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PATCHWORK: A SOUTHERN FAMILY PORTRAIT

By

Rebekah Dement Farmer
B.A., Indiana University Southeast, 2007
M.A., University of Louisville, 2009

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in Humanities

Department of Humanities
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

December 2016

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A Dissertation Approved on

November 18, 2016

By the following Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Annette Allen, Dissertation Director

Dr. Michael Williams

Dr. A. Glenn Crothers

Dr. Catherine Fosl

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my loved ones.

Joe Jack Dement, 1926-2013
Ruby Geraldine Bennett Dement, 1929-

Mary Ann King McCord, 1927-2002
John Morgan McCord, 1928-1996

Ralph Ruble Dement, 1924-2012
Martha Eloise Holman Dement, 1928-2012

Mary Searcy Couch Hopkins, 1922-

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I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to a great many individuals, many of whom I may now only thank in my thoughts and when I am able to visit their graves. I sincerely hope those to whom this work is dedicated will know the depth of my love and gratitude for their inspiration and guidance, for without those formative stories from my grandparents and other older family members, I likely never would have begun this journey I have taken. My words seem inadequate as they are poor indicators of the thanks I wish to offer, but I would be ungrateful indeed if I did not mention the following individuals by name: my beloved Grandma, Mary Ann King McCord, and her beautiful sisters, Dorothy King Bragg and Marjorie King Poitevin, inspired me with tales of their father's grand hotel; my dear great-aunt Searcy Couch Hopkins helped fill an immeasurable void when my Grandma left this world too soon, and without her my understanding of Tullahoma's heyday would be woefully inadequate; my cousin Kathryn Hopkins, Aunt Searcy's youngest daughter, has been a tireless research partner when I clumsily navigated the Tennessee State Archives (and the streets leading to and from them); my cousin Searcy Dianne King, Aunt Searcy's oldest daughter (and the only individual to be born in her grandfather's hotel, as far as we know) has painted for me a vivid mental picture of the world of her childhood; the late Robert Laughlin Couch (described to me by many as "Tullahoma's historian"), Aunt Searcy's younger brother, supplied me with marvelous stories of Tullahoma in the Camp Forrest years; my aunts and uncles in Tullahoma (James and Kristian McCord, John and Michelle McCord) have

supplied untold dozens of meals and nights of lodging during my various research trips; my aunts and uncles outside Tullahoma (Stephen and Beth McDowell, Bill McCord) have graciously shared images and memories; my beloved grandparents, Joe Jack and Geraldine “Jerry” Dement, have given me more than words can express; Granddaddy’s brothers (Mac, Ralph, and John) and their wives (Louise, Martha, and Maurine, respectively) have graciously shared their memories with me, as have various cousins (Kenneth and Barbara Dement and their daughter, Mary Roma Nadeau); my Granddaddy’s cousin, Hugh McSpadden, has never met me in person but has through correspondence been an invaluable resource providing insight into the world of my great-grandparents’ youth; my grandmother’s siblings (especially her brothers Raymond and Swanson) and their families have regaled me with candid tales of their formative years; my father’s siblings (Bob, Ann, and Joey) and their spouses (Mary Ann, Richard, and Patti, respectively) have kindly fielded multiple questions (and have dutifully set aside various artifacts of family history for my perusal); and the incomparable Janie Rippy has forever altered my perspective of the world in ways I may never be able to articulate.

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Finally, to my husband Bill: you have weathered my frustration, my tears, and spending the entirety of our marriage thus far with me being a perpetual student. Our road has not been an easy one, and we've overcome more than our fair share of obstacles.

I would not be where I am without your love and support; from your enthusiasm for the fifteenth version of a section to the comfort you've offered when I was sure I couldn't continue, you've always been by my side. You forever have my gratitude and love.

ABSTRACT

PATCHWORK: A SOUTHERN FAMILY PORTRAIT

Rebekah Dement Farmer

November 18, 2016

This dissertation is a jointly scholarly and creative exploration of the potentials of autobiography. Specifically, this dissertation seeks to examine how the personal narrative may be utilized to undermine or challenge prevailing cultural myths and legends of the American South as they are manifested in master narratives propagated within an individual family's narrative. As emblems of Southern culture, these master narratives have privileged the white male experience over other Southern voices. An interdisciplinary examination of selected historical and literary texts reveals certain external challenges to the resilient master narrative, but this dissertation suggests autobiography may prove a particularly potent force to challenge the narratives from within the alleged monolith of white, upper- and middle-class Southern culture. In so doing, this dissertation aims to evaluate the tension between connection and critique as experienced by the native Southern author.

The dissertation is divided into five chapters incorporating scholarship from the fields of history, literature, and Southern cultural studies. Each chapter is comprised of five thematically linked reflective essays blending familial and personal narratives, and the chapters are connected by creative pieces, titled "interludes," offering lyrical exploration of overlapping themes and images. The first chapter contains an overview of

key thinkers and texts to establish a framework of inquiry—in short, the context for the current exploration. The second chapter examines Southern master narratives as they have been filtered through the histories of specific family units, and the third chapter explores specific Southern cultural values, including religion and the veneration of an agrarian lifestyle, adopted and adapted by white, middle-class Southern families. Examinations of gender roles and expectations comprise the fourth chapter, and the fifth chapter deals almost exclusively with questions of race.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iv
ABSTRACT.....	ix
EPIGRAPH.....	xiii
CHAPTER ONE: Our Context: On the Southern Family.....	1
Wherein I Became Their Leader: An Intellectual Journey.....	1
Journey of a Different Sort: Academic Context and Methodology.....	7
Master Narratives: The Subjugator and the Subjugated.....	21
Subversive Potential of Personal Narratives.....	34
Abandoning the Tree: A Patchwork Approach.....	53
INTERLUDE: Patchwork: A Transition from Context to Name.....	59
CHAPTER TWO: Our People: On Expectations of Class and Family Name.....	64
A Southern Inheritance.....	64
Every Old Crow: A Brief Introduction to my Maternal Lineage.....	80
Humble Beginnings: “Reflecting Upon Memories of Old Chicken House”.....	88
Number One Son.....	102
A Good Dement.....	114
INTERLUDE: Seasons: A Transition from Name to Place.....	117
CHAPTER THREE: Our Place: On Land and Labor.....	127
Sun Time.....	127
Shrine of Nature.....	129
The Unclean Beast: The Spirit and the Natural World Collide.....	140

The Masonic Curse: A Meeting of Spiritual Belief and Cultural Value.....	150
Service.....	156
INTERLUDE: Hands: A Transition from Place to Performance.....	176
CHAPTER FOUR: Our Fairer Sex: On the Southern Lady.....	184
Mothers and Daughters.....	184
I Remember That Dress.....	204
The Girls.....	209
A Peculiar Disposition.....	220
Service, Revisited.....	230
INTERLUDE: Seasons, Revisited: A Transition from Performance to Position.....	245
CHAPTER FIVE: Our Expectations: On Being Just Like Family.....	251
Moses.....	251
Five Generations.....	259
Good to the Coloreds.....	268
Faces.....	276
My Friend, Janie Rippy.....	286
EPILOGUE: Reflecting Upon a Patchwork Journey.....	289
ENDNOTES	292
CURRICULUM VITA.....	297

“The desire to reminisce arises not so much I think from the number of years you may happen to have accumulated as from the number of those who meant most to you in life who have gone on the long journey.”

--William Alexander Percy, from *Lanterns on the Levee*

CHAPTER ONE
OUR CONTEXT: ON THE SOUTHERN FAMILY

Wherein I Became Their Leader: An Intellectual Journey

The pride in his voice was palpable, and, though it was painful for him to stand, he willed himself to his feet to inquire, “Does anyone else have a *granddaughter* here?” The crowd chuckled, delighted to see the joy on their former president’s face. At the ripe old age of 28, I had earned the door prize for being the youngest person in attendance at this gathering of the National Dement Family Association, and Granddaddy was only too proud to show off his granddaughter and her interest in family history. That weekend, I listened to fellow Dements—some related distantly, but most united in last name only—expound on what made their lineage unique and what kept them digging through crumbled court records and yellowed family papers to find where their great uncle’s fifth cousin, once removed, had made his home or where their great-grandmother’s stepmother’s cousin had once appeared in the local paper for her prize-winning jam. Though not limited to Dements from the South, Dements with Southern roots had comprised the majority of this group’s founders when they first united in the late 1970s. Once I started earnestly pursuing family history as a teenager, Granddaddy had been nudging me toward involvement in this most auspicious gathering of like minds, but I’d never managed to make the time to join him at one of their bi-annual meetings. In 2011, when I could no longer ignore his failing health, I finally made the time to join him. Knowing he and Grandmother could not safely make the long drive alone, my husband

and I volunteered to take them—a rather disconcerting experience at first, as I’d long grown accustomed to resting comfortably in the assurance of Granddaddy’s ability to handle everything from complicated machinery to a delicate piece of honeycomb from one of his beehives. To admit he was no longer capable of something proved bittersweet, but, as with most things, he combatted it with humor: “I’m in the backseat!” he announced gleefully, swearing he’d let “Sally,” his nickname for my GPS system, navigate for us instead of the trusted and worn atlas he kept in the glovebox of their Lincoln Town Car.

During our trip, he didn’t have to tell me family was of utmost importance, and we didn’t need to discuss our shared affinity for old documents and photographs. We shared wide eyes over images and stories presented by others in attendance, and he gave me the warmest of encouraging smiles when my time came to share with the group. I’d gathered a collection of documents about one of our wealthy ancestors (and he was probably our only wealthy ancestor, truthfully), a Rutherford County, Tennessee, settler by the name of Cader Dement. When I showed snippets of probate records documenting Cader’s wealth, Granddaddy’s nod of silent, proud approval echoed through me. As I prepared to discuss Cader’s will, in which he freed two of his many slaves, I knew I had to abandon my plan to explain the relative hollowness of this action: the slaves Cader freed were old and likely infirm, so the gesture was a token of paternalism granting a lessening of daily labor at best. For Granddaddy, as for Cader’s contemporaries, the act was a symbol of Cader’s magnanimity, proof positive of his status as a respectable, Southern gentleman. I had the opportunity to challenge that assumption, to show this particular manumission had more to do with control than it did with freedom. I looked at

Granddaddy's face, beaming with pride at the work I'd done and the proof I provided of our presumably noble Dement heritage. I looked, and I allowed the myth to obscure what I knew to be true.

