in some back-up."

Knowing Earl was knocked out gave Traci the courage to move. With trembling fingers, she retrieved her cell phone from her apron pocket and keyed in the numbers. Her tongue felt thick and dry, stuck to the roof of her mouth with fear. Nevertheless, she managed to croak out the words. "There's been a shooting at Whiskey Business. Forty-five-oh-one Highway Fifty-nine. No, I... I don't think anyone was hit. He's down, now. Customers tackled him. Please hurry."

"We have officers on the way," said the disembodied voice on the other end of the line. "Ma'am, stay on the phone with us until—"

But Traci had dropped the phone, her shaking fingers too weak to maintain their hold. It landed with a muted *plop* into the pool of spilled guacamole at her feet.

"You think she's okay?" A fine mist had moved in over the past couple of hours, making the road ahead difficult to see in the damp night air.

"As okay as she can be after a day like today." Bill looked over at Aubrey, whose face was briefly awash in the headlights from an oncoming car. "Thank God she dropped that tray. If she'd been standing straight up ..." He left the thought unsaid.

"Yeah, I'm not sure she knows just how close she came." It was Aubrey's nachos, Traci had told them down at the police station, that unbalanced the tray, which wouldn't ordinarily have been a problem except that her fingers were too cold and numb to easily correct it.

Thank you, Maggie. Aubrey sent the thought out into the hinterland, smiling slightly at her response. *My pleasure, hon. Someone's got to look out for that girl.*

Ahead of them, Traci's brake lights briefly flashed as she slowed to turn into her driveway, which was little more than a rutted, washed-out trail leading up to a rented trailer that had seen better days.

After leaving the station, Traci had gone to pick up Jimmy from his daycare center while Aubrey and Bill headed to Aubrey's house to load up his old refrigerator. They'd met back up at the diner, now closed and dark after the hustle and bustle of the police investigation, to follow Traci back to her home and get the refrigerator unloaded and situated.

"Let's stay for a while, if she's up to it," said Aubrey. "I hate to leave her alone so soon after something like that. We'll order a pizza or something. Young people always like pizza."

"Good idea," agreed Bill. "She's not likely to have any food in the house, what with her refrigerator going out."

Aubrey pulled the truck in behind Traci's car and turned off the lights. "That question you asked me earlier, Bill. About helping you."

"Yeah?"

Aubrey cut the engine and turned to face Bill across the seat. "Count me in."

"It was fun, wasn't it? We're still a team, Aub. I go low, and you go high. Makes it easier on my bad neck and your bum knee."

"Between the two of us, we make almost one complete cop."

"He's going to need surgery on that leg," said Bill, "and I imagine he'll be seeing stars for a couple of days in the hospital before they cart his ass off to jail."

Aubrey smiled. "We give 'em hell, don't we?"

Bill laughed. "That we do, my friend. Now let's go help this girl."

-The End-

Author's Note from Melinda Clayton

Bill Frazier first makes an appearance in *A Woman Misunderstood*, the second in Melinda Clayton's Tennessee Delta Series:

Blessed Are the Wholly Broken, Tennessee Delta Series, Book 1

A Woman Misunderstood, Tennessee Delta Series, Book 2

Child of Sorrow, Tennessee Delta Series, Book 3

The fourteen-year-old boy he's discussing with Aubrey in "Whiskey Business" has his story told in the third novel from The Tennessee Delta Series, *Child of Sorrow*.

Turn the page to read an excerpt from *A Woman Misunderstood*.

Chapters 1 and 2 from *A Woman Misunderstood*

The Tennessee Delta Series, Book 2

by

Melinda Clayton

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A false witness shall not be unpunished. He who utters lies shall perish.

Proverbs 19:9

Chapter 1: Rebecca

I ONCE READ that the stench of a decaying human body is similar to that of rotted fish, but that was not my experience. Perhaps it's because I've only witnessed the odor once, or perhaps it's because the one time I did, the number of bodies was multiplied by three and they'd been putrefying for days in the moist heat of a Tennessee summer. Whatever the reasons, it's not an experience I'm likely to forget, not only due to the smell, but also because the corpses were those of my family.

The bodies belonged to my parents and younger sister, the three people in the world for whom I'd been tasked with caring, which is what I'd been trying to do that scorching July morning. I'd pulled into their long, rocky, rutted driveway to perform my usual Saturday chores: mow the lawn, pay the bills, shop for groceries, take my sister out for a treat. It wasn't immediately clear, as I parked under the old pecan tree and stepped out into a wall of heat, that something was wrong. The place looked run down, true, but that had been the case for the past several years, since my father's most recent heart attack.

Forty acres had quickly become too much for him to handle, so he'd rented the farm portion out to another farming family. While the fields had been recently plowed and planted with cotton, the couple of acres surrounding the house were overgrown and neglected. Buttercups grew wild across a lawn filled with Johnson grass, a horrible weed that had killed off our beef cattle years before. Hydrangeas spread shapelessly along the driveway, and the unpruned crepe myrtles hadn't bloomed in years, their scraggly gray branches twisted and turned in a never-ending dance of death.

I did my best to keep the yard in check on the weekends, but given the four-hour drive and my odd work hours, it just wasn't always possible. On a good weekend I managed to get it all mown, which was more than would have happened without me. For years, I'd begged my father to hire someone to help me mow, but he refused, citing cost as the reason. But that wasn't it.

He was a cheap bastard, don't get me wrong. I could probably count on one hand the articles of new clothing I had growing up, and I was the oldest. I doubt my sisters ever saw clothes with store tags still attached. It wasn't for lack of money, either. We had money; we just weren't allowed to spend it. That man could squeeze a penny until it screamed, as my mother used to say.

But that's not why he refused to hire someone to mow his yard. My father grew up in a time in which family cared for family, sons built houses on adjacent acres, and daughters lived at home until they married and went to live in a house built by some other son on some other acre his father had given to him. So that's what he expected of me, even though I'd disappointed in nearly every category, beginning, of course, with my gender. In my father's eyes, son or no, coming home weekends to help was my job, plain and simple.

On that particular morning, it was a little unusual not to see my sister's face plastered against the front window, drool dripping down her chin as she rocked in her wheelchair, squealing with excitement. My visits were the highpoints of Callie's life, sad as that might seem. I suppose compared to every other day, endless days during which Callie sat for hours in front of the T.V., a visit to the local Dairy Queen was pretty exciting, after all.

I'd long ago stopped trying to persuade my parents to enroll Callie in some sort of workshop or day program. When she'd aged out of special education classes at the local high school twenty-

eight years prior, that had been the end of Callie's socialization. Family cares for family, my parents would say whenever I brought it up, and so Callie remained at home, living a life that was no sort of life at all.

Of course, that was no longer the case that sweltering summer morning, but it wasn't until I'd climbed the porch steps and opened the front door to that horrible smell that I really began to understand death. When I stumbled over Callie's dead body, my foot slipping and sinking into the rotted flesh of her stomach, I had no choice but to understand.

After I finished screaming, my first thought was to call 911.

My second was to find Lena, my surviving sister.

My third was to wonder how much time we had before her arrest.

This is important, this third thought of mine. If you stick with my story, you'll understand why.

Chapter 2: Rebecca

I WAS BORN on May 3, 1965, the first of three daughters born to Patrick Eugene Reynolds and his lovely wife Becky May. At my mother's insistence, they named me Rebecca, the longer version of her own name, and the one she'd always wanted.

It was no secret my father had wanted a son, nor was it a secret I tried my best to fill the gap. I toddled after him as soon as I was able, riding along on the tractor, gathering eggs, milking cows. I dare say he'd nearly forgotten I was female until puberty hit at the tender age of twelve, at which point he became flustered and curt, shunning my company in the field while reciting a list of daily chores I needed to complete to help my mother care for my younger siblings. It's interesting to me, in my mature years, that when my femininity became obvious, outdoor work was deemed inappropriate, but now that I'm older and surely less fit it's not only appropriate, but expected. One of my father's many idiosyncrasies.

Callie was born in 1969, when I was four years old. I was much too young to understand what was happening at the time, but have since come to understand her disabilities stemmed from a combination of ineptitude and indifference. By all indications, Callie had developed normally in the womb, but when my mother suddenly and unexpectedly went into labor late on a Saturday night, her doctor proved impossible to find.

The nurses in our small-town hospital panicked, literally holding my mother's legs closed until a hospital janitor drove to a bar on the outskirts of town, nearly at the river's edge, to collect the doctor and transport him back to tend to his patient. If you know anything at all about the area of our county called the river bottom, or *the bottoms* for short, you understand the sort of establishment to which I refer. As it turned out, my father was the one who gave the good doctor a ride back to town, the janitor following behind to ensure they made it without taking any side trips into ditches or fence posts.

Make of that what you will.

Mother's legs forced closed equaled pressure on the baby's skull, which equaled pressure on the baby's brain, which equaled brain damage. There you have it. And all so the doctor could drink whiskey and soda in a dump of a bar and ogle barely-legal-aged girls on a Saturday night in the hopes of getting laid, while his social-climbing clueless wife did *her* best to get laid while drinking cheap chardonnay at the country club on the opposite side of town.

The whole scenario portrays small-town hospitality in a fascinating new light, don't you think?

Anyway, so there was Callie the summer of my twelfth year, the year I was assigned to what my father referred to as *woman's work* back at the house. She was four years younger than I but still in diapers, still unable to speak, sit, or walk. Callie was at the top of my father's list of chores for me to complete. But of course there was no completion; there was just a life-long, endless cycle of feeding and changing and bathing and pretending all was well in the Reynolds' household, when nothing could have been further from the truth.

Lena, the baby, was at the bottom of the pecking order. How could she have been anywhere else? Lena was born in 1971, two years after Callie, and destined at birth to be the overlooked,

forgotten child. Over time, she responded accordingly and gave my parents—and me, by extension—hell. But that was to be expected.

Let me interject here to correct any misconceptions. I realize I may sound bitter, but I'm not. No. I'm a pragmatist. I'll speak openly and honestly about the hand dealt me, without hysterics or emotion, because truly, what's the point? It simply *is*. Things simply *are*. So that's the way I'll report it.

I merely want to tell the truth.

-End of Excerpt-

About Melinda Clayton

Melinda Clayton is the author of two series: The Cedar Hollow Series, which includes novels *Appalachian Justice*, *Return to Crutcher Mountain*, *Entangled Thorns*, and *Shadow Days*, and The Tennessee Delta Series, which includes *Blessed Are the Wholly Broken*, *A Woman Misunderstood*, and *Child of Sorrow*. Clayton also authored *Making Amends*, a standalone novel of psychological suspense.

In addition to writing, Clayton is a licensed psychotherapist in the states of Florida and Colorado (now on retired status) and teaches in Southern New Hampshire University's COCE MFA program.

Links to all of Clayton's work through Thomas-Jacob Publishing, LLC can be found on the [Thomas-Jacob Publishing, LLC website](#).

An excerpt from *There's Bees in My Peas!*

A children's book

by

Smoky Zeidel

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Artwork by Scott Zeidel

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Coming soon from Thomas-Jacob Publishing, LLC.

There's Bees in My Peas!

Ms. Gardener went into her yard one fine day.
She looked at her roses and said with dismay,
“There are holes in the leaves! Some pest’s eating my plants!
Now what could it be? Beetles? Aphids? Or ants?”

The holes were as round as a ring or a dime
on the edge of the leaves. She said, “Who did this crime?
Who’s chomping the leaves, don’t they know that it’s wrong?
I’ll catch them! I’ll watch if it takes all day long.”



She watched and she waited, she paced round and round,
Then she stopped. What was that? Had she heard a soft sound?
She had! There it was! A soft *buzz buzz buzz buzz*,
A cute little insect all covered with fuzz!

Ms. Gardener watched as it worked without pause,
Cutting a disc from a leaf with its jaws.
Then clutching its prize with its feet as it fled,
The cute little insect flew from the rose bed.

“I know what you are!” said Ms. Gardener with glee.
I was wrong. You’re no pest. You’re a leafcutter bee!”



Through her garden of green beans and carrots and chard,
she followed the bee to the back of her yard,
where she'd put in a bee house all cozy and sweet.
There, she found the bee with the leaf in its feet.

She watched as the bee stuffed the leaf in a hole.
She knew that a warm cozy nest was its goal.

“You’ll lay a wee egg, and your larva will hatch,
then grow into a bee in my vegetable patch.”



-End of Excerpt-

Publisher's Note

There's Bees in My Peas! is scheduled to come out later in 2022. In the meantime, you can learn more about Ms. Gardener and her gardening experiences in Smoky Zeidel's [*Who's Munching My Milkweed?*](#), featuring beautiful artwork by Scott Zeidel.

About Smoky Zeidel

Smoky Zeidel is a poet and novelist, whose love of the natural world is thematic in all she writes. She taught writing and creativity workshops for many years at venues throughout the Midwest before succumbing to her bohemian urges and moving to Southern California. Her work has earned her five nominations for the prestigious Pushcart Prize.

Smoky lives in the Coachella Valley, which is part of the vast Colorado Desert in Southern California, with her husband Scott, two cats, and a Chihuahua named Tufa (who considers herself the Boss of Everything). She is an avid desert gardener, monarch caterpillar rancher and butterfly midwife.

Links to all of Zeidel's work through Thomas-Jacob Publishing, LLC can be found on the [Thomas-Jacob Publishing, LLC website](#).

Chapter 1 from *The History of My Body*

The Fleur Trilogy, Book 1

by

Sharon Heath

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*“Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.”*

Leonard Cohen, Anthem

Chapter One



THE BIBLE SAYS that in the beginning was the void, and it hasn't escaped me how fast the Lord moved to take care of His own particular vacuum—dividing day from night, spitting out vast oceans, carving out competing continents that could one day have the power to blow each other up. What an inspired series of creations to keep the devil of boredom at bay. No wonder God kept seeing that it *was* good.

Maybe it all would have happened differently if the bird on the front lawn hadn't given me my idea about my grandfather's balls. Or maybe not. You never know in this life; there are too many variables. In ancient times they might have called it Fate, more recently the Butterfly Effect, but I like to think of it as the human race's chronic aversion to boredom. I figure any species lacking fangs and claws had a powerful incentive to evolve an active sort of mind.

I suppose I'm not the only one who likes to hear about her own beginnings. Luckily for me, Nana loves to reminisce about the period in her life that coincides with my first eleven years, when we all lived together on what *Time Magazine* once described as "Senator Robins' conspicuously spacious Tudor estate in the Main Line suburb of Gladwyne." While the rest of us spent virtually all our time on that property, Father often spared us his presence, commuting to an apartment in D.C., where, as he liked to put it, he served as the only senator from Pennsylvania defending the sanctity of human life.

I had my hands full defending my own. Looking back from the perspective of my fifteen years, I have to appreciate my infant ingenuity in keeping me just this side of the lurking pit of nothingness. Nana says I made more of a racket than all the saved babies combined, directing frantic tom-toms at my mother, who'd cry back at me from the foot of my crib, a drowning woman clutching her wine glass like a life raft. The crib still exists. I saw it a few years ago, its slats bearing the imprints I made with my bullet-shaped head.

I saw Mother defend me against Father only three times in my life. The first was on my tenth Easter. I remember because I was wearing the dreamy pale blue dress and matching strappy shoes Nana had bought me for just that occasion. Having talked Cook out of one of her yummy lemon squares after returning from church, I was humming and chewing my way toward the den until I realized Mother and Father had gotten there first. Father had already begun one of his rants against the devil abortionists. This time he added an extra twist. "Who knows," he taunted Mother, "how much you wanting to get rid of her made our only child autistic?"

Usually, when Father got mean, Mother ran up to her room, but this time she stood her ground, though her voice quivered noticeably. "That's not what Dr. Sand said!"

Father made a sound that was more like a bark than a laugh. "Oh, what's the difference? Doesn't matter a hell of a lot when everyone can see she's a freak. Spinning like a maniac her first day of Sunday school just because some kid made a dumb crack about the crucifix. Kids are like animals. They know. No wonder none of them would go near her after that."