There had been a time I gladly would have accepted Granddaddy's interpretation of almost anything over that of any other educator, no matter their credentials. A master of all things practical with a gift for explaining even the most complex of ideas in simple terms, Granddaddy was himself a gifted educator, teaching hundreds of students in his twenty-plus years with the Agriculture Department at Middle Tennessee State University as well as countless others who worked for him, attended his church, or happened to cross his path in any number of ways. If you had a question, he generally had an answer and could deliver it in such a way you would wholly enjoy the learning experience. I accepted his assertion of states' rights as the true cause of the Civil War without hesitation, and I merely smiled to myself when my junior high history teacher attempted to convince my classmates and me otherwise. My unwavering belief in Granddaddy's worldview continued through high school. Even when undergraduate history courses suggested some of Granddaddy's interpretations of the slaveholding South might have been skewed (he insisted, for instance, many masters were good to their slaves and always treated them "just like family"), I could reassure myself of the legitimacy of his viewpoint by noting he had never been openly racist: never would someone like Joe Jack Dement have uttered a racial slur, and he always treated Mr. Luther, the old black man with a nearby farm and shared interest in dairy cattle, with the utmost respect and cordiality. It never occurred to me that Luther was the man's first name, and that he always, always called Granddaddy "Mr. Dement." When Granddaddy voiced disapproval

of MTSU's appointment of a black Chancellor ("I just don't think he's fit for the job," Granddaddy said), I assumed Granddaddy knew something I didn't about the man's credentials. The mantra of "just like family" stuck in my brain, and I couldn't let myself believe a man as charming, gracious, and well-respected as my granddaddy could possibly believe an entire race of people were destined to be inferior simply because of the color of their skin.

As my foray into Southern history deepened (and I received the bulk of my instruction from a liberal professor from Canada, no less), I found myself selectively editing what I shared with Granddaddy, and I became adept at emphasizing the facts and findings I knew would please him. I didn't tell him I'd determined slaves were most certainly not treated like family, and I didn't tell him I'd wept reading some of the atrocities committed in the name of white supremacy. After my maternal grandmother's death in 2002, my interests temporarily shifted away from the Old South to the much-romanticized years of World War Two, and I soon became enamored with the world of my grandparents' youth. The liberal Canadian professor had also introduced me to the wonders of oral history, and, tape recorder in hand, I set out talking to anyone who wanted to share their memories (rose-tinted and otherwise) of Middle Tennessee during the war. I had no shortage of volunteers, and I quickly amassed close to thirty interviews. My efforts earned me an undergraduate research fellowship and eventual publication in the *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, and the pride of seeing my name in print was second only to the pride of handing Granddaddy and Grandmother their own copy of the journal.

I easily continued my mastery of selective sharing as I pursued a master's degree in literature; I simply didn't tell him I'd become drawn to Southern authors willing to

challenge the status quo, and I only had to mention the title of my course on African American poetry once to know he probably wouldn't be interested in discussing the particulars of that class. A course on the Black Arts Movement was similarly left out of the rotation of topics for conversation, and my thesis topic, using trauma theory to explore the fiction of British author Rebecca West, granted me a reprieve from my mental balancing act. A Master of Arts in English was a respectable accomplishment for a good Southern girl, as was the start of my teaching career. When I began my doctoral studies I teetered toward uncharted territory; no one on the Dement side of the family had an impractical doctorate (though we did boast a medical doctor and a physical therapist), but, since I had proven myself adept at teaching, the foray was still deemed acceptable for someone of my gender and position. Once my required coursework was completed, I used graduate history seminars to fulfill electives, and Granddaddy was delighted to know I'd once again be studying the antebellum South. He was eager for me to know of Abner Dement, the ancestor who had been "murdered by an unruly slave," and he was equally as eager for me to know the punishment of Abner's murderer: the slave had been hung on the gates of the Dement plantation, his body left to rot as a warning to others. When I could find no evidence of this event (or of a Dement plantation owned by Abner, for that matter), he remained undaunted; there were several years missing from the newspaper collection at the Rutherford County Archives, after all, and the Tennessee State Library and Archives, though boasting an impressive collection of antebellum newspapers, still yielded no mention of the fateful event. Thus unable to support or refute the grisly legend (and Granddaddy, being a reasonable man, understood why I couldn't attest to the story's veracity in the paper I submitted at the end of the seminar on

the antebellum South), I focused instead on Abner's brother, Cader. His exploits were enough to earn me an A in the seminar, and they were enough to impress the gathering of Dements at my first National Dement Family Association experience.

Within two years of that most memorable road trip to celebrate all things Dement, Granddaddy's health declined so rapidly that my balancing act became quite easy. He was in too much pain to focus for long, but he remained proud of my pursuits and quick to commend my ongoing interest in family history. "You're the family historian now," I was constantly told. I shirked my duties after Granddaddy died in July 2013, for I simply could not will myself to attend that year's gathering of the auspicious NDFA just a few short weeks after he had passed. Grandmother went alone with another relative, but she phoned me several times to let me know I was missed, and that she was lonely. I knew I couldn't miss again. In 2015, she wasn't well enough to attend, so my husband joined me for a long drive to Missouri. The members welcomed me with open arms, as many of them had known and loved my grandparents for longer than I'd been alive. They wept with me as I gave a presentation on Granddaddy's role in World War Two, and at the conclusion of the gathering, they unanimously elected me as their new president. It had taken just one simple sentence to convince me to accept the position: "Your granddaddy would be so proud."

Journey of a Different Sort: Academic Context and Methodology

I can't pinpoint the exact moment I became aware of the disparity between what I'd been told and what I was learning from textbooks and lectures, nor can I tell you exactly why I became fascinated in Southern history, literature, and culture beyond its direct application to my family history. My interest began as a matter of seeking context, certainly: I wanted to know more about what life had been like for my grandparents, great-grandparents, and so on, and my older relatives were so pleased with my pursuits it seemed only natural to continue. I never considered myself an apologist, and, surprisingly, I often joined my classmates in mocking what we imagined to be the mindset of illiterate Confederates, blindly fighting for their backward, racist views. It came as some surprise to read Charles Dew's *Apostles of Disunion* and Paul Finkelman's *Defending Slavery* as an undergraduate and discover the eloquence with which slavery had been defended. All defenses and calls to action were anchored by the assumption of white supremacy, but I was startled to discover how ardently and elegantly the viewpoints had been articulated. "Maybe my ancestors weren't just ignorant bumpkins after all," I remarked in class one day, much to the amusement of the professor. I clarified my position, saying I found the rationale abhorrent but the execution commendable. Southerners weren't all uneducated rubes, I reasoned, and the values my modern classmates and I found most repulsive had been vibrantly and passionately expressed by individuals whose command of language far surpassed my own. Thus armed with proof of Southern intelligence, I pardoned my ancestors—surely among the educated, I assumed—as merely being products of their time. I couldn't blame them for

participating in their respective cultures, no matter how repugnant I found certain aspects, any more than I could blame my parents for wearing bellbottoms and listening to Dan Fogelberg. The comparison was hardly analogous, to say the least, but it was enough to temporarily pacify the gnawing feeling of shame creeping up my spine. I hadn't, after all, witnessed any of these actions myself, and I had no proof at that point suggesting my ancestors hadn't been good masters. Maybe, just maybe, Granddaddy's version of things had some validity after all.

Perhaps I had simply assumed the inherent Southern tendency to naturally accept paradox without question, thus allowing me to categorize actions I found distasteful or abhorrent as simply being a product of their respective time periods. By divorcing my awareness of subjugation from my own familial attachment to the subjugators, I was able to continue critically examining the foreign landscape of the past while simultaneously—and dare I say willfully—ignoring my ancestors' culpability. “Why should you feel guilt for the sins of your fathers?” I asked, seeking a way to rationalize my uneasiness. I allowed the love for my grandparents and my sense of familial loyalty to cloud my judgment far longer than I should have. Granddaddy in particular had so profoundly shaped the way I viewed the world, both as a child and as an adult, that I just couldn't bring myself to question his beliefs.

How, then, did I reach the point of no return? What finally moved me from blind acceptance to awareness of the role my family—and even I, myself—had played in the perpetuation of the white South’s most cherished myths and legends?

The chapters following this one comprise a memoir of sorts, a reflection of how I’ve come to understand my Southern background, and of the intellectual and emotional journeys I’ve taken to do so. These journeys have been more personal, more intimate, than I ever could have anticipated, for when I first set out to examine my family’s history I had no intention of examining my own relationship with the ongoing narrative. Instead, I had intended to examine my family’s interpretation and adoption of Southern cultural values, myths, and legends as dispassionately as possible, employing a wholly scholarly lens to analyze my family’s history and experiences as I would any other topic. I have failed to remain objective, but the admission of this failure has proved useful in and of itself: in acknowledging my subjectivity and my biases, I can better understand their origins and their impacts. In admitting my shortcomings and shortsightedness, I can

endeavor to more fully understand their implications. To do so, I must first recount the intellectual trajectory, at least in part, of my forays into the fields of Southern history, literature, and cultural studies. I do not claim to provide an all-encompassing analysis of each relevant theme or idea, but I must in good faith establish the scholarly framework from which my own approach has been derived.

Foremost in my journey have been the interwoven, overarching themes of class, gender, and race. To discuss these themes in their entirety as they relate to Southern culture would be a herculean task indeed, so what I offer here is simply intended to be an overview of the thinkers and texts I've found most influential and provocative. Because the personal narrative is featured so prominently in history and literature, the two primary fields from which my understanding of these themes has been gleaned, I must also address the significance of autobiography and its subversive potential. As with the themes themselves, I do not claim to provide a comprehensive overview of autobiographical theory. Rather, I have included concepts and thinkers I have found most applicable to the understanding of Southern history, literature, and culture.

On Issues of Class

Though wealth could certainly be an indicator of social class, the acquisition of material goods alone did not secure one's position within white Southern society. Rather, the manifestation of certain codes of behavior provided the primary demarcation of social rank. Paternalism, particularly as conveyed in Eugene Genovese's 1974 *Roll Jordan, Roll*, has provided my primary framework for understanding these codes of behavior as they pertain to matters of race. Racial interactions will be explored more fully in the

following sections, but, as racial subjugation functioned as an indicator of social class, the concept of paternalism as it pertains to both race and class merits an introduction here. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* defines paternalism as “the interference of a state or an individual with another person, against their will, and defended or motivated by a claim that the person interfered with will be better off or protected from harm.”¹ As manifested in Southern culture, this interference represented an informal contractual obligation: the benefactor, in exchange for his interference, could expect a certain return for his investment. In the case of class-based paternalism, the benefactor could expect the loyalty and allegiance of his alleged social inferiors, united with him in part by their common whiteness. In the case of race-based paternalism, the master demanded the loyalty of those allegedly benefitting from his guidance and in return granted them a quasi-humanity, the semblance of affection, a few small privileges (such as an occasional pig for their own consumption), and certain limited forms of protection provided they did not step out of line.

The concept of paternalism alone, however, is an insufficient explanation of the longevity of this mindset, for white Southerners of a certain class continued to expect the respect of their so-called inferiors for generations after the end of slavery. In his classic *Southern Honor: Ethic and Behavior in the Old South*, historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown provides a detailed analysis of a concept I found to be a compelling explanation for many of the behaviors I had both read and witnessed: the concept of honor. According to Wyatt-Brown, the ideal of honor is a seminal cultural value shaping individual behavior, familial relationships, and communal interactions. By following the “rule of honor,” white Southerners could assure themselves of “conduct[ing] their lives by the highest

ethical standards,” thereby making “peace with God’s natural order.” Following this rule “required the rejection of the lowly, the alien, and the shamed. Such unhappy creatures belonged outside the circle of honor. Fate had so decreed.”² Subjugation was a matter of honor, then—a naturally accepted code of conduct veritably mandated by cultural norms.

Honor, like paternalism, provided justification for stratification by class as well as subjugation by race. As Wyatt-Brown explains,

Honor resides in the individual as his understanding of who he is and where he belongs in the ordered ranks of society...It is, at least in traditional terms, both internal to the claimant, so that it motivates him toward behavior socially approved, and external to him, because only by the response of observers can he ordinarily understand himself. The internal and external aspects of honor are inalienably connected because honor serves as ethical mediator between the individual and the community by which he is assessed and in which he also must locate himself in relation to others.³

A man’s honor, determined by and dependent on his place in the community, influenced both private and public behaviors. In some instances, the two were indistinguishable. As Wyatt-Brown observes, “The inner life of the family was inseparable from its public appearance.”⁴ According to Wyatt-Brown, the broad concept of honor alone is insufficient to describe the social code of the Old South, particularly as it was manifested among different social classes. He notes: “Honor in the Old South applied to all white classes, though with manifestations appropriate to each ranking. Few could escape it altogether. Gentility, on the other hand, was a more specialized, refined form of honor, in which moral uprightness was coupled with high social position.”⁵ Wyatt-Brown suggests “three components appeared to be necessary for public recognition of gentility in the Old South: sociability, learning, and piety.”⁶ For the modern reader, wealth seems conspicuously absent as an indicator of honor or gentility; for the white Southerner of

that time period, however, wealth alone could never purchase admission to the upper tiers of society. Simply put, affluence was not part of the self-image embraced by members of the ruling class⁷ and those who wished to emulate them.

Conspicuously absent as well is the term “religion,” though Wyatt-Brown’s use of “piety” implies internalized moral values. Religion, after all, could be manipulated by external forces, but a man’s piety, as a component of his honor, was a testament to his individual fortitude and, thus, an indicator of his rightful place of mastery over those beneath him. However, Wyatt-Brown demonstrates the influence of evangelical Christianity on the concept of honor, noting how it had “severely altered the characteristics that defined the ideal Southern gentleman” by the mid-nineteenth century. He writes:

“High-mindedness,” magnanimity, and a sense of self-worth continued to be adjuncts of manly gentility, however imperfect their realization in practice. But much more easily discernible and therefore more readily acquired was piety. That virtue, however, was also the subject of some ambivalence in the public forum. A long anticlerical tradition among the upper classes of Virginia and the Carolinas was bound to affect the way men perceived religious attributes.

Ultimately, “inner motivation rested upon Stoic, not Christian precept. One was to imagine public scrutiny, not expect alienation from God or even one’s own sensibilities.”⁸

This is not to say, of course, that the Southern man would have eschewed organized religion entirely. As scholars such as Larry Tise⁹ and Charles Irons¹⁰ have demonstrated, Christianity provided, in many cases, another justification—and a customizable means of personal control—for the continued subjugation of the African race. I cannot presume to know whether all slaveholders embracing Christianity did so

primarily as a means of slave management, but I can conclude from the literary accounts of authors such as the white southern heretic abolitionist Angelina Grimke what became of Southerners attempting to employ Christian values in defense of slaves' humanity rather than in defense of slavery's perpetuation.

Whether measured by his piety, his hospitality, or the grace with which he spent his leisure time, in the patriarchal, paternalistic South, a man's honor and his subsequent place in society were dependent on not only his own behavior but the behavior of his family as well. Though "family" could be used to describe all members of a man's household, both white and black, perhaps the foremost meter of a man's honor—beyond his individual behavior, that is—was the comportment of the women in his life.

On Issues of Gender

The white Southern woman as an archetype has been so frequently lauded in literature and in culture that Wyatt-Brown, writing in 1982, noted, "The southern adulation of women needs little elaboration here." Following his lead, I will provide only limited evidence of the mythologized Southern lady. Though somewhat dated, Anne Firor Scott's 1970 *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics* has provided my single most comprehensive source for antebellum depictions and expectations of the white middle- and upper-class Southern woman. From Wyatt-Brown, though, I have gained a better understanding of why, beyond Biblical precepts, such expectations existed. He notes:

It should always be stressed that there was a dual vision of the ideal, one always present in Western popular thought. The Southern woman was supposed to be not only ethereal but also hardworking, politically aware (though never "to mingle in

discussion”), and prudent in household. These were virtues of subservience.¹¹

These “virtues of subservience,” like other womanly virtues, may have been lauded as signifiers of worth beyond rubies¹², but, as in most patriarchal cultures, a woman’s worth was determined primarily by her relationship to a man. In short, while adopting such character traits as prudence and political awareness might have benefitted the Southern woman as an individual, she embraced them because of their contribution to her man’s manly honor and its consequential perception in the larger community. Just as the embodiment of female virtues could serve to bolster a man’s reputation, so too could an attack on those womanly virtues, substantiated or otherwise, threaten a man’s standing. According to Wyatt-Brown,

Nothing could arouse such fury in traditional societies as an insult hurled against a woman of a man’s household, most especially his mother...The intensity of feelings arose from the social fact that a male’s moral bearing resided not in him alone, but also in his women’s standing. To attack his wife, mother, or sister was to assault the man himself.¹³

The retribution for such an assault was, of course, a matter of honor undertaken as much for male pride as for the vindication of the woman attacked. As Wyatt-Brown explains, “The male identified that inner part of himself with his women. The woman’s responsibility was solely to make sacred that internal space.” As such, “They should have little cause to defend themselves, a male imperative.”¹⁴

Honor, as presented by Wyatt-Brown, is a masculine trait. The Southern woman needn’t defend herself from attack, nor need she concern herself with intellectual or other pursuits for the sake of personal edification. Instead, the woman need primarily concern herself with the intertwined duties of upholding the domestic expectations set by the man

of her household (whether father, husband, or other male relative) and with comporting herself according to the standards of her social class. In short, Southern women “were not expected to be mere ornaments, but were to fulfill duties commensurate with male prestige.”¹⁵

On Issues of Race

Despite my granddaddy’s influence, I was aware from a fairly young age of the horrors perpetuated in the name of white supremacy. Reading even a sanitized version of Sojourner Truth’s quest for freedom in elementary school instilled a fundamental awareness of racial inequality, and future history classes further reinforced my understanding that my family’s fairly uneventful past was largely due to our skin color. As an undergraduate, I wept openly when reading Mamie Till-Mobley’s biography of her son, and as a graduate student I was forever moved by Walter Johnson’s *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market*. I could never deny the brutal realities of racial prejudice and subjugation, but I struggled to fathom how such atrocities could have been perpetuated by a people—my people!—claiming such traits as gentility and honor. I may never understand why racism exists, but I must endeavor to understand how it has impacted interracial interactions, both historically and currently.