"Don't!" Mother stepped back as if she'd been hit. "That's not fair! It was an awful thing for that boy to say. Dr. Sand isn't convinced she's even on the spectrum. You can't shove her into some category just because you don't know what to do with her." I watched her face turn a particular shade of pig-pink. "Besides," she added breathlessly, "if someone's getting punished,

maybe it's the senator who had to marry the child he took out for a burger and a good screw after a pro-life rally."

Transfixed, I watched spit fly out of Father's mouth as he shouted, "Child? Hardly! But you're right about one thing. You may stink as a wife, but you were a hell of a good screw. As for the kid, maybe you're right about that, too. Maybe she's just a born space cadet. Or maybe it all comes down to maternal neglect. Maybe if you hadn't been at the bottle all these years, she'd be cured by now."

Just then, Sister Flatulencia had rushed into the room and was steering me out of it and down the stairs toward the kitchen, one hand on my shoulder and the other frantically fingering her rosary beads. I had barely been able to follow my parents' argument—I had never heard the name *Autistic* before, and the part about screws was more than a little confusing—but I always felt sorry for Mother when Father blamed her for not wanting to have me. Why *would* she have wanted a child like me, who was always driving people away with her words and her whirling and flapping?

When Sister Flatulencia and I entered the kitchen, it was apparent we'd walked in on the beginning of a game of Hearts, the three-handed variety they occasionally had to resort to when they couldn't scramble up a fourth. Nana and Fayga and Cook each held a clumsy spread of seventeen cards, and a one-card kitty interrupted the pattern of the washable Stars and Stripes tablecloth covering the small kitchen table.

Sister Flatulencia answered their upturned questioning faces with a curt, "They're at it again," but that didn't stop me from loosening myself from her grip and approaching Nana, asking, "What's *autistic* mean?"

Nana snorted and replied with a dismissive, "Shhh, don't be silly," cuffing me on the ear with her handful of cards more forcefully than she probably intended. That was the odd thing about Nana. For a nanny with an addiction to a game called Hearts, she had all the gentleness of a Mack truck. Just like the angel in the Bible who wrestled with Jacob and made his thigh go out of joint before blessing him, one minute she was treating me like a side of beef, the next she'd be showering me with little chicken-peck kisses that sent waves of pleasurable goose bumps over my oddly shaped head.

As Nana's eyes veered back to her hand, Fayga chipped in with a nasal, "I can't believe he actually said that in front of the child," her wriggling worm of an upper lip stretched tight and wide, like it was getting fried to a crisp by the sun. I'd often reflected that it was too bad about her face, which was so nondescript that it looked dangerously like a void punctuated by the teensiest salvation of a wormy lip.

Cook chimed in predictably, "I can't believe it either," looking around the table as if she'd actually contributed something. Cook was a weakling when it came to having her own opinions. When Fayga was mean, Cook thought she had to be, too, which made me worry that perhaps Cook wasn't real at all, just a little trick of the void to personify itself. Sometimes I had to remind myself that Cook was really one of my angels, the only one in our house who could bake angel food cake, which is my favorite food. Luckily for me, she'd baked a nice round loaf the night before, so when she set down her cards and pushed up from the table, her round body sailing past me toward one of the long kitchen counters, I held my breath, and not just because I'd gotten a whiff of her hands and breath, which smelled eternally of garlic and onion.

Suddenly Fayga threw down her cards and flew out of her chair to the corner of the kitchen, stomping her Comfort Flex shoe on the floor several times. “Got you!” she cried. She hated roaches. Short of burning down the house, she did everything she could to kill them. Her mission in life was to keep dirt under control, which was pretty clever of her, because the earth is made of dirt, so her particular method of keeping the void at bay had a pretty good shelf life. But when she was overworked she tended to get mean and complain a lot, particularly about the washing she had to do for Father’s saved babies: dirty diapers, pukey crib sheets, soiled terry cloth infant sacks constructed with arms but no feet as if we were host to mutant Martian babies with only one set of limbs apiece—all of it purchased in lots of a hundred from Leland DuRay, an infant clothing wholesaler who was one of Father’s frequent contributors.

I tried to keep my eyes averted from the squished roach Fayga was scraping up from the floor as Cook motioned me to sit down at the table, setting my second dessert for the day in front of me. I was still licking my lips fifteen minutes later as I took the stairs two at a time up to my room to look up my new word.

I’d been using the dictionary and encyclopedia to battle boredom ever since teaching myself to read, my little bottom planted comfortably on a potty stool painted a pastel yellow that put my amber pee, stinking of vitamin drops and creamed asparagus, to shame. I created something of a household brouhaha back then by graduating so quickly from *Goodnight Moon* and *Green Eggs and Ham* to increasingly hefty dictionaries, Sister Flatulencia’s *World English Bible*, and an assortment of dog-eared *Vogue* and *Elle* magazines Mother kept in the pretty pink basket in the corner of her bedroom. As you might imagine, sounding out words at the age of four was a lot easier than comprehending their meanings, but a couple of phrases have stayed with me to this day, like “an honest answer is like a kiss on the lips” (*Proverbs 24:26*) and “pearlescent pink and robin’s egg blue are all the rage for spring” (*Vogue Magazine*).

Autistic sounded a teensy bit like me, but mostly it didn’t. It wasn’t that I hadn’t been called names before. Sweetie Pie was one. I stopped liking it after dreaming of lying curled into a ball on a giant pie tin at the center of our massive, burlwood dining table—shined up so often by Fayga that every piece of food I ever ate there smelled like Ye Olde English Furniture Paste. On one side of me sat a slightly burnt apple pie with sickly-green crescent moons decorating the top and on the other a lemon meringue, one of my favorites ever since I discovered I could make Jillily sneeze if I put a dollop of meringue on the tip of her pink triangle of a nose. But here’s the worst part: everyone but Grandfather was salivating and aiming giant forks in my direction.

Fortunately my second name, Angel Face, didn’t disrupt my sleep. Since my potty stool was convertible, with a lid that could be flipped over to stand on, I could slide it across the marble floor to the flower-and-butterfly-painted sink that Nana never failed to remind me was much nicer than the plain white ones in the big, bare bathroom father built for the children he’d saved from the devil abortionists. Standing on tippy-toes, I’d spend hours staring at my angel face in the mirror, hoping I’d see wings start to sprout from the curved handles of my ears so I could fly out of the house and up to heaven.

I entered Father’s new name for me in my diary. I liked to keep lists of words I looked up, taking particular pleasure in words with more than one meaning. But the reference to the major characteristic of the name *Autistic*—poor eye contact—made me nervous. I scrambled off my bed and stood in front of my dresser mirror, staring straight into my watery blue eyes and counting out

a full sixty seconds without blinking, until I got distracted by the shape of my head, deciding it really was pretty pointy at the top.

Nana once told me that my bullet-shaped head is living evidence of my mother's distaste for anything too painful. She said that when it came time to push me out of her body, Mother gave one heave that allowed the tip of my head to squeeze through the swollen opening at her bottom, then decided it hurt too much and waited around until Father yelled bad words at her before reluctantly releasing me into the world. The other problem is that my bullet of a head is covered with funny-looking bumps and indentations. I saw them for the first time on the afternoon of my fifth birthday, when Nana said, "Oh, for heaven's sake, I'm not going to watch you scratch yourself like a monkey one minute longer," and drove me off to the doctor.

Only days before, I'd wandered over to the wing of our house Father had converted for the children he'd saved from the devil abortionists. Climbing into one of the new toddler's cots, I'd put my body right up next to hers so I could pretend we were Siamese twins. With her peach-fuzz cheeks and round blue eyes, she looked so much prettier than pale-eyebrowed, crooked-grinned, stringy-blond-haired me. Who knew she was going to infect me with a nasty case of ringworm and make me get my head shaved?

My rash prompted Father to permanently ban me from the saved babies' wing of the house, so I mostly struggled in secret with my insatiable curiosity about those other children. It wasn't as though I had a bunch of friends to distract me. Thanks to my banging and flapping, none of the local private schools were willing to accept me, and Mother wasn't exactly rushing to organize play dates.

I suppose I should give Nana credit for the bumps and indentations on my head. It probably took her flinging me into hundreds of hard landings onto my old rock of an infant changing table for me to realize I could actively give myself pain. Nana still cringes when she describes the first time she caught me squirming around my crib, rhythmically banging my head against its slats as if I were consciously aiming at slightly varying angles each time. I personally count it my earliest achievement, a terrific means of dispelling the void. Because as sure as my grandfather's balls could qualify for the Guinness record of the world's most gargantuan testicles, conquering the feeling of emptiness was the chief challenge of my young life. After all, Nana couldn't spend all her time slathering my little butt with Johnson and Johnson's. There were all those other butts, that revolving door of children my father kept rescuing.

But it wasn't just pain and reading and making lists that kept me going. Ever since turning four, I've had Jillily. As long as I can remember, Sister Flatulencia liked to call Jillily a tuxedo cat, which set the stage for some awful confusion when Fayga remarked offhandedly sometime after my sixth birthday that tuxedos were how Father dressed when he went off to rake in the dough. On the next Saturday that Father stayed out late, I tried to keep myself awake as best I could, pinching and banging until he got in, so I could sneak into his bedroom when he was showering and try to find his cat suit and where he kept his dough. I didn't find either one, not even a streak of flour on his wide-lapelled jacket, although I detected some unfamiliar perfume mixed in with the sharp jolt of bitterness in the jacket's armpits.

I vowed to try again, so the next time Father didn't come home for dinner, I kept myself awake by busily pinching my belly fat in a room that was pitch dark except for a little circle of light around my nightlight in the shape of a duck with a chip at the edge of its bill. My belly started

hurting so badly that I opened my eyes and saw the silhouette of my mother at my doorway. She was craning her head in my direction, as if she couldn't quite see me, and she was holding her arms with her hands, as if she had to hold herself in one piece, and she was crying softly, just like Jillily after Cook shut the kitchen door on her paw. My room started smelling like the rubbing alcohol Nana dabbed on my knee whenever I fell, and I found myself hating Father, though I couldn't have explained why.

Under normal circumstances, when there was something confusing going on that I was trying to figure out, I felt good, because it filled up the you-know-what. But when my mother slipped away and took with her that disturbing smell, I had to pinch my tummy a lot harder to keep myself out of a pitch-black pit.

Nana yelled at me the next morning, "What's your doctor going to say when you go for your tests this afternoon?" I asked her why I had to go to so many doctors, anyway, if I wasn't even sick, but she turned away and muttered under her breath, "I have to see to the babies," and left the room without answering.

Needless to say, none of this resolved my confusion about Father's pits and the mysterious perfume he used to bring home with him instead of dough. The fact was, except on his late nights, Father had no smell to him at all. Which should have been a clue right there. Most people have the common courtesy to give off a little whiff of something to help other folks with their voids.

Nana, for instance, was pretty generous in that department, walking around the house with the perpetual stink of baby puke on her left shoulder and the faint perfume of Johnson's Baby Oil on her hands, and underneath them both, a hint of strong dirt somewhere under her skirt, like a body that lived mostly in caves, without much air circulating around. Every once in awhile, all of those smells, the puke, the oil, the cave dirt, were overtaken by the sharp punch of chocolate, which was Nana's favorite food. She liked every kind of it—from bittersweet to creamy white. One time, I heard her whisper to Fayga and Cook that chocolate was better than sex, and they all giggled, but then Fayga slapped my arm for listening, and Cook got all flush-faced and nervous and sent me out of the kitchen, and I had to bang my head against the Laura Ashley floral wallpaper on my bedroom wall a couple of times to make myself feel better.

Of course, the most aromatic member of our household was Sister Flatulencia, who, by the way, was never called that name to her face. Nana made it clear to me early on that she was to be addressed simply as Sister. For all I knew, Sister Flatulencia had never been given a proper name at all, but she was anything but anonymous. She was the tallest person in our household, taller even than Father, and though most of the time she kept her hair wrapped inside a royal blue bandana, she couldn't seem to fasten the scarf tightly enough to stop little grizzled curls from peeking out of it. She might have looked a little prettier if, besides her bandana, she didn't dress exactly like a man, with a white shirt tucked so tightly into her tailored black trousers that even her meager little breasts didn't show. As it is, with no makeup on her face, she looked just like a very tall man playing at being a woman by sticking a bandana on his head.

Speaking of whiffs, when I tried to ask Sister Flatulencia why I had to go for so many tests, she just passed some of her famous fruity wind and batted her eyelashes over her flying saucer eyes and kept muttering her name for me over and over again, "You Poor Child, You Poor Child, You Poor Child." I didn't particularly like that name, either; it made my tummy feel like those balloons they tie up at the county fair to look like animals, but they never do. What kind of animal

had no eyes, or nose, or even a mouth? An animal without a mouth would die in a couple of days from starvation. I shuddered to think of it, imagining what it would be like to float in the void with that bored-as-hell God, who wouldn't even let you get born so you could do things like give yourself pain to save yourself.

Not that Sister Flatulencia would have seen it that way. Before she became Mother's companion she was a nun, or at least she had been until she had a nervous breakdown. Nana told me that the nervous breakdown came from taking care of all those babies my father saved and feeling bad that she never had one of her own. I guess that's why Nana could do it, since she had her very own baby, even though he died serving his country. One time I tried asking her, "Was your son a waiter or a cook like Cook, and how do you serve a whole country? It sounds like such a lot of work to do. Did he die of working too hard to make his whole country fat and happy?"

But Nana just said, "Shhh," and got up and acted like she had a lot of things to do, even though she'd seemed quite content the minute before to sink with me into the softest of our chintz sofas to watch re-runs of *I Dream of Jeannie*.

I used to wonder why they don't let nuns have babies. Maybe it was because nuns are married to Jesus. This is how my thinking went:

1. Father says that Jesus is God, so maybe God needs nuns to send every single bit of their love His way because it helps fill His void.
2. God is pretty big, so it figures He has a bigger void than any of us to fill.
3. Come to think of it, a country's pretty big, too, so it makes sense that a son who's trying to serve it could end up dying from over-work.
4. Maybe Sister Flatulencia's nervous breakdown saved *her* from dying of over-work.

Sometimes I passed the time by wondering, what is a nervous breakdown, anyway? Is it a constant state of gas? That is what Sister Flatulencia had, which worked to our advantage when it came to sitting by ourselves in the middle of the Majestic, with lots of space between us and little groups of teenagers making disgusting slurp sounds to force the Coke up their straws from the bottoms of their paper cups. Myself, I didn't really mind Sister Flatulencia's farts. They were much sweeter than a lot of people's smells, definitely sweeter than Father's pits and Nana's pukey shoulder and Mother's medicine odor whenever she stood in my doorway. I'd take them any day over Jillily's vomit, when she ate grass and it came out the same shape as it went in, but surrounded by stinky brownish goop, murky tide pools all over the carpet. Sweeter, too, than the sickly pee smell of Grandfather when his balls started to swell from congestive heart failure.

And just so you know, I haven't said much about Grandfather so far, but not because he wasn't important. On the contrary, he was my favorite person in the whole world.

I used to find it confusing that the name Grandfather could belong to more than one person in a family. Nana used to call my two grandfathers Grandfather Phillips and Grandfather Robins, which was pretty strange, because it was Grandfather *Phillips* who used to watch the birds with me. Grandfather Robins didn't watch anything but his pennies; at least that's what Cook used to say. Come to think of it, I'm not sure anyone had to tell Cook about that, so maybe she wasn't so opinionless after all.

Nana said that Cook didn't like anyone who pinched pennies because it took a lot of money to buy the freshest meats and vegetables. That comment of hers was extremely helpful in the void-management department. I used to spend hours trying to imagine how you could pinch a penny. Belly fat, yes. The little bit of flesh hanging from the underside of your arm, easy. Really, anything that has a little plumpness to it is pretty pinchable. Not Jillily, though. I learned that the hard way. Before I learned that not everybody likes pain the way I do, I made Jillily cry.

I tried to tell myself that it would never have happened if she hadn't gotten taken to the vet to get fixed. Personally, I had no idea why she had to get fixed. I never noticed anything about Jillily that looked broken. To me, she was perfect in every way. But in the weeks after coming back from the vet, she walked funny, her white furry belly all loose and hangy and swaying from side to side. I figured anything that pouchy-looking was fair game for a pinch, so one day, when I came into my bedroom and she was lying on her back on a little patch of sun on the carpet the way she likes to do, with her legs spread open and her paws flapped up in the air, I felt the itching for a pinch come over me, the way it can. Everybody laughed at Jillily when she struck that particular pose of hers. Fayga would call her Charlotte the Harlot, but then Sister Flatulencia would make a mean squint of her flying saucer eyes and Nana would say, "Hush!"

Anyway, there was Jillily, my favorite person in the whole world besides my grandfather, even though Nana has always insisted that Jillily isn't really a person. Sometimes Nana's mind is just a little limited, if you know what I mean. But Nana wasn't there when I reached down and gave that empty-looking belly a nice, squeezey pinch. In one quick second, the world went black as the blankest void. Jillily yowled and gave me a look like I'd sold her to the devil abortionists, then she ran away from me and squatted under my four-poster, with her body clenched up all tight and the muscles in her back twitching like she was being bitten by fleas. I flattened myself like a crocodile to slither under the bed and coax her back out, and I had to give her a thousand chicken-peck kisses all over her back and ears and belly before she let her motor whirr again, and when she finally let me kiss her little pink triangle of a nose, I could see the wet gook in the corners of her yellow eyes and I knew that I'd made Jillily cry.

That was my first time realizing there are some things worse than boredom. My whole body felt like something ugly and stinky and I kept wishing that my skin was a pair of pajamas I could just take off and fling into Fayga's dirty clothes bin, along with all those Martian infant sacks. A part of me wanted to bite off my ugly, stinking fingers, but Jillily's whirring told me she needed me to keep patting her, so I kept my fingers out of my mouth and stroked Jillily with them, instead.

That afternoon, I told Grandfather what I'd done. We were sitting together facing the big lead-paned front window of Grandfather's bedroom, Grandfather in his recliner and me in my giant-sized, cushiony rocking chair that I'd inherited from my mother. We were watching our tree like we always did, and I kept opening my mouth to say what was on my mind and then closing it again. It was only after the last mockingbird had flown away and the branches looked as desolate as a motherless baby that I finally turned to Grandfather and told him. For a long time, he looked at me, his eyes brimming over with kindness, and then he stretched out his big, twisty hand and put it over my evil, Jillily-pinching one and he made his sounds.

Nana said that the sounds Grandfather made sounded like "ugga umph uggga," but what if they did? Grandfather's infirmity didn't stop Nana from inviting him up to her bedroom at the end of the day if she needed him to make a foursome. If you're not a cards player you might not know

that it takes four people to play a proper game of Hearts. Grandfather wasn't so good at Hearts. He hardly ever won.

But when Grandfather put his Hearts-losing hand on mine and looked so tenderly into my eyes, my hatred at myself for making Jillily cry flowed right out of me. After a while, Grandfather let go of my hand, and we both turned back to watch our tree. A pair of sparrows was hopping from branch to branch in a complicated zigzag pattern. They like to keep busy to fend off the void. I snuck a quick look at Grandfather. The edges of his lips were turned up in a peaceful grin.

I suppose I should explain about Grandfather's inability to make language. Nana said that Grandfather had suffered a stroke. I already knew that stroke is one of those double-meaning words, so I asked her. "Did somebody pat Grandfather the wrong way, like somebody rubbing Jillily's fur from her backside to her head instead of the right way around? Or did he go swimming one day and do the butterfly stroke so fast that his words dissolved like butterfly wings in the swimming pool?"

But she just laughed and said, "No, Angel Face, nothing so fancy. A stroke is just an infirmity—a sickness like a bad cold, only it doesn't go away." She added, "It's a good thing his stroke didn't affect anything but his ability to make words." I knew from personal experience she was right. He could read just fine. If anything, he understood way more than most. But he couldn't write anymore, let alone speak comprehensibly.

Grandfather didn't seem to mind that he couldn't talk like the rest of us. It didn't stop him from taking his bulldog-headed cane for a slow walk around the grounds every day, it didn't stop him from poring over the pile of newspapers beside his place-setting at our Ye Old English Furniture Paste-smelling dining room table each morning, and it didn't stop him from sitting by my side in his room, stroking my hair and sneaking me red jelly candies and listening to me copying all the bird calls as we watched our tree.

Grandfather and I had a lot in common. We both knew what it was like to not be understood. I could say words better than Grandfather, but that didn't guarantee that people wouldn't look at me as if I'd just said "ugga umph ugga" when I talked to them.

Grandfather and I both liked to watch birds. Birds have a couple of very good ways of dealing with the void—they can fly and they can sing. They also provided Jillily with an antidote to boredom. When birds flew past the window, she made deep noises in her throat that sounded friendly, but they weren't, they were about wanting to kill, which made me have second thoughts about Jillily until I remembered how much I liked to tear hunks of chicken off the bone with my teeth and forgave her.

Speaking of eating, another thing that Grandfather and I had in common was a taste for red jelly candies, which were hard and shiny and sweet. The only trouble was, when I went to brush my teeth at night, if I'd sucked a red jelly candy that day my tongue would still be bright red at bedtime. No amount of brushing would make the redness go away. When I get an idea into my head, it's not so easy to get rid of. Plus, there's something about the nighttime that's just an invitation to the void, so once I got the idea into my head that red was the color of blood, I started to worry I was dying. After that, whenever Grandfather would slip me a piece of red jelly candy, I'd pretend to put it in my mouth, but really I'd stick it in my pocket. But then I worried I might be saving myself, but what about Grandfather? What if those candies had given him his stroke?

That was when I decided to sneak into Grandfather's bedroom while he was taking one of his walks and steal his candies from him. I found the drawer where he kept his crinkly plastic bags of red jelly candies. Right next to them, though, was something even more interesting: a photograph of my mother when she was a teenager and marrying Father, who wasn't a teenager at all. I could tell that Mother was getting married because of what she wore. I thought she looked very pretty, her long white dress bulging at her middle as if she'd eaten a couple of Cook's biggest angel food cakes.

I knew Grandfather still had an hour to go before he'd finish circling the grounds, so I settled into my mother's rocking chair and studied the photo. There was a much younger version of my grandfather peeking into it from the uppermost left corner. The top of Grandfather's head was chopped off by the white border, but he didn't seem to mind; he was smiling a big fat smile at his only daughter. My father was there, too, tall and skinny, with his hair pale yellow and fluffy, like one of Fayga's mops. I almost laughed, but when I noticed the way my father was looking down at my mother in the photo, goose bumps started marching up and down my arms. Father had the same exact look in his eyes as a dog I'd encountered in front of the doctor's office when I was little, all sharp-tooth lunging at me with a volcano growl coming out of his throat and Nana yelling, "Hey, buddy, that dog needs to be put down!" before wrapping her thick arms around my body and chicken-peck-kissing me.

That photo took my bad feeling about my father from the Saturday night I'd heard Mother cry and turned it into a rock in the middle of my chest. I just couldn't understand why my beautiful young girl of a mother in her white dress wasn't running from my father as fast as her feet could take her. And, worse still, why my grandfather was smiling. Shouldn't he have been shielding Mother with his body, yelling, "That man needs to be put down?"

I realize this doesn't begin to explain about the bird on the lawn and my grandfather's balls, but I hope I've given you enough of a preview of coming attractions to help keep your void at bay. As for me, I'm afraid I've worked myself up a little. But don't worry—give me a moment to recover, maybe a pinch or two, and, as Nana likes to put it, "Bob's your uncle, I'll be as right as rain."

-End of Excerpt-

Publisher's Note

The History of My Body is the first novel in The Fleur Trilogy, by Sharon Heath:

[*The History of My Body*](#), The Fleur Trilogy Book 1

[*Tizita*](#), The Fleur Trilogy Book 2

[*Return of the Butterfly*](#), The Fleur Trilogy Book 3

Turn the page for an excerpt from *Tizita*, the second book in The Fleur Trilogy.

Chapter 1 from *Tizita*
The Fleur Trilogy, Book 2

by

Sharon Heath

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Tizita (pronounced tizz-i-tah): an Amharic word for the interplay of memory, loss and longing, sometimes conveyed in an Ethiopian or Eritrean style of music or song of the same name.

*The tears of the world are a constant quantity.
For each one who begins to weep, somewhere else another stops.
(Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*)*

*Until the day breaks
and the shadows flee,
turn, my beloved,
and be like a gazelle
or like a young stag
on the rugged hills.*

(Song of Songs 2:17)



Chapter One: Fleur

NOTHING LASTS FOREVER. I hate to say it, but someday our dependable sun will kiss goodbye its penchant for fiery display to become first a red giant and then a white dwarf, finally shrinking into a cold clump of carbon floating through the ether. Even black holes evaporate, though a really big one can take a trillion years to die. Here on planet earth, where an organ roughly the size and shape of a clenched fist serves as gatekeeper between life and death, species as diverse as white-cheeked gibbons and black-footed ferrets manage about a billion and a half heartbeats in a lifetime. We humans do only slightly better, the healthiest of habits winning us no more than three billion beats before we succumb to the void once and for all.

Which is only one of the reasons I was having trouble with the *foie gras*. It was Adam's girlfriend, the enviably beautiful Stephanie Seidenfeld, who first introduced me to the dish not long after Adam had transformed from being my childhood tutor to, well, so many other things. I'd been sitting across from Stephanie and Adam in a red-leather booth at a bustling restaurant not too far from Caltech, nervously prattling on about my Reed Middle School classmates, who seemed to despise me for everything from my sorry social skills to my alacrity at algebraic equations and my ever-burgeoning breasts. Our waiter, who asked for our orders with one of those fake grins I associated with Little Red Riding Hood's pretend-granny, interrupted my litany of grievances. Eager to get that toothsome smile away from our table, I leapt in with a request for my standard Angel Hair Diavolo. Stephanie ordered the goose liver pâté and a small dinner salad, and Adam hemmed and hawed until Phony Granny began to show his true colors, snappishly demanding, "It's a busy night, man. Do you need another minute?"

Adam forestalled his departure with a hasty, "No, wait. I'll have the Pizza Vegetariana." I gave myself over to pure hatred toward the waiter for making Adam turn crimson with embarrassment.

Once our food arrived, I couldn't help but notice the zeal with which Stephanie dispatched her glutinous loaf, pausing a few times to dot her coral lips with her napkin while the busboy refilled our water glasses. It was only when Adam described the force-feeding of the goose killed for her pleasure that I emptied the contents of my stomach onto the white tablecloth. Not exactly what Mother would call *comme il faut*, but I suppose I might be excused, being at the time only a green girl—alas, in more ways than one—of thirteen.

Now, here I was—eight years, six months, two hours, and fifteen minutes later and twenty miles west of that Pasadena pizzeria—merely a shade less green than I'd been then and faced with the same abominable dish, this time presented with considerably more panache at a onetime drug rehabilitation center turned pricey hotel and restaurant, just a stone's throw from the Santa Monica beach pier. The occasion: an intimate celebration of my turning twenty-one on a birthday shared with Josef Stalin, Jane Fonda, Benjamin Disraeli, and Frank Zappa. And if the astrologers out there would care to explain what we five have in common, I'm listening.

My dinner companions this time were my best friend for nearly ever Sammie, her boyfriend Jacob, and my fiancé Assefa. Assefa was due to set off for Ethiopia the following day in search of

his father, who'd gone missing with his childhood friend and co-researcher Zalelew Mekonin, presumably somewhere on the dusty road between Gondar and Aksum. Under the circumstances, none of us felt much like celebrating, but Assefa—nothing if not a respecter of ritual—had insisted that we had to mark my coming of age. Knowing how much anxiety he was pushing aside on my behalf, how could I say no?

The Casa del Mar's dining room was fragrant with the scent of fresh pine. We were four days away from Christmas, and the staff had gone all-out, decorating the imposing fir tree in the corner with so many colored lights and shiny ornaments that I couldn't help but secretly pinch my thigh every time I thought of the homeless veterans and sunburnt psychotics I knew were encamped on the beach only a few blocks away. There'd been a time when I hadn't understood why ample spaces like my father's old Main Line Philadelphia estate couldn't be made to accommodate those without homes of their own, but that was before I'd discovered the sacred status assigned to private property. The things people did to fend off the void were quite irrational and never failed to amaze me.

Assefa's words were slightly slurred, his capacity to hold his liquor in some kind of inverse ratio to his years spent in a tiny village near Gondar. He might have been raised by a couple of lapsed Christians, but he'd absorbed the ethos of his predominately Muslim community and was generally sparing in his alcohol consumption. Over the past several months I'd been suffused with gratitude more than a few times that he'd been brought to America before succumbing to the temptation to belong to the local majority, the price of admission a mere utterance of the words, "There is no god apart from God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God."

In that respect, Muslims had a lot in common with my deceased Father, whose insistence that there was no god apart from God, with Jesus as his son, seemed to ignore the fact that heaven has been rather overpopulated with gods and goddesses ever since primates began walking upright. It wasn't exactly out of character that Father hadn't even begun to consider that the Egyptian baboon-headed god Thoth, the Bushman dreaming-god Mantis, the many-armed Hindu goddess of destruction Kali, or even Jesus himself, for that matter, might actually feel less passionately one-sided about abortion than he and his Cackler followers.

But Father's crusade against abortion, let alone his attempts to discredit my own small efforts to advance our knowledge of the physical world, was far from my mind as Assefa urged me on, quite unfairly I thought, with a breathtaking batting of his thick lashes, "Tayshte ... taste it. Look at *our* dishes." He gestured toward his own empty plate, which looked as if it had been licked clean. "You've got to at least try. It'll be an insult to Antoine if you don't."

Sammie, the traitor, joined in. Predictably, her original British accent was back in full swing after just one glass of Deutz Brut. She waved an expansive hand, the olive cheeks she'd inherited from her Jewish father and Indian mother glowing a rich burnt sienna. "C'mon, Fleur Beurre, Assefa's right. How's Antoine going to be motivated to keep delivering more goodies if we send your *foie gras* back untouched? You can do this, girl." She licked her lips in search of any last little bits. "Your heart'll forgive the cholesterol just this once. Antoine's *foie gras* is brilliant."

Silently cursing Antoine, I managed a weak grin.

Antoine was the reason we were dining at the Casa del Mar in the first place. Assefa's next-door neighbor in their side-by-side duplex in Carthay Circle, he'd recently graduated from L.A.'s campus of Le Cordon Bleu with an offer of a job as sous-chef at the Casa. He'd promised Assefa

he'd sneak us an assortment of yummy freebies for my coming of age party, and the *pâté* was evidently the first on his list.

I'd met Assefa himself only six months before and had been bedazzled by him from the start. We were an odd, but complementary match—he a brilliant intern with an interest in cardiology and a background in literature as sophisticated as Sammie's; me a whiz at physics, list-making, and cat quirks, and pretty hopeless at everything else.

Despite the fact that Assefa was living at that time with his parents, a mere half mile away from Caltech, we didn't cross paths until his mother Abeba came to work for my own overcommitted mother, babysitting and tutoring the orphaned Cesar Jesus de Maria Santo Domingo Marisco after the tragic death of my old nanny, who'd adopted the child when he was barely out of diapers. Mother taking on Cesar was just one instance of God's taste for irony. When I was little, my mother hadn't been able to get away fast enough from the unwanted children my father kept saving from the devil abortionists, yet here she was, on a fast jog toward forty, landed with full custodianship of one of them.

Mother had found Abeba through an employment referral list offered by Caltech. As she put it at the time, "I have to assume that anyone who advertises her services to professors at the top science university in the country has to have more on the ball than your average undereducated nanny." Looking forward with some curiosity to meeting a woman who could balance anything on a ball beyond a matchstick or a piece of lint, I felt an immediate affinity with Abeba when we were introduced, she warmly clasping my outreached hand in hers, which were surprisingly small and sealskin smooth.