As Genovese’s *Roll, Jordan, Roll* illustrates in its opening chapter, paternalism often provided the external justification for slavery; simply put, masters believed slavery to be a necessary evil and themselves to be the moral guardians of the allegedly inferior, inherently immoral race. Left to their own devices, they thought, the enslaved would undoubtedly descend into debauchery and lawlessness—conditions assumed by many to

be the natural state of the darker races (Native Americans too, it must be remembered, were thought to have needed the guidance of white morality) Because self-moderation by such base peoples was virtually impossible, white guardians had to shoulder the burden of morality for themselves and for those in their charge; complaints regarding the weight of this burden are littered throughout antebellum correspondence between slaveholders male and female, but the burden was a compulsory price for both the social status of the slaveholder and the ultimate fate of the human chattel. In short, perpetual bondage under the guidance of the self-proclaimed benevolent slaveholder, no matter how burdensome the slaveholder might claim the guidance to be, was necessary to secure the eternal soul of the immoral slave. As Genovese explains, however,

Southern paternalism, like every other paternalism, had little to do with Ole Massas's ostensible benevolence, kindness, and good cheer. It grew out of the necessity to discipline and morally justify a system of exploitation. It did encourage kindness and affection, but it simultaneously encouraged cruelty and hatred. The racial distinction between master and slave heightened the tension inherent in an unjust social order.¹⁶

The longevity of such an unjust system may seem unfathomable to the modern reader of any race. As Wyatt-Brown explains, "Today we would not define as an ethical scheme a code of morality that could legitimate injustice—racial or class. Yet so it was defined in the Old South."¹⁷ For the white Southerner, racial subjugation was a matter of honor—a naturally accepted code of conduct veritably mandated by cultural norms. Such a mindset had unintended consequences, however. According to Genovese, "Southern paternalism may have reinforced racism as well as class exploitation, but it also unwittingly invited its victims to fashion their own interpretation of the social order it was intended to justify."¹⁸ Though they were often discounted and obstructed, these

alternative interpretations could not be silenced indefinitely. In this regard, the subversive potential of the personal narrative—the articulation of these alternative interpretations of Southern paternalism—has proven vital to the eventual dismantling of the white South’s most cherished myths.

On Autobiography

From Sojourner Truth on, I find I’ve been fascinated by the individual voice. I wouldn’t fully appreciate the forces shaping which voices were heard and which were not until undergraduate courses in history and literature introduced me to the tools of historiography and literary criticism. The individual voices heard through history, I soon realized, were not a matter of chance. To elaborate on the progression of my understanding here would be a daunting (and lengthy) task, so I will instead focus my efforts on one of the latter stages of my evolving understanding: my first encounter with women’s autobiography as a means of critical inquiry. The two preeminent scholars in the field, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, have provided a critical plank in the framework of my own approach to autobiographical writing. In the introduction to one of their seminal works, *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, the authors argue:

If feminism has revolutionized literary and social theory, the texts and theory of women’s autobiography have been pivotal for revising our concepts of women’s life issues—growing up female, coming to voice, affiliation, sexuality and textuality, the life cycle. Crucially, the writing and theorizing of women’s lives has often occurred in texts that place an emphasis on collective processes while questioning the sovereignty and universality of the solitary self. Autobiography has been employed by many women writers to write themselves into history. Not only feminism but also literary and cultural theory have felt the impact of women’s autobiography as a previously unacknowledged mode of making visible formerly invisible subject.¹⁹

The prospect of making the “formerly invisible subject” visible resonated deeply, for many of the Southern autobiographical writings I’d found most engaging served this precise function. Indeed, Smith and Watson observe, “Autobiographies by women and people of color introduce stirring narratives of self-discovery that authorize new subjects who claim kinship in a literature of possibility.”²⁰

Such a “literature of possibility” was acknowledged only reluctantly—and as a result of concentrated efforts by feminist activists in multiple fields. “Influential early feminist literary critics,” including Ellen Moers and Elaine Showalter, “interrogated the history of patriarchy and the invisibility of women’s texts and voices in dominant literary and academic culture.” Their work also addressed marginalized genres, “modes of private autobiographical writing” previously dismissed or underrepresented. Smith and Watson conclude: “In recovering the long-out-of-print writings of women over centuries and framing them as a tradition rather than as ‘marginal’ or ‘failed’ efforts to write master narratives for male audiences, these pioneering critics cracked literary history wide open.” Scholars in other fields offered similar challenges; Smith and Watson note the work of female historians to “redirect the attention of their discipline from large-scale political events to the social history of everyday subjects and practices.” Their efforts resulted in a “call for reading a woman’s personal narrative as a separate genre,” thus inviting students and scholars alike to consider “models of heroic womanhood absent from their own education.” As Smith and Watson suggest, “In a literary canon and a Western tradition that had ‘othered’ women, whether as goddesses or demons, on pedestals or in back rooms, this effort to reclaim women’s lives and discover how women would speak ‘in their own words’ was an essential initiatory gesture.”²¹

My understanding of autobiographical texts thus broadened, I had to determine what, if anything, united the subjugator and the subjugated. What notes of commonality could be found in the voices of the oppressors and the voices of the oppressed? Did certain aspects of Southern identity transcend race, class, and gender? I do not claim to offer a definitive resolution to these questions, but I have found an intriguing hypothesis in James Cobb's nuanced analysis of Southern identity in his 2005 text, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity*. He writes:

In trying to understand some of those who have struggled most thoughtfully with the idea of southern identity, nothing is so clear as the importance of their own personal connections with a particular place, family, and community to their sense not only of what it meant to be southern but, more critically, their sense of who they were as individuals.²²

Perhaps, then, the point of connection is the understanding of that relationship: the personal connection, one's own roots, hold the key to understanding both self and Southern identity.

Master Narratives: The Subjugators and the Subjugated

The tendency to romanticize the past is a fairly human trait, but in the South it's been perfected to an art form—a cultural habit as invasive as kudzu, seemingly innocuous when it first sprouts but capable, if left unchecked, of coiling and curling its way around anything in its path until inanimate objects and indigenous species alike are left hunkered and suffocating under its verdant, fragrant weight. Many in the South are content to act as though the emerald veneer of myth and whitewashed half-truths were solid, as though the mass of vines matters more than what lies beneath. Those whose lives and narratives are obscured and muted by the veneer were the first to challenge the myth, to peel back its layers and reveal the reality. The individual narrative is a remarkably efficient tool for such a task, and one need look no further than the slave narrative for evidence of its power to undermine the master narratives propagated by cultural elites. Efficient though the narrative may be, a people stubbornly wed to their legends and illusions of grandeur are quick to justify the actions of the many by discounting the experience of the one. As such, multiple narratives and approaches are needed to fully expose and topple the perpetuated myths of harmony and homogeneity; the staunchest defenders may never be woken from the hypnotic trance of denial, but the numbers of these defenders consistently dwindle as the narratives of the marginalized continue to infiltrate cultural consciousness—and as years pass, and the desperate grip on the oft-repeated refrains of “how things were and how they should be” begins to loosen.

Perhaps Southerners have become particularly adept at clutching the illogical and the outdated because of the almost countless paradoxes inherent to white Southern

culture—a culture that’s been historically insular and often hostile to outside critique. We expect our women to be fragile, virginal, and pure before marriage, masters of flirtation and male flattery during courtship, and strong but silent mistresses (for we cannot call them masters, though they may fulfill the very same roles) of the domestic sphere. We fondly embrace individuals of African descent with seemingly mutual affection, all the while actively supporting systemic subjugation. Indeed, we white Southerners have been primed to accept contradictions almost since birth: we are all God’s children, but even the Heavenly Father surely recognizes (and condones, according to some) the pecking order amongst us. We might all be children invited to sit at His table, but some of the children are “naturally” destined, by the color of their skin or the families to which they are born, to sit at the table in the kitchen rather than the dining room. These often unspoken rules of interaction have embedded themselves into the Southern mindset partially by way of a specific narrative form: the master narrative.

Defined by historian Jason Phillips as “stories masquerading as knowledge or truth that promote the interests of white patriarchy past and present”²³, Southern master narratives privilege whites (and white men, specifically) not only as the allegedly natural masters of allegedly inferior races but as the masters of allegedly inferior classes and genders as well. Categorizing these narratives has proved a problematic task indeed, for each attempt reminds me how insidiously intertwined they have become as they’ve woven themselves into nearly every aspect of Southern culture. As such, the following groupings—defined briefly here and expanded later in this section—are admittedly imperfect, but I remain hopeful they will prove a valuable aid in synthesizing my ideas and observations, as well as my process of self-inquiry.

Narratives of ancestry, in my estimation, encompass myths and expectations of family name, including related, class-specific behaviors mandated by individual families. More often than not, such behaviors are aspirational: in other words, the family often strives to embody values of a higher socioeconomic class than the one to which it actually belongs. This mindset manifests itself in illusions of past grandeur in terms of both wealth and ancestry, a deliberate self-delusion white Southern author Dorothy Allison brilliantly undermines in her 1996 collection of autobiographical performance pieces, *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*: “I was born trash in a land where the people all believe themselves natural aristocrats. Ask any white Southerner. They’ll take you back two generations, say, ‘Yeah, we had a plantation.’ The hell we did.”²⁴ Though few of my ancestors were significantly wealthier than the marginalized lower classes Allison seeks to reclaim and redeem in her works, they’ve largely remained stalwart in their assumed superiority over those they judge as lower in class standing—and practically incapable of making an admission as frank and direct as Allison’s. In many ways, the lauded lineage touted by these narratives of ancestry shapes the behaviors propagated by the second two groups of narratives: narratives of place and narratives of patriarchy. In short, the family name and its accompanying legends—exaggerated, outright fabricated, or otherwise—influences the actions of individual family units in both private and public spheres. In similar fashion, the legends inform the dynamic and fluctuating actions of the individual, serving to further reinforce the perpetuation of the mythologized, master narrative.

For my purposes, narratives of place denote intrinsic values, or how the family is to function as a unit. Within my family’s narratives, these sagas include the veritable

worship of the agrarian lifestyle, a strict adherence to traditional religious belief, and the perpetual subservience of women. In matters of both religious expression and relations between genders, weakness is not permitted: family members must remain stoic in the performance of their duties with no voiced questioning of the tasks and demeanors assigned to them. Weakness, however, is granted a notable exception in the case of women, and then only inasmuch as it renders them dependent on men. In other words, the woman must be strong enough to fulfill her roles within the household (along with any public roles the man to whom she remains faithfully subservient deems appropriate), but she must be weak enough to remain incapable of functioning without the patriarch's guidance.