In a voice like wind chimes, she'd effused, "Ah, Fleur, I've been so eager to meet you. We two share a kinship in name, you know. I am a flower in Amharic; you are a flower in French." As I saw myself bursting forth with petals somewhere in the French countryside, Abeba beckoned me toward Mother's capacious kitchen. Pouring me a cup of the best coffee I'd ever tasted, she went on to share the name of her husband Achamyalesh, which she informed me translated as *You Are Everything*, as well as that of their only son Assefa, whose name, she told me, meant *He Has Increased Our Family By Coming Into the World*. You certainly couldn't accuse the Ethiopians of minimalism.

Abeba's eyes positively glowed when she spoke of Achamyalesh. I learned soon enough that, like intelligent women the world over whose access to advanced education has been culturally constrained, she took particular pride in her husband's achievements. She seemed oblivious to her own well-developed attributes, particularly her generosity and what Mother liked to call her "pull-out-all-the-stops enthusiasm."

While I'd never regretted moving away from Mother's New York penthouse to the far humbler Pasadena cottage of my physics mentor Stanley H. Fiske and his sister Gwen halfway between my twelfth and thirteenth birthdays, I'd been touched when Mother had elected to forgo the joys of MoMA, the Met, and Mile End Deli to pack up the massive contents of her apartment and the remains of Father's estate to move to nearby San Marino to comfort me after my Nobel debacle.

Mother being Mother, always depending on one kind of group or another, it hadn't been surprising that she'd brought with her to SoCal the retinue of angels with whom I'd grown up in

Father's Main Line mansion—Nana, Sister Flatulencia, Fayga, Dhani, Ignacio, as well as a decidedly seraphic No-Longer-a-Baby-Angelina and the rather devilish young Cesar.

And me being me, it had been pretty predictable that I'd found a way to continue to sleep at the Fiskes' once she arrived. The fact that Mother took it in good stride—filling her void with her Bill W. friends and her studies to become a librarian—wasn't all that surprising. Neither one of us was in the habit of much mother-daughter intimacy. I'd bet money on her feeling a bit relieved when I made my excuse that Caltech was more convenient to the Fiskes' bungalow than to her 12,000 square-foot Tudor-style home, just a hop and a skip from the Huntington Gardens. What I didn't tell her was that her new digs bore more than a passing resemblance to Father's sweeping Main Line grounds, and it would take more than a few angels to make it tolerable to live somewhere like that again.

But once she'd introduced me to Abeba, I found myself detouring almost every afternoon to Mother's on my way home from Caltech. Dispatching a noisily reluctant Cesar to his room to do his homework, Abeba would proceed to ply me with Ethiopian versions of after-school treats, regaling me all the while with stories about the remarkable Achamyalesh. Those visits were a godsend, especially on the days when my team and I had butted our heads for hours against some unyielding mathematical problem. Shoveling in handfuls of *dabo kolo*, crunchy nuggets of spice heaven that I learned to wash down with little sips of *bunna*—Ethiopia's far superior antecedent to Starbucks' finest—I couldn't help but grow *curiouser* and *curiouser* about Abeba's other half.

Who wouldn't want to meet someone named *You Are Everything*? Especially when said all-inclusive soul was an African anthropologist who, according to his wife, avidly kept up his research despite being reduced to driving a cab in the U.S.? My curiosity was rewarded soon enough, heralded on one of those typical SoCal June-gloom days that left you despairing that summer would ever come. I was mounting the Malibu-tiled steps leading up to Mother's front porch, appreciating their vibrant design as only someone who'd never lived in the house could, when Abeba dramatically flung open the front door. She clasped my elbow and excitedly tugged me so impatiently into Mother's vaulted-ceilinged living room that I almost tripped on the Persian rug in the foyer. "Oh, Fleur, it is such good news I have. The Anthropology Dean at Pasadena City College has read Achamyalesh's VITA. She is going to give him a chance in their evening public lecture series." Abeba's mood was contagious. I skipped after her into the kitchen, where she automatically reached for a pot and poured me a cup of *bunna*, nearly spilling it in her enthusiasm. "He will be speaking in just two weeks on the work he has been doing on the cultural folklore surrounding the Ark of the Covenant."

Thanks to Adam's thoroughness as a tutor, I already knew about the Ethiopian Orthodox Church's claims that the cask containing God's covenant with the Jewish people had been in their possession near the Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion at Aksum ever since the Ethiopian Menelik, son of the Queen of Sheba and the Biblical Solomon, brought the Ark back home after a visit to his wise father.

I tended to greet stories of wise fathers with a certain skepticism. Personally, I'd never met one. As for the Ark itself, I'd been fascinated by its storied contents ever since I'd learned that, according to Biblical historians, the Ten Commandments were preceded by another set of ten precepts called the Ritual Decalogue, which included such pithy prescriptions for a righteous life as "Do not cook a young goat in its mother's milk."

The controversy surrounding the whereabouts of the Ark spoke to who owned the truth, who owned a special connection with God. But I hadn't yet met a soul who actually lived by God's Commandments. Oh sure, I didn't know many murderers. (None, to be honest.) But even the smaller taboo against coveting seemed to put our species on the spot. I couldn't possibly enumerate all the physics colleagues I'd met who'd told me they envied my brilliance (read Nobel). And every time Apple released a new iPhone, the amount of coveting that went on would certainly have driven Moses to despair.

I set Mother's zebra-festooned, Hermes "Africa" espresso cup onto its saucer and asked excitedly, "Oh, Abeba, do you think Achamyalesh would mind if I attended his talk?" Little did I know I'd played right into her hands. I learned later that it was Abeba who'd persuaded Assefa to accompany his father to the lecture. The rest, as they say, was history.

Fast-forward six months, five days, and six hours and twenty-nine minutes. A champagne glass in one hand and my own pale paw in the other, Assefa nodded encouragingly toward the twin meaty mounds on my plate. But it was no use. Every time I looked down at those liverwurstian circles, I saw a doleful set of goose eyes staring back at me. Feeling myself slide toward the pit of everlasting nothingness, I had to pinch the palm Assefa wasn't holding to control the impulse to flap.

Assefa realized he was pushing me too far. "Okay, but only for you would I do this." Throwing me a conspiratorial look, he leaned in toward the center of the table and, skewing his elbow forward at an awkward angle, "accidentally" spilled his glass of Deutz into my plate while simultaneously crying out, "Oh, what a clumsy sod I am." His eyes twinkling, he pulled me toward him, his sharp collarbone pushing comfortingly against my temple. When distressed, I am always a sucker for a little pain.

A waiter appeared out of nowhere to expertly whisk away the sodden dish and rearrange the silver. I craned my neck to look up at Assefa's copper-colored face. I still hadn't gotten over my good fortune in finding a man whose heart was pure, but whose high forehead, leonine cheekbones, cushiony lips, and chin-sweeping goatee lit a host of impure flares across my belly. My only other sexual partner had been dark-skinned, too, but with Hector Hernandez it had been one brief moment of unexpected (and unwanted) penetration, subsidized by cheap beer, naiveté, and the synchronicity of multiple "Linda palomas" whispered in my ear just after I'd washed my hands with Dove soap. Carl Jung and Wolfgang Pauli would probably have turned over in their graves to learn that their notion of a-causal but meaningfully connected events (aka synchronicity) would play a role in a thirteen-year-old girl losing her virginity. But with Assefa, it was what Stanley H. Fiske liked to call "the real deal" and what Adam rather wistfully (and, as it happens, inaccurately) pronounced as "first love."

Not that concupiscence hadn't made its contribution to the mix. Just that morning, the fact of my birthday a poor competitor to the dread stirred by his father's disappearance two weeks earlier, Assefa had momentarily roused himself from his funk, convincing me to pose naked with him, hip to hip, in front of his full-length bathroom mirror. "Come, *dukula*," he'd whispered, his tongue a serpent in my ear, "let us look at one another." I hadn't needed much persuading. I liked to see the two of us together as much as he did. The contrast never failed to stir my tweeter.

I'm not a short woman, my father having bested six feet by several inches, and Assefa wasn't exactly the tallest man, so our noses were at about the same level. But the resemblance ended right

there. Everything about me shouted, *American girl!* My nose was just a bit upturned, my blue eyes studded with silvery gray flecks, my eyebrows a mere shade or two darker than the sun-bleached hair concealing my slightly pointy-shaped head—a leftover of my entrance into the world from a teenaged mother’s clenching tweeter. I’d been profoundly relieved a few years back when my thighs finally flared out to balance the bulbousness of my breasts, and I was extra glad of them these days, given Assefa’s penchant for grasping my hips like guiderails as he drove deeper and deeper into my dark mystery, crying, “*Awon, awon!*”

“Yes, yes!” I’d moan back, trying not to pinch his skinny butt too hard as a mini-explosion sent waves of pleasure from my tweeter across every inch of my body. Assefa was as lean as a Watta hunter, his face hauntingly narrow, his hair a fine pattern of springy coils.

In the mirror, I watched my hands cup his purplish-brown balls, his member rising to a breathtaking angle. For a brief moment, I thought I saw a coffee-colored woman with wild black curls staring back at me—*who was that?*—but when I closed my eyes and reopened them the apparition was gone. I attended to the matter at hand. Assefa and I were compelled to have a nice long go at each other, with me seated on the edge of the bathroom counter, watching his glorious backside contract rhythmically in the mirror. But this time, something unusual happened. I felt a fullness inside me as Assefa came. “Oh, no!” I cried, as I heard him shout with unencumbered pleasure.

The condom had clearly not been up to its job. I felt a slow trickle of semen down my inner thigh. To my embarrassment, I began to cry until Assefa whispered, “Don’t worry, *dukula*. Didn’t you just finish your period last week? It will be all right.” I tended to be lazy about keeping track and wasn’t so sure he was accurate about the timing, but my worry faded as he held me even tighter. I’ve always been a sucker for a strong grip. He began to lick the tears off my cheek like a mother cat, though his tongue was much softer than Jillily’s. It broke the spell. I giggled, and he laughed with me.

It had been almost physically painful to unglue ourselves and get dressed, he to pick up some last minute supplies for his trip, me to take off for Caltech. The burst condom didn’t give me too much disquiet. I’d learned ages ago to shove unwanted thoughts into a seeming endless number of spare cupboards in my mind.

Actually it was precisely because of my lifelong familiarity with emptiness that I was particularly looking forward to discussing with my team certain implications of the Eridanus supervoid in an area of the universe devoid of galaxies. The void was huge: nearly a billion light-years across. It had been pretty much confirmed that supervoids were empty of all matter, including dark matter, and a few of my more imaginative colleagues were even conjecturing that Eridanus was a gateway to a parallel universe. While that sounded pretty sci-fi, serious theories of parallel universes were emerging from research into the phenomenon of quantum entanglement, famously described by Albert Einstein as “spooky action at a distance.”

I was never one to dismiss seemingly outrageous ideas out of hand; if I were, I would never have gotten this far. The phenomenal world was a tantalizing gem whose facets outleapt anything the mind might conceive. Quantum entanglement was just such a phenomenon. On a quantum level, once objects have interacted with each other or come into being in a similar way, they become linked or entangled. The fact that particles of energy and matter could interact with each other and retain a predictable connection in balancing pairs despite considerable distance between

them had fascinated me ever since Adam had first described it, both of us wolfing down Krispy Kremes in a combination of excitement and awe.

I'd been haunted by the void as a child. Not the common, garden variety childhood terror of disappearing down the bathtub drain, but a lurking pit of eternal emptiness that threatened me long before I taught myself to read Sister Flatulencia's *World English Bible* and Mother's *Elle* magazines when I was nearly four. It was only when Adam introduced me to Nobel physicist Stanley H. Fiske that I found a way to put that preoccupation to good use, ultimately coming up with the discovery of dark matter within all living organisms in the form of cellular black holes (I called them C-Voids), along with the potential to harness the exchange of light and dark matter to move people around with a zero carbon footprint via the Principle of Dematerialization. Those two discoveries, emerging during a feverishly insomniac contemplation of the heartache of abortion, the abominable human consumption of chimpanzees (euphemistically called "bush meat"), the self-replication of fractals, and the suspended jewels of the Hindu god Indra's web, each one of them mirroring every other jewel in the web, won me the Prize, but not even a pro-science president had been able to budge a Congress determined to outlaw any grant that would fund our application of P.D.

But now another angle on the topic was beckoning. Inspired by David Bohm's vision of entanglement as a guiding wave connecting individual interacting particles, Laura Mersini-Houghton had come up with her own model of entangled universes that was just begging to be verified. We toyed with becoming the ones to do it as we waited for my father's parting gift to me—what Gwennie Fiske called "the congressional dog and pony show to sabotage scientific progress"—to play itself out.

I'd tried out my thoughts about the Many Worlds Theory on Assefa the first time we met, explaining how one of the myriad debates in quantum physics concerns what happens to the unused possibilities when a choice is made to pursue one course of action over another. Many Worlds theorists contend that those other options actually play out in parallel worlds.

Assefa was fascinated with the idea, which proved to be a greater stimulant than the Brazilian blend I was drinking at the time. My rhapsodizing over science had been the ultimate repellent for every man Sammie had tried fixing me up with, to the point that I'd decided to forego blind dates forever. Poor Sammie had tried her hardest sell with the last one. "He looks fab, Fleur, you'll see—and super smart. Phi Beta Kappa, Law Review, the whole enchilada." She'd been at least partly right. Russell Glick had the look of a young George Clooney, but as we dined together at the fashionable Border Grill, he'd seemed more concerned about demonstrating how many Margaritas he could throw back and enumerating which T.V. shows he liked best than registering my increasing restlessness. When, finally, he seemed to recall that women tended to like it if you at least asked a few questions about them and I described to him the thrill of discovering C-Voids, he'd responded, "Yeah, but what do you do for fun?"

Delivering me to my doorstep, Russell had looked shocked that I'd averted my face as he aimed his lips at mine. I'd phoned Sammie as soon as his shiny black Mercedes sped away. "I appreciate you looking out for me, Sam, I really do, but if one more idiot tells me I need to lighten up, I'm going to spit ... or something worse." Sammie snorted, and in an instant we were giggling over how we'd repaired a major clash in our teens by shooting rice pudding out of our noses.

Russell Glick turned out to be the perfect opening act for Assefa, not that he needed one. Yacking away as we huddled together at the Coffee Club, I explained to *him* how black holes and voids had been a major part of my life since my earliest days as Mother's unwanted only child in a household full of eccentric women and cast-off children. Assefa's eyes stayed locked onto my face the whole time. One sure sign you're being listened to is that your companion actually asks relevant questions, though Assefa would have to have been more than a little crazy if he hadn't *needed* to ask questions after my meandering description of how the unpredictable variability of the Butterfly Effect had led an eleven-year-old girl to attempt to resurrect her beloved Grandfather by plumping his withering testicles with water, the failure of which had energized her then-alcoholic mother to finally wrest the two of them away from her abusive husband's Main Line estate.

"Which," I'd confessed, "was followed by my arrest for skinny dipping in someone's private New York garden, moving in with my physics mentor Stanley H. Fiske and his sister Gwennie here in Pasadena, and getting pregnant by a boy who had matching Jesus and Mary tattoos on the backs of his hands. My abortion was the last straw, as far as Father was concerned." Assefa winced, and I hastily appended, "I know, I know—it was horrifying. Even though I was just thirteen, I'll never be at peace with what I did." I felt my eyes moisten, but even the lump in my throat couldn't seem to stop my verbal Vesuvius. "I call her Baby X," I said, hastily brushing tears from my cheek. I daren't look Assefa in the eye or I'd simply implode, so I stared at his coffee cup, which had a slight nick in its Styrofoam rim in the shape of a probability distribution sign. "You'd think killing your child would ruin your life forever, but I'd tucked her into the hole in my heart, and not too long afterward I had my epiphany about C-Voids and the next thing I knew I got the call telling me I was being awarded the Nobel Prize. Really, it was a team effort. But now we're at a standstill on P.D.'s application, thanks to this lousy economy and too many members of Congress convinced my project has something to do with human cloning. Which it doesn't. You'd think they might believe me about it."

That one still irritated me. I was imperfect in more ways than I could possibly calculate, Baby X a case in point, but I wasn't a liar. At least not about anything so consequential. Contrary to the beliefs of the flat-earthers wanting to drive us back to the Stone Age, scientists generally tell the truth. The fact that I'd been the youngest scientist ever to receive a Nobel Prize seemed to be as irrelevant to certain members of Congress as had the jailed Aung San Suu Kyi's Nobel Peace Prize to the Burmese government while she still languished under house arrest.

As Assefa burst in with a series of penetrating questions, it dawned on me that I had to be either pretty nervous or something I couldn't quite put my finger on to natter on like that—especially the abortion part, which might have been in the public record after my catastrophic Nobel speech, but not something I typically talked about with anyone, let alone an attractive stranger. Looking back now, I don't think it was nerves at all, but Assefa's gift for absolute acceptance.

Once he finally managed to get some sense of what I'd been talking about, he pronounced gravely, "Enat—my mother—was right. You are quite brilliant. I do believe you've just managed to compress your whole life story into three minutes." He shook his head wonderingly. "And what a life it has been!" Without warning, he stood up, and I was afraid he was going to walk out on me, but instead he leaned forward, whispering, "Tell you what. I'll get us another couple of coffees

and you can fill in the holes”—he flashed me a knowing grin—“and give me the expanded version.” I watched him walk toward the busy counter, his body displaying a kind of feline grace in a tangled loop of fluidity and tension.

He came back to the table carrying two steaming cups, which he carefully set down before going back for a couple of napkins, taking the time to fold them into perfect little triangles. He pulled his chair closer to mine. I caught the faintest whiff of something—a mixture of cinnamon and Roquefort cheese?—and took a long, relaxed breath. Who wouldn’t feel reassured by such interesting smells?

Unconsciously stroking his goatee, Assefa shot me a teasing look. “Now, let’s start with that grandfather of yours. You didn’t really think you could resurrect him, did you? By pouring water on his ... body?”

I felt myself flush. “I know it sounds ridiculous, but it made perfect sense to me at the time. The thing is, I was raised in an extremely religious household. Mother’s companion was actually an ex-nun. My father was the foremost crusader against abortion in the Senate, and the house was drenched in stories about Jesus. My mother hadn’t gotten sober yet, my nanny was busy most of the time taking care of a revolving door of foster children, and my grandfather, who was mute from his stroke, was the only one who actually had any time for me.” Nervously pressing the pleat in my napkin, I paused. “Well, no way around it, he was everything to me. I felt I had to bring him back to life. Somehow—well, not somehow, but that’s a whole other story—I got it into my head that his balls, which went from swollen to shrunken with congestive heart failure, were somehow the key to bringing him back again, so I poured a bunch of water on him—actually, onto the crotch of his best blue suit—while he lay in his casket.”

I waited for the inevitable derisive laughter, but Assefa seemed preoccupied. “Your grandfather,” he said slowly, “he was a good man?”

I nodded.

“Ah.” How can one word—less of a word, really, than a sound—convey so much?

That was when I sensed that there might be a connection between Assefa and me far stronger than pheromones.

He grunted, and in that moment his narrow face seemed to fold in on itself. “My grandfather Medr, my father’s father, hasn’t had a stroke, but the result is the same. He hasn’t uttered a word since his wife—my grandmother—was raped and murdered by Eritreans when they invaded our homeland.”

My mind reeled, but my mouth assumed an idiotic life of its own. “Medr. What an interesting sounding name. Does it have a particular meaning?” As soon as the words came out, I wanted to scoop them back again.

Assefa looked understandably taken aback, but responded politely, “Earth and Fertility,” at which point I burst into tears. “Oh, God,” I cried, “what a beautiful name!” He looked both alarmed and confused. I wanted to run out of the coffee house, but was paralyzed. “Forgive me. I’ve always been socially backward. What you’ve just told me is horrible. I am so sorry. Please forget what I just said. Believe me, it’s no accident my nickname used to be Odd Duck.”

God bless him, Assefa actually laughed. “Odd Duck? As in ‘quack, quack?’” He put his thumbs side by side with his fingers splayed flat on the table, and, wriggling his wrists, waddled

his hands toward me. But now a shadow overtook his smiling eyes. “There is nothing right to say when there is too much pain. Perhaps that is why Medr has chosen not to speak at all.”

I know it goes against the grain, but I’ve decided that shared suffering can actually be an aphrodisiac. That night, in the back seat of his father’s yellow cab, Assefa kissed my forehead, brought his soft lips to mine, and, reaching into my organic white cotton bra, fondled my breasts, which seemed to have developed a rather pushy life of their own.

I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry with how much my tweeter was aching for him, but Assefa turned out to be old school. We managed to hold off moving into the mini-explosion phase until we got engaged. It was a different story as soon as a simple silver band with its hard-purchased zirconia and sapphire ring encircled my fourth finger. In his brand new double bed in his brand new duplex apartment, Assefa made up for lost time, establishing what would soon become a ritual of commenting enthusiastically on various electrified parts of my body as he nibbled at them. Surrounding my lips with his own fuller ones, he traced their shape with the tuft at his chin, pulling back to proclaim, “My little Nobelista, whose mouth is a fount of wisdom.” Moving down, he licked every inch of my breasts, coming up for air to pronounce like a connoisseur, “Abundant! Delicious! Fit for a king!” As if he weren’t already sending spears of fire across my belly, he tantalized me with little chicken peck kisses, inching his way down to my tweeter. Coming up once for air, he murmured, “Mmm, could this pussy be the source of all that genius?” before diving back in again.

I ended up spending every weekend I could at his apartment. Even when he dragged himself off to study all day at UCLA’s Biomedical Library, I preferred curling up in his bed with a pile of physics papers to venturing out. The bed smelled of him. I brought Jillily with me most times in her dented old cage of a cat carrier, sliding her traveling litter box out from under Assefa’s bathroom sink and pouring in just enough Jonny Cat to do the job. At eighteen, Jillily was a lot skinnier than she’d once been, but just as likely to stretch across the bed in her Charlotte the Harlot pose, flat on her back with her white apron exposed, giving me the look that said, “Well, don’t you want to stroke my silky belly and sniff my perfect fish breath?”

But on the morning of my birthday, it wasn’t UCLA that Assefa left our bed for but a series of last-minute errands to prepare for his trip. Asking myself for the hundredth time where in the world Achamyalesh and Zalelew could have disappeared to and not getting any reassuring answers, I drove Jillily back home to the Fiskes’ before my planned day at Caltech. As I launched myself up the path on Rose Villa Street, I saw Gwennie look out the kitchen window and wave. But before I could wave back, I was accosted by our next-door neighbor Fidel Marquetti. I’d always assumed Fidel to be a harmless sort of man until this past summer, when he’d taken a fierce dislike to the Korean family who’d just moved in at his other side. Well, to be fair, it wasn’t the Kangs who’d offended Fidel’s tender sensibilities, but their Jindo named Chin-Hwa, whose name, as Mrs. Kang had proudly informed me the first time the dog exuberantly sniffed my crotch, meant, “The Most Wealthy.” Which made a kind of sense, given the fact that the success of the Kang’s liquor store in South Pasadena was undoubtedly due less to the sweet potato vodka they prided themselves on purveying than the fact that they’d actually sold two winning SuperLotto Plus tickets over the past year and a half.

It was probably because of the mysterious skin condition that had Fidel feeling in flames most of the time that he developed an inordinate irritability toward Chin-Hwa. From the beginning, I

couldn't help but notice that Fidel demonstrated less than an average Pasadena neighbor's tolerance for the dog's frequent escapes from the leash in Mr. Kang's frantic hand to howl at the borders of Fidel's unusual variant of a SoCal front lawn.

There was a story behind Chin-Hwa's antagonism toward Fidel's garden. In defiance of Southern California's current drought, Fidel had planted rows of tall, exotic grasses separated by neat squares of annuals, which he liked to water with one of those revolving lawn sprinklers. The thing was, the generally impeccable Jindo breed of dog had one (in this case fatal) flaw: an aversion to water and a desperate desire to avoid getting wet. Mr. Kang had attempted to resolve the situation by taking Chin-Hwa out for his walks only when Fidel's sprinkler wasn't running, but it turned out that Chin-Hwa had a second character flaw less endemic to his breed. He held a grudge. Anytime he could slip his handsome white head under the backyard fence that a desperate Mr. Kang kept unsuccessfully reinforcing, he'd make a beeline for some tidy gathering of multicolored pansies, planting a crushing dump over as many of Fidel's flowers as he could before slinking back to his own yard.

After three months of Fidel banging on the Kang door, Mr. Kang bowing his head and muttering apologies, and Mrs. Kang standing in the background wringing her hands, Fidel had finally gone over the edge, festooning his front yard with printed signs with admonitions ranging from "I Know What You're Doing" to "Curb your Dog." Though the former was the most provocative of the bunch, it was the latter that had gotten to me, only because I misread it the first time I passed by as "Curb Your God."

Which had taken me on no end of void-vanquishing mental excursions. How many world crises would simply dry up if the world's zealots would only curb their gods? Lord knew, I might have been able to make peace with my own father had he gotten past the certainty of possessing the one and only spiritual truth before he died.

But this morning it was Fidel himself, and not one of his signs, that had me nearly bursting into untimely laughter. His brown face was mottled with patches of undoubtedly painful crimson as he pointed wordlessly to what I had to admit was a pretty exuberant splash of doggie diarrhea over a plot of pink impatiens. But he found his voice in no time. "Those damn Chinks. I thought those people *ate* their dogs. These ones've gotta be spending too much time praying to that Buddha-head in their living room to even notice what that frickin' animal of theirs is doing. If I were them, I'd be spending half my days in confession. You'd think they were the ones who won the war."

I stopped myself from trying to correct him. Where would I even begin? I shrugged with what I hoped at least looked like sympathy and ran toward Gwennie, who was thankfully beckoning now from our front door. As I submitted to a giant hug, I couldn't help but think about poor Fidel, and I must have muttered out loud, "Well, *somebody's* God certainly needs a little curbing," because Gwen pushed me away and said defensively, "Huh?"

I quickly reassured Gwennie that I didn't mean *her*, but she was already walking away from me, throwing over her shoulder, "Listen, I've got some news for you. C'mon into the kitchen." I nearly laughed at how my thrifty metabolism led middle-aged women—well, middle-aged women except for my mother—to want to feed me first and talk later. Gwennie set down a plate and gestured for me to sit at the kitchen table while she sliced off a slab of banana bread, but I just stared at her. Sensing my unease, she relented. "Okay, kiddo. I got a call from your mother a few

minutes ago. Abeba showed up and told her that Zalelew's daughter phoned this morning. She got a postcard from her father, postmarked Gondar." Dropping into my chair, I anxiously shoved a hunk of banana bread into my mouth. Gwennie continued, "Zalelew wrote that he and Achamyalesh bumped into a young woman from their old village when they arrived at the airport. She was accompanying three small children and the Spanish parents who were adopting them. Zalelew said she was a girl Assefa had gone to school with." I stopped chewing, but Gwennie seemed not to notice. She added, "They were going to visit the orphanage where she worked on their way to Aksum." She cocked her head hopefully. "So maybe Assefa won't have to go now?"

Reaching for my cell, I realized I hadn't turned it on yet this morning. As soon as I did, the haunting melody of the ringtone I'd assigned to Assefa, Teddy Afro's "Aydenegitim Lebie," filled the room.

Assefa's voice was trembling. "Fleur? Thank God you finally picked up. Have you heard the news?"

I began to burble about how we'd celebrate, when Assefa broke in, clearly thinking aloud, "The thing is, though, why didn't they call? Abat promised us he'd call when he landed in Gondar. Don't you think it's odd that all anyone got was a postcard? My family always phones when we arrive at our destination. It's what we do. And why haven't they called since?"

"Gondar's a pretty small city. Maybe the phone service has been down," I ventured hopefully. "Maybe the cellphone he rented was a dud. Maybe he figured a postcard would do the trick."

"And make us wait for two weeks? The postcard wasn't even from him."

"Maybe you'll get one tomorrow. Sometimes mail travels at different rates. It is Ethiopia, after all."

He snapped, "What's that supposed to mean?"

I got a little short myself. "Oh, come on, it's an underdeveloped country. For God's sake, even the U.S. Postal Service screws up half the time."

Assefa paused, then conceded grudgingly, "Yes, of course, of course, you're right."

Gwennie shot me a look and crossed the room to load the dishwasher, flinging in plates and cups a bit more forcefully than usual.

I knew my argument made sense, but Assefa's voice, though calmer now, was no less determined. "Nothing has changed, really. Something's not right."

"So ...?"

Assefa asked defensively, "What can I do? What if it were *your* father?"

I felt like I'd been struck. I could hear the stiffness in my voice as I reminded him, "If it were my father, things like phone calls wouldn't have been an issue."

Gwennie twisted around to frown meaningfully at me, anxiously stroking her Physicists are Spacier apron, the one with the "a" in Spacier x-ed out and replaced by an "i."

Assefa was contrite now. "Ah, *dukula*. I have been insensitive. And on your birthday, too. But you do see, don't you, that I must go? My mother is still very worried."

"I suppose," I muttered ungraciously.

But just as I ventured the question that was niggling at me, "Oh, by the way, who's the girl they bumped into," Assefa said, "Damn. My cell's breaking up. I'll see you tonight at—"

That was it. We'd lost the connection.

I tried talking it over with Gwennie, she sitting on my left so she could hear me with her good ear. “You’re being ridiculous, child. I don’t know what I was thinking. Of course, he has to go. It’s not like his father to skip the call. He would have found a pay phone or called from the hotel. Something.”

I was too ashamed to share the real source of my disquiet, telling myself not to be an idiot. Besides, Gwennie—ever the political animal—was already taking the conversation in a new direction. Muttering something about orphans, she pulled her eyeglasses down from the top of her head and wandered over to the wicker basket of the week’s worth of newspapers she kept at the corner of the kitchen. Pushing aside my plate, she spread a marmalade-stained page across the table.

“Look at this,” she said, pointing to a headline that announced, “Ethiopian Ministry of Health Acknowledges More than a Million AIDS Orphans.”

She flung out her arms for emphasis. “One fucking million!” The last time I’d seen her like this was when Father’s Cacklers—otherwise known as Campaign America to Crush C-Voids—had joined with Big Oil to mount their campaign against my research. Pulling up a chair, she began reading aloud. “UNICEF predicts that the number of street children will only increase, with teenage girls ending up as prostitutes. The number of orphans may top two million by 2015.” Gwennie pounded the table hard enough for my plate to jump. “Who’s going to care for all those children?”

Her face had gone red enough to make me worry about her blood pressure. She wasn’t getting any younger, and after Nana’s sudden death last year, I couldn’t afford losing anyone else I loved. In an attempt at diversion, I broke in with my Fidel story, ticking off on my fingers his multiple feats of historical revisionism.

At first, she looked annoyed. Nobody likes to be interrupted in the middle of a political rant. But when I got to the part about the “Chinks” thinking they’d won the war, she was bending over with laughter. Then the hiccups began. They were the worst kind, climaxing in wet burps that ominously suggested something worse might not be far behind.

Laughing apologetically, she hurriedly grabbed a glass from the cupboard, filled it with filtered water, and drank it upside down over the sink. She wiped the drool from her chin, waited a moment, then pronounced, “There. That’s better.” Trying to control her tittering this time, she shook her head. “Poor man.” Then she proceeded to pack up the rest of the banana bread for me to take to school.

As it turned out, wild bathroom sex wasn’t my only overindulgence that morning. In my nervousness, I’d pigged out on more banana bread than I’d realized—there was only half a loaf left to bring to my team at Caltech. Thrusting the tin-foiled care package into my book bag, I squinted out the living room window to make sure Fidel had gone in. Dashing outside, I started up the dented green Prius I’d inherited from Gwennie. As I glided past Fidel’s yard, I saw that he’d tacked up one more sign. This one was clearly an impromptu job. You had to give Fidel credit for pride of place; all the others had been made up professionally at the local stationer’s. This newest effort was hand lettered in a downward slant, and despite being brief had a couple of misspellings: “Buda Hades go home.” Given that Fidel’s whole family had taken advantage of one of the surges of amnesty following their emigration from Cuba on an illegal fishing boat, the message packed more than a little irony.