My final grouping, narratives of patriarchy, dictates the family's relationship with the world beyond the domestic sphere, and includes control of both outward actions—particularly cross-racial ones—and inner mindsets regarding those actions. In my observation, no honest dialogue exists of why race relations are to be conducted in a certain way; instead, emphasis is given to how such behaviors are to be implemented in daily interactions. In short, we must be benevolent, we must never refer to black women as ladies, and we must cease associating with black children once we are past a certain age. We will receive no explanation as to why these things must be so, as older generations—and those before them—have largely accepted these relations, including segregation and other forms of institutionalized racism, as matters of common sense meriting no further justification.

Master Narratives of Ancestry: The Family Name

With the possible exceptions of Southern pride and Southern honor, the Southern family name, itself intrinsically linked to pride and honor, is likely the most iconic component of white Southern culture. An obsession with establishing ancestry began in the antebellum era, as noted by W.J. Cash in *The Mind of the South*:

Many Southerners turned ultimately, in all seriousness and complete faith, to carrying their line back to such mythical personages as Brutus, the eponymous founder of Britain, and Scota, the daughter of Pharaoh... In male or (more often) female incarnation, they were to be found, in these years, not only in every community, but, in one degree or another, in practically every family of any pretensions.²⁵

Cash's withering critique notwithstanding, pretentiousness could indeed be listed among the foremost of native Southern character traits—not that any self-respecting white Southerner would admit to such a thing, of course. This importance of this alleged connection to noble ancestry has been well-documented, most notably by William R. Taylor in his 1957 work *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character*. Within the text, Taylor traces the origins and lasting impacts of cultural differences many attributed to the original settlement of Northern and Southern states. Proponents of the theory suggested the regions had been settled by the descendants of opposing parties of the English Civil War; the Cavaliers, adhering to the values of English country gentry, settled in the South, and the Roundheads, embracing values of “a leveling, go-getting utilitarian society”²⁶ settled in the North. This cultural divide, according to some, served to exacerbate regional tensions leading up to the Civil War, but Taylor and other scholars have proven little if any demographic evidence exists to support such genealogical connections.

In more recent scholarship, the power of these presumed ancestral connections has been traced in antebellum literature. James Cobb's 2005 *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* provides a compelling overview of the Cavalier legend as it has been examined in history and literature. Notably, Cobb describes John Pendleton Kennedy's 1832 novel *Swallow Barn* as "the defining literary contribution to the enduring image of a southern-planter cavalier."²⁷ Citing the national popularity of Kennedy's novel and other works championing the merits of the Cavalier myth, Cobb suggests that the myth provided a welcome respite from the "national obsession with the accumulation of wealth" spurred by the Jacksonian era. Cobb contends, "This encouraged many Americans, North and South, to regard the laid-back planter-aristocrat as an appealing symbol of a bygone era when idealism and respect for tradition had supposedly trumped the lust for money and material luxuries."²⁸ In short, Americans valued what the Cavalier symbolized, regardless of the veracity of his claimed origins.

While generally lacking numerical substantiation for claims of ancestry, such "fictional sociology,"²⁹ as Taylor deems it, gained traction as a sort of scapegoat for those benefitting from highlighting Southern distinctiveness. According to Taylor, white Southerners "persisted in seeing themselves as different and, increasingly, they tended to reshape this acknowledged difference into a claim of superiority."³⁰ The foremost justification for such claims of superiority remained rooted in white supremacy: claims of noble ancestry, after all, implied purity of race as well as class. As cited by Cobb, Grace Elizabeth Hale, author of *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South*, explores the conflation of "white" and "Southern" as synonymous descriptors of identity. She suggests the association functioned as "an identity to create and empower within an

internal dynamic of white versus black and an external dialect of southern versus northern.”³¹ By virtue of their ancestry—and, by definition, their race—white Southerners could continue clinging to a self-identity established through the subjugation of others.

Whether manifested as the thinly veiled class prejudice of Rick Bragg’s teacher as he described her in *All Over but the Shoutin’*, a woman whose actions were respectably disguised as concern for his comfort by suggesting he would be more at ease with his “own kind,” or as outright disdain for the lower classes, master narratives of ancestry perpetuate justification of a paternalistic mindset and mannerisms. In short, those of aristocratic heritage—even those with embellished or fabricated pedigrees—are bound by inherited duty to uphold the standards of their forefathers, imaginary or otherwise. Such class-specific standards dictate behaviors in public and private spheres alike, though the latter are likely more difficult to challenge. In essence, while agents of social change have rendered some displays of class-based prejudices no longer socially acceptable, even the most potent social movement is often hard-pressed to infiltrate the most guarded of all sacred Southern institutions: the Southern family household.

Master Narratives of Place: The Function of Familial Values in the Private Sphere

For many families in my lineage—and indeed for many families in the white South—the Southern family household is anchored first and foremost by an inborn attachment to the land. Having been championed by Thomas Jefferson himself, worship of the agrarian lifestyle remains a hallmark of Southern culture, with expressions ranging from the coordinated efforts of the Southern Agrarians who took their stand against the

dehumanizing forces of industrialization to the daily interactions of individuals whose ideas were rarely published but equally as passionate. The November 2010 edition of *Tennessee Farm Bureau News*, for example, features my grandparents in its monthly “Anchors in Agriculture” section. The article outlines their background and accomplishments, emphasizing their lifelong connections to the land and culminating with their personal reflections of their experiences. Grandmother, ever the educator, stresses learning in her response:

So many young people are removed from the farm. They need to be told and educated about where their food, fiber, and fuel comes from. You have to take care of what you have and leave it better for those coming after you, and teaching the children and young people is one reason we were so proud to be involved in Farm Bureau.

Granddaddy’s response, however, is a bit more philosophical: “Ag is a way of life: it’s in your blood and you can’t get it out. You’re always conscious of it. It anchors your very existence.”³² The veneration of the agrarian lifestyle, in addition to being reified in Farm Bureau newsletters, is often represented in attachments to specific places. My great-grandfather’s farm is still referred to in our family’s lexicon as “the home place,” even though no one in my immediate family has farmed that land in nearly fifty years.

Veneration of the land has been similarly as idealized as another sacred Southern image: the Southern woman. Anne Firor Scott’s *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930*, provides a compelling overview of the antebellum foundation of this Southern tradition and traces the effects of the myth as a cultural value through the early twentieth century. Though many of the character traits attributed to the Southern lady are not uniquely Southern in and of themselves, Firor Scott suggests that the extent to which such traits were idolized distinguishes them from other similar attributes connected to

comparable archetypes in other cultures and regions thanks in part to the popularity of gendered stereotypes perpetuated in plantation novels. The idealized and idolized Southern lady, as with other emblems of the South, is therefore rife with irreconcilable contradictions. She, according to the master narrative, is most certainly the weaker sex, but her weakness is permitted only inasmuch as it exists in service to men: in other words, weakness should keep her in her rightful place below the man in her life, but it should not prevent her from fulfilling her duties within the household. Her subservience, in fact, was generally considered part of her charm. As Firor Scott notes, “It was her nature to be self-denying, and she was given to suffering in silence, a characteristic said to endear her to men.”³³

Through the effective pairing of personal narratives and various published texts functioning as mouthpieces for master narratives, including newspaper editorials and early ladies magazines, Firor Scott demonstrates a lasting fissure between the idealized Southern lady and the reality of her daily existence. Such fissures, even when recognized and lamented by those forced to navigate them, could not be voiced openly. As Firor Scott explains:

Open complaint about their lot was not the custom among southern ladies; yet their contented acceptance of the home as the “sphere to which God had appointed them” was sometimes more apparent than real. Most southern women would not have tried, or known how, to free themselves from the system which was supposed to be divinely ordained, but there is considerable evidence that many found the “sphere” very confining.³⁴

The evidence Firor Scott cites, here and elsewhere, was obtained primarily from several antebellum diaries—texts whose subversive potential remained unrealized because of their very nature. While questioning the confines of the master narrative within the

safety of a private diary may have served a therapeutic function, a private document cannot participate in undermining a public narrative unless it is shared publicly—and to do so would be an unthinkable action indeed for the average antebellum Southern woman.

Firor Scott provides a compelling overview of one particularly potent tool implemented to secure the continued subjugation of women: the use of religion to maintain harmony in the household by ensuring continued subservience. Though texts like Nathan Hatch's *The Democratization of American Christianity* have documented the liberating potential of religious belief, the prospect of gaining equality—or even gaining the opportunity to be publicly heard—remained slim. Hatch, for instance, briefly recaps the experiences of three female Baptist preachers within the antebellum period—only one of whom practiced beneath the Mason-Dixon Line (and then only in the border state of Kentucky, where the stricter codes of the Deep South might have lost a bit of their potency).³⁵ Though a handful of women certainly did gain notoriety for their depth and expression of religious belief, Firor Scott suggests that religion served a primarily moderating function. She provides repeated evidence of internalized religious values, noting one newly married young woman's private record of goals, starting with Bible reading and prayer before breakfast, quickly followed by the desire “to obey my husband in all things reasonable.”³⁶ In order to secure such obedience, women were reminded of their inherently sinful natures, often through the use of scripture itself. Firor Scott notes, “The biblical verse most frequently quoted in southern women's diaries was from Jeremiah: ‘The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked: who can know it?’”³⁷

Though the prophet Jeremiah didn't specify the gender of the deceitful heart, Southern women seem to have adopted the assumption he must have been referring to the weak, inherently fallible female. In this regard, private and public worlds overlapped: both assured the Southern woman she was committing a grievous sin to challenge the ideals of the culture around her. As Firor Scott explains:

Religious women were persuaded that the very qualities which made any human being a rich, interesting, assertive personality—a roving mind, spirit, and ambition—were propensities to be curbed. No matter what secret thoughts a woman might have about her own abilities, religion confirmed what society told her—namely, that she was inferior to men.³⁸

This intrinsic connection between familial and social codes of conduct is manifested elsewhere in master narratives, most notably in interactions with a marginalized group expected to embody deferential subservience of the same caliber expected of the Southern woman: those of allegedly inferior race.