My short drive to school was filled with long thoughts, including the AIDS crisis in Africa, which I generally managed to shove into a dusty storage cupboard at the back of my mind. Normally, any mention that the cradle of our species had two out of every ten people prematurely dying was as unbearable as pictures of polar bears and penguins stranded by melting ice caps. I tried remembering who it was who'd said that the loss of one human being was the loss of a whole universe. If that were the case, how could we even fathom the loss of a million? If it were a question of a million pet dogs or cats being felled by a preventable disease, red states and blue states would come together at last and the whole country would be clamoring to send in the marines.

Still fuming, I pulled into the parking lot, slid out, and slammed the car door. Despite its impact on the world of science, I was thankful Caltech wasn't a huge campus. I got halfway to Lauritsen before realizing that I might have my purse and laptop with me, but I'd forgotten the banana bread and had to leg it all the way back again.

When I finally entered the lab, the whole team—except, of course, Adam—was there. Stanley stood at the blackboard, while Gunther leaned his tall-glass-of-milk body against the back wall, thoughtfully rubbing his blond-stubbled chin. Amir, Tom, and Katrina were huddled together, doing some computations at a long table. Adam's replacement, Bob Ballantine, sat at a student's desk in the middle of the room, turning quickly when I opened the door. Bob was becoming something of a problem. From the moment we'd met, it was clear he was going to have a crush on me, while all I could think of was Uncle Bob, the imaginary shrinking relative who spent half his time in my pocket and the other half skipping by my side during some of my more memorable childhood adventures.

Before I knew it, Bob rose from his chair, struggling to tuck his blue Oxford shirt into khakis that were just this side of being honest-to-God floods. Within seconds he was close enough for me to detect a hint of smoked fish and orange juice. On the whole, not an unpleasant combination. His signature eye tic more pronounced than usual, he thrust a manuscript into my hand with the air of a dog presenting his favorite throw toy to his master. Or a cat triumphantly delivering a dead hummingbird to her mistress' bed, which Jillily had done just a few weeks before.

"I know we're supposed to be sticking to the supervoid," he said, "but look at this paper. By one of my best undergrads. He's taken an unusual twist, connecting Pribram and Bohm's holographic models with C-Voids."

I wanted to push him aside and head straight for Stanley, but everything I'd read so far about the possibility of a holographic universe stopped me dead in my tracks. "Why, thank you, Bob." He grinned broadly, and I tried not to notice what looked like a sliver of lox fat snagged between his left front tooth and lateral incisor. Running my eyes down the first page of the manuscript, I commented, "Actually, Jack Ng just published a piece suggesting that quantum foam is holographic. I think your guy might be on to something."

Passing him Gwennie's banana loaf, which he eyed with the kind of suspicion one greets an unexploded bomb, I hurried up to the blackboard, waving the paper at Stanley before I was treated to one of his class-A hugs. Though age might have taken a half-inch or so off his height, Stanley was still a lot taller than I. He managed to extract a quarter from the scrunchy atop my head, which gave me as much of a thrill as the first time he'd performed that particular magic trick when I was an eleven-year-old girl. Then he croaked to the rest of the room, as if they couldn't see for themselves, "Here's our Fleur," before sweeping the paper from my hand. I don't think I've

mentioned that, despite being a man of great distinction and unquestionably the most brilliant person I'd ever met, Stanley had the face and, well, hop-ability of a frog. His brilliant head was squished rather flatly onto his unusually long neck, and his bottle-cap glasses magnified his already buggy eyes. When excited, he was prone to jump around the room, and in our early days proved to be as skip-happy as Uncle Bob himself. And that's just what he did: a hop and a skip in front of the blackboard for old times' sake. I saw Gunther stifle a snort from the corner and gave him a little wave.

I shot a conspiratorial look toward where Amir, Tom, and Katrina had been, but they'd disappeared. How had I missed that?

Just as I was about to ask Stanley where they'd gone, he seemed to realize he was holding the manuscript. Peering down at it, he worked his rather pronounced Adam's apple and asked, "So, what's this when it's at home?"

I laughed. "I don't know about home, but when it's here, it's from Bob."

As if on cue, up trotted Bob himself, brushing banana bread crumbs from his shirt. A brown triangle of banana bread crust had moved in next door to the lox fat, so I assumed Gwen's package had been promoted from object of suspicious derivation to the highly valuable item it actually was.

Bob grinned and scratched his head. I noticed that he'd actually styled his chestnut hair in spikes and put some kind of product on it that called attention to its generous dusting of dandruff. "Jaime Gomez," he offered enthusiastically. "Great paper. 'The Holographic Argument for C-Voids.'"

Without a word, Stanley nodded, walked to one of the front row desks and, crouching on its chair as if it were a toadstool, lost himself in Jaime Gomez's paper. Bob and I exchanged an unusually accordant look. With Stanley reading the paper, we knew we were invisible to him, consigned to the black hole into which all human relationships descend when even the kindest of scientists gets grabbed by an idea.

I bore Stanley no hard feelings for this, since I'd once been one of that law's more egregious examples. I'd had no end of grief as a young adolescent trying to repair my relationship with Sammie after the call of C-Voids and P.D. temporarily blinded me to the justifiable demands of true friendship. Since then, I'd taken great care to let Sammie know how much she meant to me.

Which is why, when my cellphone went off to the tune of Duffy's "Warwick Avenue"—the ringtone I'd assigned to Sammie—I hastened out of the room to take the call.

As soon as I stepped out, I saw Katrina coming down the hall, Tom and Amir grinning behind her. Her ponytail bobbing, she carried a Petri dish with a large pale-colored muffin on it. A small, lit candle protruded upwards from its center like an erect nipple. Breast on a platter, I thought. That was what I got for having wild sex first thing in the morning.

The phone was still ringing. I took the call. "Sam, love, I think I'm in the middle of a birthday surprise."

I heard that infectious giggle on the other end. "No worries. Just rang to sing you happy birthday." Which she proceeded to do, at least the first six words—terribly out of tune, as usual. Laughing at herself, she gave up. "Oh, hell. What a waste of Mum's genes." Her mother Aadita's voice was exquisitely elastic; it was almost indistinguishable from one of my favorite singers, India's famed fusion artist Nine Virdee, with whom Aadita had familiarized me. "Anyway, call me later. Many happy returns of the day, girl."

I walked beside my birthday muffin back to the lab, letting my kindly colleagues assume that the wide grin on my face was for them alone, and not the girl who, sitting with me on a front porch in the pouring rain, had taught me everything I needed to know about friendship.

Not that Stanley and Amir and Tom and Katrina and Gunther and even Bob Ballantine were chopped liver in that department. Actually, they weren't chopped liver in any department, they had hearts and kidneys and brains and bladders, too, but I've long since learned that most people aren't as intrigued as I that some words have both literal and idiomatic meanings and that chopped liver is as good a metaphor for insignificance as *piss-ant* or *small potatoes*.

Anyway, getting back to my physics pals, I soon discovered they'd chipped in for half a year's worth of yoga classes at Golden Bridge as a birthday gift. Better still, they indulged me while I ran through my ideas about the applicability to P.D. of Gerardus 't Hooft's speculations about holographic theory. My fellow Nobelist had suggested that the whole universe could be understood as two-dimensional, our perception of three dimensions being a function of an information structure "painted" on the cosmological horizon.

"Hang on a mo," I added, my enthusiasm building. I ran over to my laptop and brought up an article in *Scientific American*. "Here it is. Jacob Bekenstein making the argument that the physical world is comprised of matter and energy, yes, but also information. Information tells matter and energy what to do with themselves, like a robot in a factory that needs instructions telling it which bits of metal and plastic to weld."

I flipped my laptop closed and threw a meaningful look at Stanley. "Same with a ribosome in a cell, which can't synthesize proteins and get power without information brought from the DNA in its nucleus." I grinned. "Don't you just love it? That's where P.D. comes in, just as soon as we perfect getting the information to the cell to trigger the shift from light to dark matter."

Gunther looked pretty excited himself. His wandering eye added a slight air of lunacy to his demeanor as he broke in, "I like it. Simplifies our job. Makes me think of Wheeler's insistence that information, not energy and matter, is the basic building block of life."

I could tell Bob was itching to take part. "Wheeler's from Princeton, right?" he asked, left eye twitching madly.

I couldn't help but wonder how many ocular anomalies one physics team could display. "Right," I said. "You know, don't you, that he was the first one to publicly refer to black holes?" But my mind was already racing ahead. I went up to the blackboard and tentatively chalked out what I saw as the problem. "I'm not so sure, Gunther, that it's all that simple. How're we going to send the message to dematerialize and rematerialize without catastrophically altering the mass and energy of our subject?"

Gunther broke in excitedly, his untethered eye wandering even more wildly. "Well, if the team at Max Planck can actually create an optical cavity with two laser beams for a water bear, they might be able to adjust the frequency of the beams so that the laser photons absorb the vibration energy of the water bear around its mass center, slowing it to a ground state and allowing it to both appear and disappear into a void state."

Tom frowned. "You're assuming the void state awaits it somewhere outside the water bear, but Fleur's idea is to harness the water bear's cellular voids and create an internal energy exchange between dark and light matter."

I nodded, wondering whether the application of dematerialization would rest on Gunther's water bears, science's more recent superstars, prized for their relative indestructibility. Tiny little creatures—most of them no longer than a millimeter—they're sometimes called moss piglets, which is my favorite name for them, since they move their chunky little bodies across moss and lichens in slow motion, supported by eight tiny, pudgy feet.

Stanley gave a happy little hop. He liked nothing more than group riffing on a mind-stretching theme. Amir made him even happier by offering, "But maybe that's where Eridanus comes in. If Mersini-Houghton's right, we just instruct our object to shift itself into one of its parallel universes."

"But, wait," interjected Katrina, nervously tapping her pencil against the arm of her chair. "You're assuming that the other universe has similar physical properties, which it can't. At least, I don't think so. Unless" She scratched her scalp just below her shiny ponytail, in the process pulling pretty little wisps free. "Unless it's all part of some larger guiding wave."

Stanley smiled slyly and clapped his magician's hands. "Looks like we've got lots to think about, boys and girls." He gave a froggish croak. "Fleur, didn't Gwen tell me she and I were taking you out to Rose Cottage for a birthday lunch?" God, banana bread for breakfast, English tea for lunch, dinner that night at Casa del Mar. My birthday was guaranteeing my hips would be more grabbable than ever when Assefa returned.

But thoughts of Assefa returning, no matter how deliciously erotic, meant Assefa had to go away first, which sounded like a dangerous stretching of an invisible cord between us. That night, as I struggled to slither my butt into my best black dress, I struggled even harder with a serious case of dread. I had to force myself to muster a cheery grin as a silk-suit-clad Assefa greeted me forty minutes later when I approached his Commodore Sloat Drive door, though fake melted into for-real once he brushed his generous lips against my cheek and nibbled at the diamond stud in my ear.

But the lively spirits that marked the beginning of our dinner began to fade as alcohol coursed through our bloodstreams and our tummies expanded—mine, of course, minus the *foie gras* lumping up inside the other three. The conversation at the table got looser, which is, I suppose, why Sammie spoke aloud the question we'd all been secretly asking ourselves. "How can two men disappear on a road only 217 miles long without anyone noticing anything?"

"Well," I countered, "it's not like some straight throughway. Isn't a lot of it wild mountain land?" I darted a look at Assefa, who I could see retreating into himself.

He responded glumly, "I know so little of my homeland. I hate it. All I remember are little bits of life—isolated scenes—mostly inside our compound. My cousins—they're still there, you know? Bekele and Iskinder. They were older. Iskinder taught me to play Kelelebosh with rocks. It is a little like your jacks." Your, I thought. He's already distancing himself. "A school chum or two would visit sometimes. There was a girl" He caught me staring at him and seemed to shake free from a memory. "For all I know, my father going missing is calling me back to my roots."

Sammie laughed, "Roots? I'm a Jew living in diaspora. Jacob, too. Jews have no roots except for some land we stole from a group of other now-displaced souls."

Jacob lashed out, "Didn't steal. It was all down to you Brits. They raised expectations with the Balfour Declaration. It was only a matter of time until the U.N. passed the Partition Plan."

Which got everyone going on one of those impossible arguments about who the true underdogs were, the Palestinians or the Israelis.

I barely kept track of the points my dinner mates were attempting to score. All this talk about roots was making me nervous. I told myself to relax. Sammie had gone back to England several times since we'd made friends when she was twelve and I thirteen, and more recently she'd traveled to India for her grandmother's funeral. Dhani had taken Angelina back with her for a visit to her parents in Delhi. Mother had even accompanied Cesar to Guatemala to visit the town where his *coca*-addicted mother had been born. They'd all returned safe and sound and just as before. But I found myself saying, "Don't go!"

Everyone looked taken aback by the non sequitur. Shifting gears the quickest, Sammie jumped in indignantly. "Fleur, that's not fair! He's got to find his dad." Having lost her own father as a child, she was a sucker for people connecting with their fathers and had cut me off for a while after I refused to attend my own father's funeral.

"You're right, you're right." I didn't repeat my request, but I meant it—meant it as our cab took us back to his duplex, meant it when Assefa bent down to kiss my forehead goodbye at the crack of dawn the next morning. It didn't help my peace of mind that he was adamant about wanting to go to the airport alone.

"I can't stand teary goodbyes," he repeated, nuzzling my neck.

As soon as his cab turned the corner from Commodore Sloat to Schumacher Drive, I fled to Stanley and Gwennie's, where I found my mentor seated at the kitchen table in his pajamas, absent-mindedly petting Jillily while he pored over the paper Bob had given me the previous day. When I flopped down beside him, he immediately proceeded to speculate on its implications until he finally threw up his hands and asked irritably, "Why do you keep looking at your watch? You're not bored, are you?" He had a salt and pepper beard now, which—combined with a slightly bent frame that resembled an old TV antenna—made it difficult to forget that he wasn't getting any younger.

I wanted to say, "Bored? Who could be bored by the idea of a holographic universe?"

Instead, I burst into tears.

I hadn't lived with Stanley and Gwennie for the past decade without Stanley learning how best to comfort me. He scooted over, and his arms encircled me with the kind of confident firmness that only two other humans had ever known how to execute. The second was Adam, but Nana had been the first. She'd been gone for nearly a year, but she'd left her heavy imprint on my heart and across the landscape of my skin, which retained a cellular memory of her chicken peck kisses and Mack truck grip.

I was pleased to get a whiff of Stanley's sunflower-seed breath while we hugged.

"It's Assefa," I sniffed. "What if I never see him again?"

He pulled away and skewed his head at me. "But that's ridiculous, child. No matter what happens, he'll surely come back to you."

Just then, as if we both had a sixth sense, we turned to see a bird crash into one of the kitchen windows. My heart sank. It was a young crow. Corvids were ubiquitous in SoCal. This one balanced on the window apron for a moment, visibly stunned, then gathered itself and took off again, a survivor, joining a cackling trio of others on our next door neighbors' oak.

"What the hell?" Stanley muttered.

Then we turned to each other and burst out simultaneously, both of us laughing—though mine was definitely more of the nervous variety—“A murder of crows!”

-End of Excerpt-

About Sharon Heath

Sharon Heath writes fiction and non-fiction exploring the interplay of science and spirit, politics and pop culture. A certified Jungian Analyst in private practice and a faculty member of the C.G. Jung Institute of Los Angeles, she served as guest editor of the special issue of *Psychological Perspectives*, “The Child Within/The Child Without.” Her chapter, “The Church of Her Body,” appears in the anthology *Marked by Fire: Stories of the Jungian Way*. Her chapter “A Jungian Alice in Social Media Land” is included in *Depth Psychology and the Digital Age*. And she contributed the chapter, “The Body Blow of Trumpism,” to *Cultural Complexes and the Soul of America: Myth, Psyche, and Politics*. She has blogged for *The Huffington Post* and *TerraSpheres* and has given talks in the United States and Canada on topics ranging from the place of soul in social media to gossip, envy, secrecy, and belonging.

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Links to all of Heath’s work through Thomas-Jacob Publishing, LLC can be found on the [Thomas-Jacob Publishing, LLC website](#).

Cara's Choice

by
Robert Hays

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Cara's Choice

DANNY CONNER HAD kept his word. She spotted the old Jeep, clearly marked by the miniature flag of Ireland Kohl had tied on the antenna, at the far corner of the back parking lot some distance from any other vehicle. Just seeing it again gave her a great sense of relief.

“There it is, Tay!”

She pointed to the Jeep and Tay nodded that he'd seen it, too. He had shifted down to the big Peterbilt's lowest gear and was turning the rig in that direction. He gunned the engine just enough to reach the corner of the lot in a couple of minutes and stopped with a mighty expression from the truck's powerful air brakes.

“What now?” he asked.

Cara was not sure how to answer. She had looked ahead only to this instant. Now that they were here, she faced decisions she had not had the courage to make before—hard decisions she couldn't put off any longer.

“I don't know,” she said. “I need to go inside and see if Danny's here.”

Tay agreed. “Let me get this machine back around to the front,” he said. “It would stick out like a sore thumb back here by itself.”

He put the eighteen-wheeler in motion again, circled the back lot, and squeezed it into a space in front of the truck stop's diner. Even after all the time she'd spent in the cab, Cara still marveled at how easily he handled the monstrous semi.

They climbed down on their respective sides of the cab. The clatter of the idling diesel engine had become so familiar to Cara it was something of a comfort. She realized, though, that this was because the sound of the engine meant the nearness of Tay.

“I don't even know where we are,” she said, as they headed across the twenty yards or so of open space between them and the diner's front door.

“Just north of Louisville,” Tay answered.

“So that means Indiana?”

“Unless they've changed the map.”

“You know I can't be caught in Kentucky.”

“Yeah, well, you don't have to worry about that here.”

As soon as they stepped inside, Cara was struck by an overwhelming sense of familiarity. She could be back in the Purple Onion, rushing from table to table to wait on the impatient drivers eager to get back on the road. The smells, the noisy chatter, the hustling waitresses, everything around her made her feel very much at home.

“Crowded,” Tay said. “We knew it would be, though, jam-packed as the parking lot is.”

“There's Danny!”

Danny Connor had spotted them as they came in, from his seat at a two-person table jammed tight against the wall half way between the front door and the kitchen. He was standing and waving his hat to get their attention.

Just seeing his familiar face brought a sudden rush of tears to Cara's eyes. She hurried to him and they embraced tightly as Tay stood aside and smiled. Although it would block the aisle, a waitress pulled up a third chair and the newcomers joined Danny at his table.

“Thank you so much, Danny,” Cara managed to say through her sniffles. “No way I can ever repay you for this.”

“Oh, come on!” Danny said. “Nothing to it. I’d crawl through fire for you, Cara, you know that.”

“But you took a risk, man,” Tay told him. “You know Sobeski was watching that Jeep. He’s got to be busting his ass to get his hands on her.”

“Oh, yeah. But that stupid deputy wouldn’t know the difference if he busted his ass or his head. He was easy to get away from. I had Bobby Hightower tracking him for me.”

Cara reached across the table and put a hand on Danny Connor’s arm. “Danny,” she said, almost in a whisper, “have you heard anything about Kohl?”

Danny drew in a long breath and let it out slowly.

“I have, honey. And it’s both good and bad. But you need to know what’s going on. It’s going to affect you, too, no matter how things go from here.”

Tay took Cara’s hand. He looked at Danny and then at her.

“Let’s get some coffee and maybe something to eat,” he said. “We’ve been on the road forever. Danny can tell us everything in good time. But I expect this may be tough, and I want you to be strong.”

Danny had a breakfast menu, even though it was late in the day, and they asked for plates of bacon and eggs with hash browns and toast. And lots of coffee. The waitress offered friendly smiles as she took their orders.

“You keepin’ these guys out of trouble?” she said, with a nod to Cara.

“As best I can. You on a long shift?”

“Just started at one o’clock, honey. I’ll be here till eleven.”

Cara wanted to say more, to have an actual conversation with this young woman and tell her how she knew and understood the tedious daily routine. This place could not be much different from the Purple Onion. Even the menu was almost the same, tailored to quick service for road-weary truck drivers. But before she could speak again the waitress promised to be right back and rushed off toward the kitchen.

“I’m sorry, Tay,” Cara said as soon as the waitress was gone. “I can’t wait. Danny, tell me about Kohl. What’s going on?”

“Okay, I’ll give it to you straight,” Danny Connor said, speaking slowly as if choosing his words carefully. “Kohl’s in trouble, Cara. Bein’ he’s on parole, it could be big trouble, depending on the judge. But it would have been a whole lot worse if it hadn’t been for Bobby Hightower.”

Cara fought to hold back a new round of tears. She felt the exhaustion of a week on the road with Tay, sleeping in the truck and being careful to stay out of sight, living on truck stop and fast-food meals at irregular intervals. It had been days since she’d had the pleasure of a shower and clean sheets. But she had to know about the man she loved.

“Where is he, Danny? Did Sobeski—”

“No, no,” Danny interrupted. “Sobeski didn’t get him. He would have if Bobby hadn’t been there. And he most likely—”

This time it was Tay who interrupted. “Kohl’s got to walk a fine line, Danny,” he said. “We all know he’s the one Sobeski really wants, and why Sobeski’s out for Cara just for spite.”

“Oh, yeah. That lousy excuse for a cop couldn’t stand Cara going for Kohl. And hell, he’s a married man. What did he expect to get from her?”

“Stop it!” Cara sensed herself on the verge of open rage. “Just skip it about me and tell me about Kohl. Please?”

“Yeah. I’m sorry. Look, here’s what happened, as best I can tell. Sobeski killed Kohl’s dog—”

“He killed Jake? Oh, my god. Kohl loved that dog so—”

“Of course he did,” Tay said. “That’s why Sobeski would do it. But go on Danny. What happened?”

The waitress returned with their orders just then, keeping her promise to be quick. They fell silent while she put the food and a big pot of coffee on the table. Danny commended her on the excellent service. Once she was gone, Tay poured a round of fresh coffee. The two men began eating, but Cara sat with her hands in her lap and waited.

Danny noticed. “Okay,” he said, looking at Cara. “You’ve waited long enough. I can go on while we eat. The way I heard it is, Kohl went after Sobeski with a knife. I have no doubt he would have killed him if he’d got to him. Bobby Hightower was on duty that night and managed to grab Kohl as he came in the sheriff’s office and wrestle him down and get the knife. He said Kohl fought like hell.”

“Yeah, he would,” Tay declared, carefully placing his cup of hot coffee back on its saucer.

“Okay, so Bobby got Kohl under control but had to lock him up. Too many people around for him to cover it up. Bobby’s been a rock. He remembers when he and Kohl were kids in school together. Kohl’s in jail, charged with carrying a weapon or some such thing. Wouldn’t be too serious except for his record. You can’t spend twenty years in the pen for murder and expect to get off easy.”

Cara was silent. She felt numb, the stress of what she’d just heard adding to the crushing anxieties she already carried. She’d managed to get by on hope, expecting Danny Connor somehow to get word from Kohl to her through Tay. Hope had faded when Tay said Danny would manage to get her Jeep off the Purple Onion parking lot and safely to her, but carried no message. Now she knew why and felt completely hopeless, betrayed by fate and left with nowhere to turn.

Danny held up a hand, like a signal there was something new. “But I do have a message from Kohl,” he said.

“Please, Danny. What?”

“He asked you to wait. He said they can’t lock him away forever, and one day he will be free to come to you. He wants you to go somewhere safe, maybe get another truck stop job, and make the best life you can for yourself. Those are his exact words.”

“But how—”

“You can always get in touch with me. I’ll no doubt work at the Purple Onion till I die. I’ll know where you are and he will know to find things out from me.”

Cara was near collapse. She thought she was going to fall forward, face-down on the table, but she felt Tay’s strong arm around her shoulders and managed to stay upright.

“You can go back South somewhere,” Tay said. “Someplace warm. No more of those terrible Michigan winters. Kohl will get off with nothing more than a couple of years at most and you will be somewhere waiting. You’re both still young and have a lot of life yet to live.”

She did break down then, dropping her head against Tay's shoulder and sobbing silently. Danny Connor looked on sympathetically, his eyes proclaiming his caring. Tay held her close and let her cry herself out.

"I can never repay you two," she said, finally straightening herself and regaining her composure. "You've both been wonderful."

"And we'll still be here for you, Cara," Danny Connor said. "Wherever you end up, nothing's gonna change."

"Maybe I'll go back to Alabama. I remember being there when I was little, and it was a kind of gentle place."

Tay laughed. "Gentle for you, as long as they don't take an Irish Traveler for some kind of colored person like me!"

"You really think—"

"I'm just kidding." Tay's wide smile turned to an open but soft laugh. "Alabama will never be my first choice," he said. "But, hey, I drive through it all the time and I've never had any problem."

Danny Connor reached into a jacket pocket. "Jack Gengler sent you this," he said, handing an envelope to Cara. "He emptied the cash drawer and took a couple of bills out of his own wallet. There's about four hundred dollars there. He said you had a bonus coming and he wished it was more, and sent his best."

"I . . . I don't know what to say. Jack was always so good to me."

"Yeah, you'll never have another boss like him," Tay said. "But if we're going to get you to Alabama we have to do some planning. I don't want you driving that Jeep across Kentucky. Do you agree, Danny?"

"Absolutely. Sobeski's no doubt put out bulletins all over Kentucky, knowing that phony old charge still hangs over her head. Any other state and the statute of limitations would have kicked in."

"You really think that charge might stick?" Tay asked.

"Probably not. The old fool who charged her with stealing his car because he couldn't get his hands on her probably is long dead and gone. But she doesn't need the extra trouble."

"He knows he gave me that car," Cara said.

Tay was silent for a few seconds, obviously in thought. "Kentucky is as wide and deep as the Pacific Ocean between here and Alabama," he said. "Only reasonable route after Louisville is across to Lexington and down I-75. It's about two hours from Lexington to the Tennessee line."

"I'll take your word on that," Danny Connor said. "By the way, what are you hauling?"

"Some kind of business machines. From Lansing to Miami. I've still got a far piece to go."

Cara looked back and forth from one man to another. She trusted them, but was a bit lost in the conversation. Did this all have something to do with her?

"Right on!" Danny Connor exclaimed. "You're going that way anyhow. I told Jack I could be gone for a few days and he's okay with it. I'll drive the Jeep to Tennessee and Cara can ride with you."

"But then how will you get back?" Cara asked. "We can't leave you stranded in Tennessee."

"She's got a point there," Tay said.

“Oh, hell! You guys know me. I talk truckin’ as good as anybody after all the years at the Purple Onion. There will be plenty of drivers heading north who will be happy for my company.”

Tay pushed back his chair, picked up the check, and tossed a few dollars on the table to tip the waitress. “Believe we’ve got a plan,” he said. “Let’s hit the road.”

Cara was almost lightheaded as they left the diner and walked toward Tay’s rig. Despite the uncertainty of Kohl’s immediate future, she had faith in Tay’s prediction and Danny Connor’s vow to be a loyal messenger. It might be a while, but she and Kohl would be together again.

-The End-

Publisher's Note

You can learn more about Cara, Danny, Tay, and Kohl in Robert Hays' novel [*A Shallow River of Mercy*](#).

For an excerpt of *A Shallow River of Mercy*, turn the page.

Chapter 1 from *A Shallow River of Mercy*

by

Robert Hays

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“I shall tell you a great secret, my friend. Do not wait for the last judgment. It takes place every day.”

—Albert Camus, *La Chute*

To Earl and Margaret and precious memories

Chapter 1

THE MAN SWUNG down from the high cab, on the passenger side, careful to keep a tight grip on the paper bag he carried in his right hand. His legs were stiff from the long ride and sharp pain shot through his bad knee as he dropped onto the hard surface of the potholed gravel parking lot. He waved goodbye with his free hand and shouted his thanks to the driver, hoping to make himself heard over the noisy clatter of the idling diesel engine, then covered his mouth and nose to protect against the swirl of choking dust and exhaust fumes left by the truck as it lumbered back onto the highway interchange.

The bone-chilling cold of an early Michigan winter cut through the man's light jacket and stung the exposed skin of his face and hands. The man, whose name was Ernst Kohl, was tall and thin and walked with a slight limp. His breath left little clouds of vapor in the frigid night air. He hurried toward the truck stop's restaurant, identified in large red neon lettering as the Purple Onion Grill. A smaller, flashing blue sign in a front window said "Breakfast any time." Breakfast was of no particular interest just now, but the grill would be warm. He pushed open the front door and went in, unsure what to expect.

The dining room was dimly lit. An Italian movie with subtitles played on a wide-screen television set mounted on one wall, its sound muted. Kohl paused and looked about the room, then made his way somewhat hesitantly to the back and took a seat on a round, padded stool and stowed the paper bag on the floor between his feet. He rubbed his hands together to combat the cold and leaned forward with his elbows on the worn Formica counter.

A lone fry-cook seared hamburger patties on the griddle and didn't look at him at first, and then when he did he said, "They let you out, Kohl? It's been a few years, ain't it?"

"Yeah," Kohl said, "they let me out and it's been a few years. You goin' to get me something or not?"

The fry-cook waved off his question with a blackened metal spatula. "Hold your horses," he grumbled. "I ain't got but two hands. Anyway, whadaya want?"

Kohl shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know," he said. "Anything that's hot."

"Coffee's hot. Want some?"

"Yeah, sure. Give me a cup of coffee."

"You want something to eat?"

"That meat smells good."

The fry-cook laughed. He was a fat man and his laugh rumbled up from his big belly, rolled across the griddle against the stainless steel splash panel, and bounced back toward the seated customer. "Bet anything I make for you's better than what you been used to," he said. "Or maybe they put a little prime rib on the menu up there and I never heard about it."

Kohl ignored the sarcastic remark. He didn't say anything until the fat man set a cup and saucer in front of him and filled the cup with coffee. "Thanks," he mumbled then, and went about adding sugar and an artificial creamer to the dark brew and stirring vigorously with a spoon. The coffee was hot and it tasted good. He drank the whole cupful and looked back at the fry-cook and pushed his cup and saucer forward.

"Want some more?" the fry-cook asked.

“Yeah, I could use another cup. Do I know you?”

“You used to. I’m Danny Connor.”

“It’s been twenty years, Danny.”

“If you say so.” Danny Connor poured more coffee. “I’ll fix you a hamburger, on the house. Soon as I take care of them truckers.” He motioned with a nod of his head toward two men at a table near the front door. “One of ’em’s my buddy, Tay.”

Danny Connor carried hamburgers to the two truckers and poured more coffee for them. Kohl turned and watched. One of the truckers, a husky black man with a merry expression on his face and a wide smile, shook the fry-cook’s hand and commenced an animated conversation. Danny Connor quaked with laughter, but motioned toward the back as if saying he had to get back to work. He was still laughing when he paused beside a tired-looking old man who sat alone at a table alongside the wall and studied a bowl of chili as if uncertain it was fit to eat. The old man looked up and shook his head no, and Danny hurried back to his station at the griddle. He finished cooking Kohl’s hamburger and brought it on a wide white China platter with stacks of French fries and onion rings and stood in front of Kohl to see if he wanted anything else.

“This looks real good,” Kohl said. “Sorry I didn’t recognize you.”

“Forget it. I’m twenty years older and a hundred pounds or so bigger than I was the last time you saw me. Anybody know you’re coming?”

“Nobody left to tell,” Kohl said. “Leastwise nobody who’d care.”

“You goin’ back to the old home place out on Old Church Road?”

“I’ll go check it out and see what happens.”

Kohl had never known Danny Connor well. He remembered when they both went to the same high school and Danny played football and Kohl wanted to play but wasn’t good enough. Kohl’s mother was still alive then. He was disappointed when he didn’t make the team and needed her sympathy, but she said it was just as well because if he played football he’d probably go around the rest of his life on gimpy knees. Too high a price to pay for a few years of sport, in her opinion. She wanted him to work on his studies and someday go to college and maybe be a businessman. He could be in insurance, she said, or run a hardware store. Something respectable.