Master Narratives of Patriarchy: Familial Codes of Conduct in Public Interactions

Just as religion influenced both private and public behavior, so too were other private codes of conduct used as justification for paternalistic control in terms of both race and class. In the slaveholding South, the white man, as the master of his home, was naturally a master within the broader community as well in terms of ensuring the good behavior and continued subservience of those beneath him. Wyatt-Brown describes the often imperceptible differences between private and public behavior: “Differentiations between what belonged in the public or the private realm were very imprecise. Evaluations depended upon appearances, not upon cold logic.”³⁹ In other words, private

and public values were often mutually reinforcing—and thus difficult to differentiate.

Wyatt-Brown continues:

As Walker Percy, the contemporary novelist, once remarked about the South of not long ago, there was an “absence of a truly public zone” completely separate from the interior life of the family, so that the latter “came to coincide with the actual public space which it inhabited.” Family values differed not at all from public ones.⁴⁰

In terms of both family and public values, emphasis was placed on manifestation rather than causation: the behaviors themselves were enforced rather than any explanation of why those behaviors exist. Essentially, the precepts of the patriarchal master narratives were to be followed without question, beginning in the home and extending outward.

Internal challenges to these master narratives, in my understanding, have been somewhat limited. Wyatt-Brown’s analysis of honor has offered a plausible explanation for the seemingly impenetrable nature—from within, at least—of white Southern culture.

He writes:

The interior contradictions of honor held men in shackles of prejudice, pride, and superficiality. It often existed not in authenticity of the self but in symbols, expletives, ritual speeches, gestures, half-understood impulses, externalities, titles, and physical appearances. All of these might conform with rational, innovative thought and action, but often enough they were diametrically opposed. Thus holding men in bondage could not have worried too many Southerners so long as they were committed to the age-old morality. Honor, not conscience, shame, nor guilt, were the psychological and social underpinnings of Southern culture.⁴¹

What becomes of those underpinnings when the individual Southern voice strives toward authenticity of self? What becomes of honor when the interior contradictions are challenged and exposed? In the antebellum South, at least, Wyatt-Brown surmises:

“Southern intellectuals were not much given to challenging customs and forms.”⁴² If the

region's intellectuals remained reluctant to challenge contradictions, what of the average white Southerner? Wyatt-Brown summarizes the mindset of the typical white citizen thus: "Like the air one breathed, the demands of honor were no more to be doubted than the pursuit of justice, virtue, and godliness, aims with which it was supposed to be compatible."⁴³ In his exploration of the origins of honor, Wyatt-Brown unearths an attribute providing yet further explanation for the scarcity of subversive personal narratives:

The opinion of others not only determined rank in society but also affected the way men and women thought. The stress upon external, public factors in establishing personal worth conferred particular prominence on the spoken word and physical gesture as opposed to interior thinking or words and ideas conveyed through the medium of the page.⁴⁴

How, then, could the personal narrative emerge in a culture privileging outward gesture over internal self-reflection?

Subversive Potential of Personal Narratives

To be troubled by the white South's seeming emphasis of reputation over reflection awakens a more pointed paradox: the necessity of evaluating one's place in the South with the awareness of both admiring and abhorring the culture of your birthplace. The prospect of defining self-identity, in short, is complicated when the explorer is torn between two impulses. On the surface this tension may be seen as simply a matter of loving some aspects of the South while hating others, but the relationship with the South, with one's own Southernness, cannot be so easily or neatly categorized. The contradictions must be reconciled—or, at the very least, recognized. The struggle to reconcile or recognize manifests itself in different ways, and I cannot claim to know which path to understanding is the most effective. Ultimately, the journey must a personal one—a quest to cut back the kudzu of time and memory in hopes of finding what lies beneath to be still intact.

The Cost of Subversion: The Tension between Connection and Critique

What factors contributed to the longevity of master narratives? Why has Southern literature by white authors been dominated by what Matthew Guinn deems “a near-monolithic record of southern experience viewed through the lens of the upper classes”⁴⁵? How has the personal narrative—autobiography in particular—served to subvert the monolith? Historian Drew Gilpin Faust, in her autobiographical essay, “Living History,” offers a compelling interpretation of the function of personal narratives:

We create ourselves out of the stories we tell about our lives, stories that impose purpose and meaning on experiences that often seem random and

discontinuous. As we scrutinize our own past in the effort to explain ourselves to ourselves, we discover—or invent—consistent motivations, characteristic patterns, fundamental values, a sense of self. Fashioned out of memories, our stories become our identities.⁴⁶

For the native Southern scholar, however, the connection between story and identity is complicated by certain professional impulses; Faust explains:

Historians tell stories too. But we who consider ourselves professional practitioners of the craft have been trained to mistrust the tales people tell, even as we fill pages with our renderings of others' lives. We cast a critical eye on what our long-dead informants tell us about their experiences; we check their assertions about themselves against other sorts of evidence. Are statements in diaries and letters borne out by legal and public records? Are they supported by the writings of contemporaries with different perspectives and agendas? We challenge the narratives of our historical colleagues as we endeavor to find the truth, and we build careers by revising interpretations, by piecing together data in new ways that yield a new plot, a fresh account, a richer understanding about a segment of the past.

To be a historian is thus to be in some sense a living contradiction. We are at once the agents and the objects of history. We are on the one hand individuals—like all others—struggling to fashion a coherent and stable narrative of our own lives that will provide the foundation of a self. Yet we are, by education and inclination, compelled to be skeptical of such stories. We must paradoxically place ourselves both outside and inside of history.⁴⁷

This paradox—similar to the tension between critique and connection—has forced me to examine my own role in my family's narrative in ways I had not anticipated before launching into the present work. I could have perhaps spared myself some inner anguish, prompted by my own painful self-realizations as well as fears of how my family might respond to my approach, had I simply "cast a critical eye," as Faust suggests, on my family's history. To ignore my own place within my family's narrative, however, would be to ignore the potential of a potent subgenre of Southern literature, Southern autobiography.

The power of the personal “I” is central to the narrative realism of autobiography; the works of two Southern authors in particular, Dorothy Allison and Harry Crews, exemplify the importance—and the consequences—of this device. While both authors produced successful works featuring third-person narration, the adoption of first-person narration heightened the sense of authenticity in each of their works. Although he had achieved significant success with his early fiction, Crews nonetheless felt compelled to address the unresolved aspects of his formative years. To do so, Crews first had to recognize the necessity of the personal “I” in telling his own story within *A Childhood: The Biography of a Place*:

For half of my life I have been in the university, but never of it. Never *of* anywhere, really. Except the place I left, and that of necessity only in memory. It was in that moment and in that knowledge that I first had the notion that I would someday have to write about it all, but not in the convenient and comfortable metaphors of fiction, which I had been doing for years. It would have to be done naked, without the disguising distance of the third person pronoun. Only the use of *I*, lovely and terrifying word, would get me to the place where I needed to go.⁴⁸

By thus embracing the “lovely and terrifying word,” Crews established not only a personal sense of place but also helped secure a foundation for future authors venturing into autobiographical territories.

The process of autobiographical exploration in itself can serve as a means of self-exploration; as Lillian Smith noted in the foreword to her 1949 *Killers of the Dream*, a treatise on the ravages of racial oppression on the collective white Southern psyche, “I had to put down on paper these experiences so that I could see their meaning for me.”⁴⁹ This process is not without its hazards, however. Crews and Allison have both remarked on the repercussions, both public and private, of voicing the harsh realities of their

experiences—and their uncompromising critique of the South’s marginalizing forces—without the protective veil of fiction. Indeed, Crews never published another explicitly autobiographical text after his memoir, suggesting in several interviews that the experience had broken him. A man known for his heavy drinking, Crews went on binges following the publication of *A Childhood* that raised eyebrows even among those familiar with his proclivities. In similar fashion, Allison has returned to non-autobiographical fiction in recent years, publishing a second novel in 1998 and conducting numerous fiction writing workshops throughout the country. In the afterward to the 25th anniversary edition of her semi-autobiographical novel *Bastard Out of Carolina*, she emphasized the therapeutic dimensions of fiction, echoing her repeated refrain from *Two or Three Things* that the story, the fictionalized version over which she remained solely in control, was what she felt was most needed. Allison has not ceased challenging patriarchal values in any sense, but her recent work has done so in a less vulnerable way. In a sense, Allison, Crews, and other voices from the South’s lower classes have performed the vital preliminary task of challenging, as white authors, the myths of white supremacy and white solidarity from the perspective of marginalized whites. What remains to be done, then, is for voices from within those myths to begin questioning the “rigid frame” Smith asked readers to consider.

Allison, Crews, Rick Bragg, and other recent voices from marginalized groups likely saw little need to further elevate those above them in income and class standing, and their autobiographical writings have proved powerful forces against the lingering influence of master narratives. Each author’s work has resonated with me for different reasons, and I found myself nodding in agreement with many of their challenges to the

idealized, mythologized image of the South—but yet, I could not shake the feeling of disconnect and, in time, of shame. I could relate to the experience of wearing secondhand clothes and off-brand tennis shoes, but, by virtue of my last name and my appearance, I'd never been eyed suspiciously by a store clerk or refused entry to a library. Had our families lived in the same area, mine more than likely would have been the subjugators, not the subjugated.