In one of the more painful ironies of his life, he ended up with a gimpy knee suffered in a far less honorable activity than football. His mother never knew.

Kohl was two years out of high school when he got in trouble and broke his mother’s heart. Since then he’d been in prison, his life one of misery and guilt and self-recriminations and perpetual mental visions of something dark and evil, and now he felt like an old man.

“How ’bout you?” he inquired of Danny Connor. “You got a family?”

“Wife and five kids.”

Kohl made a clicking sound with his tongue but said nothing. He was in no mood to hear about Danny Connor’s children, or complaints about his wife. He had no interest in problems that were not his own.

He drizzled a thin swath of catsup over the fries on his platter and ate in silence. He devoured the hamburger and onion rings and dredged the last smear of catsup from his plate with the final spike of fried potato. The food was good. Or maybe it just tasted better because this was his first meal as a free man in a very long time.

Danny Connor turned to face him, his back to the griddle.

“I suppose you know about Angie?” Danny Connor said.

“No, and I don’t care to know. Whatever it is, it’s nothing to me.”

“Sorry. I just thought—”

“Look, if you’ve got something to say, spit it out and be done with it.”

Danny Connor raised a hand, palm toward Kohl. “Okay. No big deal. I was going to tell you she moved out East somewhere, is all.”

“Like I said, it’s nothing to me.”

“Well, just forget I brought it up, then.”

More truckers came and went, keeping Danny Connor busy. Kohl picked up the paper bag and went to the men’s room. When he’d finished there, he took a seat in a booth near the front of the dining room next to a window and opened the shade so he could see out. Ghostly white lights on tall aluminum poles lit up the parking lot.

Beyond the lighted area, a steady parade of traffic slid by on the interstate highway. He was awed by the sheer number of trucks, which formed an endless parade, one close behind the other. What would it be like to drive one of those powerful machines and haul goods from coast to coast or maybe down to Mexico? The freedom to travel hundreds or even thousands of miles over the open road should make anyone happy.

He wondered about the truck driver who had given him a ride and wished he’d learned more about the man. The truck driver didn’t talk much, though, and Kohl wasn’t one to ask a lot of questions.

There were cars on the highway, too, and in his mind’s eye he pictured families on their way to Detroit or maybe the Upper Peninsula. It felt good to see people on the move—a gratifying view of ordinary people doing ordinary things that had been denied him for half his life.

And he wondered about Angie. For twenty years he had wanted to put her out of his mind forever and had hoped that passing time would let him forget. He had hoped in vain. Searing memories still pushed their way into his consciousness much too often, and the instant Danny Connor brought up her name his senses had come alive with the same raw images, the same sounds, the same smells, the same terror and confusion he had experienced that balmy evening two decades past.

The sky finally began to brighten on the eastern horizon. Kohl welcomed the sight. The depressing darkness soon would give way to sunshine.

Danny Connor’s reflection in the windowpane warned that the fry-cook was coming toward him. Kohl was grateful for that; people slipping up from behind made him nervous. He never liked to be taken by surprise. He turned his back to the window to face the man who, so far, was his only new connection to the once-familiar world he had come back to.

“I’ll be leaving in a minute,” Danny Connor said. “Anything more I can do for you before the new guy and the girls come on at six o’clock?”

“I don’t need anything else.”

“Look, Kohl, I don’t hold grudges, and as far as I’m concerned you’re just as good now as anybody else that sets foot in here. You paid your price. But don’t expect everybody to welcome you back with open arms. Not after what you done.”

Kohl looked him in the eyes. “Yeah, well,” he said, “they can take me or leave me. I’m not going to lose any sleep over it.”

Danny Connor stood waiting, as if he expected Kohl to say more. After a moment of awkward silence, he turned and went back behind the counter and began scraping grease from the griddle. Kohl kept on looking out front, toward the highway. He didn't see Danny Connor leave and he didn't notice the new cook who replaced him and the two waitresses beginning their shift because they all came and went through the back door.

He had lied to Danny Connor. He hoped desperately to be accepted by the people here, the only home he'd ever known. He was not an evil person. He had not intended to do what he did. People would understand, if only he could tell the full story. All he asked was a chance to prove himself, to find a way to make a living and live out his life without being judged on his past. He did not see this as an unreasonable thing to ask.

Kohl was trying to picture Angie as she might look today when one of the waitresses approached, pad in hand and a stub of a pencil poised to write down his order. She was plain-looking and no longer young, but it felt good to have a woman close and he didn't notice her appearance. He felt guilty sitting at one of her tables with nothing in hand and, even though he really didn't want anything more, asked for coffee and a donut.

"I'll be right back with that," the waitress promised, and offered a quick smile. Maybe the smile was forced, an obligatory expression that was part of her routine to make customers feel welcome, but he didn't care. It was a sweet smile and he felt lucky she had come to take his order. Momentarily, at least, he had stopped thinking about Angie.

The waitress returned promptly and put a cup of steaming coffee on the table and then a donut, all alone on a large plate, along with silverware rolled in a paper napkin. The coffee smelled good and so did she. Her scent carried a subtle hint of something out of his past but he didn't remember what it was. Flowers his mother used to grow? Or maybe just the scent of a woman. It had been a very long time since he had experienced either. He wished he could keep this woman close.

She took his money and hurried toward the back of the room. He watched her as she walked away. Their encounter had been brief, but he felt an inexplicable sensation that here was a kindred spirit. If there was a single person in the whole world who cared to listen to his story, who possibly could understand, this waitress might be the one. He wanted her to sit across from him and talk about things she felt were important and listen as he told her how he wanted to make the most of his life now and give people reason to forget his past.

Kohl never had considered himself an optimist. But unless all the fates were working against him, he believed this would happen. Not today, maybe not anytime soon, but it would happen. He would tell this woman and she would understand. The mere fact that this was possible was in itself remarkable to him.

He took a bite of the donut and was about to sip from the cup of hot coffee when he saw the plain black Dodge sedan with a star on the door turn off the highway and charge into the parking lot. The low morning sun glinted off its windshield as it crunched to a stop in a no-parking space beside the front door. The man who got out of the car was young and overweight, dressed in a uniform that was too tight, and wore a wide leather belt around his middle that anchored a holstered handgun. He stuffed a nightstick into a loop on the belt as he walked.

The man pulled his hat on tightly as he entered the grill, looking about warily. He saw Kohl, glanced down at something in the palm of his hand, then walked directly to the booth where Kohl was seated.

“Somebody told me you were here,” he said curtly. “You got business in this town, Kohl?”

“I live here.”

“Not for the last twenty years, you haven’t. We don’t like riffraff around here. Why don’t you just get on down south a ways while you’re on the move and let the Indiana authorities keep track of you?”

“I’m paroled in the state of Michigan. But you know that.”

The young cop slid into the booth opposite Kohl. He turned his palm upright so that Kohl could see the photograph he held, shoving it forward as if it needed to be seen up close. “Pretty good likeness,” he said. “See, the fellows up at the pen send us a heads-up when scumbags like you are turned out. Complete with their latest picture. Given how good they treat you up there, I’m surprised it’s not in color. This one doesn’t do justice to your baby-blue eyes.”

Kohl sat stoically. “You got a complaint on me or something?” he asked flatly.

“We don’t need a complaint, Kohl. Look at this badge and check my nametag real close. I’m Deputy Scott Sobeski from the county sheriff’s department and you’re going to get to know my face good because I’ll be on your ass as long as you insist on staying around here. You as much as jaywalk or spit on the sidewalk and I’ll have you back behind bars in the blink of an eye. Have I made myself clear?”

“Yeah. You talk real good—for a cop.”

“How long do you think you’ll make it on the outside, Kohl? That smart mouth will get you in trouble real fast. People around here have long memories. You’re going to catch a lot of flak, and sooner or later you’ll fight back. That’ll land you right back in prison. You’d come out way ahead by hanging your hat somewhere else.”

“You got any more news for me, Deputy Scott Sobeski?”

“Just this bit of advice: I wouldn’t be caught in the dark all by myself if I was you. Some nights it’s just not safe out there.”

The deputy slid from his seat and stood over Kohl, contempt in his eyes. “And one other thing,” he said in a low voice, “if I was you I’d stay away from that gypsy waitress. She’s got plenty of trouble of her own.”

The deputy stalked out of the building and, back in his patrol car, roared out of the parking lot in a shower of dust and flying gravel. Kohl watched until the car disappeared around a corner, never changing expression. Twenty years in the state penitentiary had taught him not to show emotion. On the inside, though, he seethed with anger. He’d paid the price for what he did and no man could be more sorry nor carry a stronger sense of guilt. He remembered this town as a place with decent people who could forgive even if they couldn’t forget. Had it changed that much? Or maybe he had been wrong all along.

-End of Excerpt-

About Robert Hays

Robert Hays has been a newspaper reporter, public relations writer, magazine editor, and university professor and administrator. A native of Illinois, he taught in Texas and Missouri and retired in 2008 from a long journalism teaching career at the University of Illinois. His publications include academic journal and popular periodical articles and eleven books, including his collaborative work with General Oscar Koch, *G-2: Intelligence for Patton*.

Links to all of Hays' work through Thomas-Jacob Publishing, LLC can be found on the [Thomas-Jacob Publishing, LLC website](#).

Death of an Ego

by

W. Michael Franklin

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Death of an Ego

“WHY IN THE fuck did I *say* that?”

I don't know how much of it I really meant. It just came out in one of those conversations that couples sometimes have (often involving alcohol). What happens once one of us is gone? How will we know when the one who leaves is trying to reach us? What's the “sign” going to be?

I told her that if I left first, she'd know I was okay when a hawk landed in the back yard. It seemed plausible enough without happening so frequently that it would be impossible to really know it was me. Why a hawk? Because I used to always come to a stop whenever hawks were circling in our neighborhood, which was nearly a daily occurrence. Hawks are impressive, yet seem somehow relatable, unlike bald eagles.

Truth is, I really thought I'd be able to pull it off. I never thought of the afterlife in any great detail, but I always believed that death was not really the end. That just seemed like a waste to me. I never really thought in religious heaven/hell concepts—more like some sort of undefined energetic presence that the deceased could ultimately master to continue influencing those left behind. I didn't move beyond this nebulous concept. I just assumed that once I passed, all would be revealed to me. It didn't feel relevant—I had no plans to pass anytime soon.

Well, the universe, God, Yahweh, Jeff Bezos, Oprah—whomever/whatever is in charge failed to consult with me. One minute I'm out walking, and the next my lifeless body is just lying on the sidewalk. Didn't feel it coming, didn't feel it happen—I was just gone. A massive aneurysm. Not a bad way to go, all things considered. Much better than some long, painful, drawn-out terminal affair. But the shock was jarring. My wife, family, friends, colleagues—one minute I'm there, next minute I'm gone. No goodbye, no warning, nothing. It was, and remains, a lot to process.

I never gave much consideration to how I would be impacted when I died, because, you know, I'd be dead—not really my problem. Well, it doesn't really work that way.

So how does it work? Well, first of all you can forget about all of the “come to the light” crap. No long-passed relatives helping the transition, either. The only way I can think to describe the initial process is the worst disorientation I ever had x1000. There are no physical reference points—there's actually no physical anything. Is there sound? Is there light? At first, there's nothing but undefined chaos. Then, all of a sudden, there's just absolute nothingness. And I was convinced that I had absolutely lost my mind.

At some point (impossible to say when, as there's no time), I began to sense that something was trying to communicate with me. There was no sound; I just felt some sort of presence. At first, I thought I was having some sort of paranoid delusion. Then I began to understand that this was something separate.

It's impossible to articulate exactly how I began to understand what was being communicated. At first there were just fragments. “Stop.” “Let go.” “Accept.” And the harder I tried to comply, the more frustrated I became. “You don't understand. I have obligations. People I love are in pain, and they need me. They need to know I'm okay.”

And suddenly it comes: “You have nothing. You *are* nothing.”

Okaaaaay ... I've been inhabited by a malevolent Mr. Miyagi. *What* am I supposed to do with *that*?

“You arrogant, deluded human! It’s not enough that you think everything revolves around you when you’re on Earth—you want to monopolize eternity! You had fifty-six *years* to take care of your obligations, say what you needed to say, do what you needed to do. If your wife didn’t know how much she meant to you when you were on Earth, you think a fucking *bird* landing in her yard is going to show her now? Your story has been written—good, bad, or indifferent. It’s over.”

And at that moment, a hawk landed in my wife’s yard.

-The End-

Publisher's Note

Links to W. Michael Franklin's character study of the sheriff from Melinda Clayton's Cedar Hollow Series, "The Sheriff of Cedar Hollow," can be found on the [Thomas-Jacob Publishing, LLC website](#).

Poetry

by

Scott Zeidel

Mockingbirds and Cats

The Building Inspector

Sleepers, Awake

Lovers

Devils and Fools

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Mockingbirds and Cats

I treasure animals
that remind me
of myself

—mockingbirds
speaking in tongues

house cats,
soft alien creatures,
who evolved to sleep
on the back of my couch

like Narcissus,
I gaze into a glassy puddle
looking for my true self,
but only see the sky
with a mockingbird flying by,
—on the ground
wet footprints from the
neighborhood feral cat

The Building Inspector

a mockingbird
built a nest
in the brambles
of a cape honeysuckle
in my backyard

he packed his beak
with loads of detritus
from places unknown,
and fit them together,
like Legos

I sat, drank my afternoon tea,
and watched—
a kind of building inspector,
half meditated, half protected him
from a Cooper's hawk,
he seemed to welcome my company

sometimes he would perch
very close, and I could see his chest
rising and falling—
at night I would hear him
through my open window
calling me

Sleepers, Awake

Waiting for
consciousness—

I slept through
conception,
birth,
at least one lifetime
and many dreams

I saw my embryonic
development happening
in reverse: first brain,
then toes, fingers, heart—

I finally imploded into
the Big Bang

and rolled over
in my crib

Lovers

I noticed a critter
cowering beneath the bed,
with itty bitty eyes,
flickering

though I wanted her,

I screamed,
zipped around the bedroom, and
created a pillow maze from
the
bed
to
the
door

and clapped—

a bullet shot
through the maze,
followed by a
tail

what remained
were some pellets
and a broken heart

Devils and Fools

Their lives are like tarot cards,
with only devils and fools,
turned over through cheating.

These stigmatics are bleeding,
and flaunt it like jewels,
their lives are like tarot cards.

Their lives are fleeting,
shallow, the shallowest of pools,
turned over through cheating.

Crying, screaming, moaning, pleading,
dreaming up images and rules,
their lives are like tarot cards.

Mistakes are made by misreading,
(these most powerful moguls),
turned over through cheating.

They sleep together after meeting,
then drink the blood of innocent souls.
Their lives are like tarot cards.
turned over through cheating.

Publisher's Note

Links to Scott Zeidel's book of poetry, *Welcome*, can be found on the [Thomas-Jacob Publishing, LLC website](#).

About Scott Zeidel

Scott was born in Northern Wisconsin in 1951 and matured in the 1960s in Detroit, Michigan and the California desert. He's a hippie—he believes in peace, compassion, nature, and beauty. This is what he writes about.

He's highly educated. He's spent 60 percent of his life in school. He didn't like school. In fact, he hated it. He found very little peace, compassion, nature, and beauty in school. Just the opposite. His higher education is in music, not creative writing or English. Go figure. Or if there are any professorial types out there you can smirk and say to your scholarly friends, "It figures."

In his 40s, while still writing his Ph.D. dissertation, and suffering from academically induced PTSD, he got into a rock band and wrote lots of song lyrics. Hence, he became a poet, and never finished his degree.

He's also a classical guitarist and painter. He's married to a fabulous master gardener, humanist, poet, and novelist. Between them, they have four wonderful adult children and a beautiful grandchild.

A Final Note

We hope you've enjoyed our short stories, excerpts, and poems.

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