How can I, being white, middle class, and being personally acquainted with only a relatively small portion of the South, offer any sort of meaningful critique or reflection of Southern identity? Can a descendant of the dominant class authentically side with the marginalized rather than the masters? Can someone whose ancestors often willfully encouraged the continued suppression of others fairly and fully critique her own heritage? Perhaps these internal myths perpetuated by my ancestors and others like them, the formative legends and stories white Southerners have hunkered down to protect, are especially tenacious because they are more deeply entrenched and thus more difficult to uproot. They are perhaps especially insidious because they are embedded in the most sacred of all Southern institutions: the family unit. Familial legends are all but indestructible, as individual families can—and often do—claim to be exceptions to the rule. Sociologists (typically dismissed by native white Southerners as meddling outsiders, mostly) might've shown few Southern families were descended from noble stock, but ours, as many in my family claim, most certainly was, as we have the family crest and accompanying legend to prove it. Studies of land ownership might've discovered only a handful of elites owned the massive plantations lauded in story and song, but I am told that my forefathers, if not directly part of the upper echelon, were

only a few steps away from being so. Some in my family still maintain that though slavery might've been a regrettable chapter in our history, our ancestors were “good” masters—we treated our servants “just like family.” Likewise, some of the older generations will reluctantly admit segregation might've been a bad idea after all, but they insist that our people were charitable toward the group they were conditioned to believe were “the lesser race.”

I wish I could say such mulishly regressive mindsets are well on their way to extinction, and I hope I am not being foolishly optimistic in saying such beliefs are finally waning. Subversive narratives from marginalized groups have been chipping away at the monolith of mythologized white Southern culture for generations by activists and writers alike actively reclaiming the voices and experiences of the subjugated. Could narratives from within the monolith serve the same function? Might a critical self-examination by the so-called “master” class and race serve to finally uproot the stubbornly remaining vestiges of myth? My purpose in pursuing such questions is not to redeem or rehabilitate narratives from the dominant class, but rather to apply a sort of internal scrutiny—in other words, to challenge the myths from the inside out. In so doing, I aspire to deconstruct the prevailing master narratives to reveal how the component, competing narratives of underlying cultural values and myths, familial legends, and personal accounts can coalesce to form a newer, more nuanced narrative, one of lived experience rather than forced or fabricated realities.

The second anchor of my approach, the subversive potential of personal narratives, will first be addressed as it has functioned to undermine master narratives in each of the categories below. In this way, the presentation of ideas and approaches will

follow my own intellectual trajectory: I began to more fully understand the context of my family's experiences through the lenses of historical inquiry as an undergraduate and beginning graduate student, and my more advanced interdisciplinary graduate courses encouraged me to explore the intertextuality of history and literature and their shared function as demythologizing forces. The personal narrative plays a key role in both fields of study: I quickly came to appreciate the importance of primary evidence in the form of diaries and other such life writings, and the field of oral history opened new avenues of exploration for me by providing a structured framework through which to examine something that had always fascinated me—the memories and experiences of others. Within literature, too, I remained fixated on autobiographical and semiautobiographical texts, seeking to unravel depictions of lived realities in conjunction with what I had learned and was learning in other fields. As a result, I have come to understand autobiography as a suitable tool for expressing both my awareness of the dialogues between these fields of inquiry and as an exploration of my own position within my family's narrative.

In addition to examining the subversive potential of personal narratives, we must also consider the often complex process of constructing such a narrative. This process—and the embedded process of examining one's own sense of Southernness—is complicated when the Southern-born author is torn between the conflicting impulses to both abhor and admire his or her native land. In these instances, described by Southern scholar Fred Hobson as “the rage to explain,”⁵⁰ constructing a personal narrative isn't a simple matter of recognizing a false dichotomy. Rather, in considering family heritage in particular, certain individuals and certain aspects of culture can be simultaneously

repugnant and respected—yet another paradox to add to the layers ensconcing the South. Through the personal narrative, this paradox, if not resolved, can at least be acknowledged.

Challenging Master Narratives of Ancestry

Claims of ancestry are among the most easily challenged components of the master narrative and have been undermined in twentieth century Southern literature in particular. In Florence King's classic *Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady*, for instance, the issue of ancestry becomes laughably fluid as the narrator's grandmother changes their family associations as needed, starting with her declaration on the first page of chapter one of a "royal grant" adjacent to a family name she thought sounded impressive—a family name she didn't realize had been plucked from the pages of a novel. King elaborates:

I had heard about our royal grant many times. Granny was always careful to keep it in the same place, but the grantor changed depending upon what monarchical name happened to pop into her head while she was launched on her pipe dreams. Her boasts were believable as long as she stuck to kings and queens from the pre-1776 era, but when she claimed a royal grant from William IV, my father started laughing so hard he had to leave the table.⁵¹

King's acerbic wit places her challenge of ancestral master narratives in a category of its own, and, given the biographical discrepancies elsewhere in the text (she omitted her sister entirely, for instance), we cannot know for sure if this interaction actually took place. Nonetheless, King's astute observations reveal certain class-based assumptions and behaviors: white Southerners cling to legends of ancestry as an attempt to legitimize

the imposed stratification of white society. Following a confrontation with a new, presumably lower-class peer, King explains:

I was afraid of her but more afraid of what she represented. Like all members of the shabby genteel class, I hated low-class people. Being a shabby genteel Southerner only intensified this prejudice; we are bottomless wells of aristocratic disdain and empty thimbles of aristocratic power. All we can do is badmouth poor white trash.⁵²

When I first read this passage from King's text, an image sprang to mind of my grandmother's horrified expression (she attempted to hide it for the sake of propriety, of course) upon meeting my sister's first boyfriend, a long-haired boy with an earring, no job, and no plans to attend college after high school. His last name was different from his mother's, and he and his siblings had different fathers—a transgression against respectable family values that might have been pardoned had the fathers passed away in some tragic accident, leaving the bereaved widow to try to start anew. We didn't tell Grandmother his mother was a foul-mouthed chain smoker, lest we threaten the capacity of her well of aristocratic disdain.

Despite the lingering traces of aristocratic snobbery, I suspect my family, like many others, has come to the uncomfortable realization (thanks in part to advanced methods of genealogical exploration) that we are not in fact descended from anything remotely resembling royalty. Though alleged connections to European royalty are waning, they've been replaced by equally as potent narratives of laudable achievement on native, Southern soil. In short, if we cannot prove we are descended from William the Conqueror or at least one of the Louises, we will console ourselves with the peerless accomplishments of native-born ancestors and pattern our behaviors after them.

Because these adopted behaviors and connections are aspirational (or perhaps

pretentious would be a more appropriate adjective here), they are particularly difficult to expose. Those whose narratives challenge these behaviors have done so primarily from the viewpoint of the disdained rather than the disdainer: Rick Bragg's *All Over but the Shoutin'*, for instance, contains a repeated refrain of internalized animosity toward the privileged. The resentment began at the age of six, when Bragg's teacher informed him he "would be much more comfortable with [his] own kind." Of the episode, he remarks:

I did not know it then, but I was getting my first taste of the gentry, the old-money white Southerners who ran things, who treated the rest of the South like beggars with muddy feet who were about to track up their white shag carpeting.⁵³

I would like to think my grandmother never said such a thing to a child in her twenty-seven years as a second grade teacher—and perhaps her class snobbery applied only to adults, for I often heard her sigh that her students couldn't choose the families to which they were born. Accountability for being respectable begins, I suppose, a bit later than second grade; had my sister's first boyfriend been one of Grandmother's former students, he might've been regarded a bit more sympathetically.

As Bragg's text (he notes memoir "is much too fancy a word for me"⁵⁴) illustrates, his early awareness of marginalization only intensified over time. He admits his defensiveness, noting how it had compounded during his first paid tenure as a newspaper reporter:

The experience of working shoulder to shoulder with so many educated and privileged young people was good for me, I am sure, but the chip I had carried on my shoulder for a lifetime grew in those years to about the size of a concrete block. To me, they had everything, and I am sure I resented it, foolishly, childishly. I could only write, a little bit.⁵⁵

He carried the resentment and insecurity through a successful career as a journalist until a confrontation with an acquaintance during his tenure as a Nieman Fellow at Harvard University forced him to challenge his own internalized assumptions. Of the incident, he notes: “I had just one bad day at Harvard, but only because I lived up to my own stereotype.” The acquaintance had challenged Bragg’s opinion on a political issue, coolly remarking, “You embarrass yourself” in response to Bragg’s stance. Bragg, in turn, responded by saying, “I’ll drag you out of here and whip your ass,” resulting in a few tense and awkward moments before the man departed. Bragg admits, “My whole life I had wondered if I was as good, as smart, as clean as the people around me. . . It is a fact I am hypersensitive to it. It may even be that I saw the disdain in places where it didn’t exist. It is more than possible, it is probably true.”⁵⁶ Though Bragg’s frank admission, here and elsewhere in the text, of his own biases is compelling, I suspect his alleged hypersensitivity to disdain was provoked by the all-too-common nonchalance with which such disdain is disbursed by those who believe themselves superior.

Challenging Master Narratives of Place

Because I had been raised to revere the land (most of my ancestors all but worshiped at the throne of agriculture) as well as to look down on (but in the kindest way possible, of course) those not able to earn their living in such a wholesome manner, I was stunned to realize how sheltered—and how privileged—my attachment to the land had been when I first read *A Childhood: The Biography of a Place*. The son of poor tenant farmers from Macon County, Georgia, Harry Crews’s formative introduction to the agrarian lifestyle was certainly more intimate than mine, for I never once labored by hand

in a field—or by machine, for that matter—until I was old enough to do so by choice rather than necessity. My agrarian introduction was one of beauty and of natural acquisition (we had cows because Granddaddy had cows, and we had a garden because all Dements have a garden), but Crews’s experience was one of sheer sustenance. In the simple matter of a place to call home—an idea I’d always taken for granted—I found myself the most moved by Crews’s text. He writes:

I come from people who believe the *home place* is as vital and necessary as the beating of your own heart. It is that single house where you were born, where you lived out your childhood, where you grew into young manhood. It is your anchor in the world, that place, along with the memory of your kinsmen at the long supper table ever night and the knowledge that it would always exist, if nowhere but in memory.⁵⁷

This sentiment could have been espoused by any number of Southern authors, both mainstream and subversive. Crews, however, extends this emphasis on the importance of place to address the circumstances of his upbringing and those of countless other poor whites for whom a single, stationary “home place” was virtually impossible. He muses about what it must be like to have spent formative years in a single place, as I had done, and to be able to return to that place as an adult. In characteristic Crews fashion, he upends the ideal and embraces his own experience, however dissonant it may be to the master narrative. He declares:

Because we were driven from pillar to post when I was a child, there is nowhere I can think of as the home place. Bacon County is my home place, and I’ve had to make do with it. If I think of where I come from, I think of the entire county. I think of all its people and its customs and all its loveliness and all its ugliness.⁵⁸

The idea of considering Wilson County, where I was raised, or the entirety of Rutherford County, where Grandmother and Granddaddy lived, as my home place was a foreign

concept to me, and I'd never before considered the grim possibility of working land without owning it. My parents and grandparents had mortgages on their farms, certainly, but they never had to seriously worry about being asked (or forced) to move on if the crop failed.

Challenging Master Narratives of Patriarchy

Formative lessons enforced by master narratives of patriarchal control are illustrated in the opening chapters of Lillian Smith's classic treatise, *Killers of the Dream*. Within Smith's narrative, we are made privy to a method of master narrative perpetuation rather different from the overt implementation of religion employed in the antebellum South: instruction through implication. As Smith describes, "Neither the Negro nor sex was often discussed at length in our home. We were given no formal instruction in these difficult matters but we learned our lessons well."⁵⁹ Such lessons were initially difficult for young Smith to accept, particularly the harsh realization that she could not display or acknowledge the genuine affection she felt for her childhood caregiver. Instead, she had to adopt the mannerisms of white people of a certain class by never being deliberately or overtly cruel—and, more importantly, by never losing sight of the superiority afforded by her class and skin color. Smith explains:

I learned to use a soft voice to oil my words of superiority. I learned to cheapen with tears and sentimental talk of "my old mammy" one of the profound relationships of my life. I learned the bitterest thing a child can learn: that the human relations I valued most were held cheap by the world I lived in.

From the day I was born, I began to learn my lessons. I was put in a rigid frame too intricate, too twisting to describe here so briefly, but I learned to conform to its slide-rule measurements. I learned it is possible to be a Christian and a white southerner simultaneously; to be a gentlewoman and an arrogant callous

creature in the same moment; to pray at night and ride a Jim Crow car the next morning and to feel comfortable in doing both. I learned to believe in freedom, to glow when the word *democracy* was used, and to practice slavery from morning to night. I learned it the way all of my southern people learn it: by closing door after door until one's mind and heart and conscience are blocked off from each other and from reality.⁶⁰

The “rigid frame” to which Smith alludes is comprised of the insidious and seemingly indestructible master narratives of white patriarchal control. Perpetuated by delusion and blind adherence, Smith makes a bold assertion in the foreword of *Killers* that challenges behaviors and actions most of her white Southern contemporaries, due in part to the lingering influences of master narratives, would have thought emblems of respectable society. Following a reminiscence of more pleasant childhood memories, she writes:

Now, suddenly, shoving out pleasures and games and stinging questions come the TERRORS: the Ku Klux Klan and the lynchings I did not see but recreated from whispers of grownups . . . the gentle back-door cruelties of “nice people” which scared me more than the cross burnings . . . and the singsong voices of politicians who preached their demonic suggestions to us as if elected by Satan to do so: telling us lies about skin color and a culture they were callously ignorant of—lies made of their own fantasies, of their secret deviations—forcing decayed pieces of theirs and the region's obscenities into the minds of the young and leaving them there to fester.⁶¹

Smith provides a poignant example of such back-door cruelties within her own home: prompted by a fellow ladies' club member, Smith's mother joined in efforts to rescue an orphaned young white girl spotted living with an African American family. The girl, Janie, was brought into the Smith home, where she shared young Lillian's bedroom, her clothes, her toys, and even her daily habit of scripture recitation. After three weeks of bonding with her new playmate, Smith

learned a harsh lesson from the often nonsensical codes of race relations: her mother asked her to pick out a few dresses and toys for little Janie to take with her as she would no longer be allowed to remain in the family's home. Janie "would return to Colored Town," despite her nice manners and her lack of family connections, simply because it was discovered that she was not white after all, and "a colored child cannot live in [a white] home."⁶² When Smith asked for an explanation, her mother merely responded, "You're too young to understand. And don't ask me again, ever again, about this!"⁶³ In this instance, we see plainly a pattern all too common in race relations: the behaviors must be followed, but the rationale for such behaviors must never be questioned. Smith condenses these behaviors into three "lessons" ingrained in early childhood: "to love God, to love our white skin, and to believe in the sanctity of both."⁶⁴ To challenge any of these lessons would result in "the same dread fear of consequences, the same overwhelming guilt,"⁶⁵ the same feeling of having committed an almost unpardonable sin.

Smith offers a possible explanation for the longevity and tenacity of the lessons she had been forced to learn, an explanation many white Southerners (some in my own family included) would find offensive because of its challenge to an unspoken but integral tenet of Southern culture: the notion of white supremacy. Smith argues,

Is there a tendency to blindness in those who overvalue their whiteness? Sometimes, I think so; even in those who cannot be called racists there is blindness. If we were not blocked off by our racial feelings would we not realize that segregationists, South and North, are our country's dangerous enemies, even when unwittingly so? Would we not realize the threat they are to our

survival as a strong free nation? For the sake of a mythic belief in the superiority of their “whiteness”—a strange mad obsession—they are willing to drag us to the edge of destruction because they have actually lost touch with reality.⁶⁶

The dangerous blindness Smith compellingly illustrates here has been recognized by those whose daily lives take place in the reality it so willfully ignores; indeed, the narratives of the marginalized and the subjugated have been challenging the solidity of white supremacy for generations. What, however, of those whose ancestors, near and distant, suffered from—and even willfully perpetuated—the cultural blindness Smith describes? How can those who have been blind to their racial prejudices come to sight?

Writing in 1949, Smith may well have been ahead of her time in recognizing and forcing her readers to consider such questions, and the critical backlash she suffered after the book’s publication serves as a testament to the tenacity of master narratives and the bigotries they engender. Due to the challenges posed by marginalized groups and expressed in their individual narratives, however, the grip of the master narrative has been progressively weakened. In order to expose the last stubborn vestiges, the lingering, rotting foundations to which many still stubbornly cling, the master narrative must be challenged from within: those who tacitly accepted blindness must force themselves to see.

Such questioning, particularly from within, is subject to scrutiny. In the preface to the 25th Anniversary Edition of *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South*, Wyatt-Brown recounts one particular response from a reader:

An irate lady, a descendant of Confederate general Edmund Kirby-Smith, gave me a tongue-lashing at a reception in Sewanee, Tennessee, where I had grown up with her and other Kirby-Smiths. I was obviously a Yankee ingrate, she implied. I must admit to a sense of guilt about that.⁶⁷

For Ms. Kirby-Smith and those like her, challenges to cherished myths and legends are direct affronts to the sanctity of Southern culture. Those of us wishing to challenge the narratives from within, in other words, must brace ourselves for the backlash. I too have received similar feedback (though none have gone so far as to call me a Yankee—yet) from even the brief snippets of writing I’ve allowed to circulate, and I suppose even the comparatively tame objections I’ve received have subconsciously influenced the extent to which I’ve been willing to openly challenge certain assumptions and beliefs. In these cases, fortunately, outside readers have urged me onward, and I distract myself from worrying over how my work might be received by a simple lie: I tell myself my family does not have to read what I have written, and so I am able to keep moving forward.

To suggest the experiences of the white middle class are underrepresented in Southern literature and history seems quite preposterous indeed, but thus far I’ve found precious few widely published autobiographical texts that overtly question master narratives from within. The works of three middle-class authors in particular—William Alexander Percy, Lillian Smith, and Florence King—have prompted me to continue my search for internal challenges to prevailing master narratives. Percy, certainly, espouses viewpoints outside the mainstream for his time and position, but his memoir—beautifully written though it often is—often serves to underscore rather than subvert the narratives of his native class. Smith’s memoir, in contrast, certainly challenges the assumptions of the master narrative, but, aside from the handful of personal encounters shared early in the text, *Killers* seemed to me an extension of Cash’s distanced critique in *The Mind of the South*. King’s challenge to ideals of Southern femininity is almost as pointed as Smith’s challenge of race, but too often King seems to be hiding behind her wit, and she never

addresses her own individual conception of Southernness, whether in terms of her femininity or otherwise. These observations are not meant to say, of course, that any of these texts should be overlooked or dismissed as voices of the middle class or as challenges to prevailing master narratives. Instead, it's my hope to build on the foundation these authors have established, and to extend the work they have begun.

Had I attempted an autobiographical approach without first having waded through the history and the literature, I might've produced a collection of moderately entertaining stories—but I wouldn't have understood (or have begun to understand, as the process is surely ongoing) the forces behind the actors in these stories, and how those forces have shaped me in ways I had been unable or unwilling to acknowledge. In the chapters that follow, I hope to demonstrate in at least some small way the subversive potential of the personal narrative—a narrative bolstered by an interdisciplinary framework—to undermine the master narrative, to offer through introspection a challenge to the familial and cultural myths that have too often blinded white Southerners from the realities of their native culture.

Abandoning the Tree: A Patchwork Approach

Just as I had originally envisioned a detached, dispassionate evaluation of my family's history, I had intended to construct a straightforward, linear narrative with chapters arranged chronologically. I anticipated seamlessly weaving scholarship and family stories as my readers progressed through the decades along with my ancestors. As any scholar of the South knows, the past and present are not so easily separated—and nor, in my case, is the boundary between anecdote and analysis always readily apparent. Instead, I began jotting down bursts of inspiration and connection as they made themselves apparent to me, and the stories eventually took on a life of their own. I certainly hadn't intended to discuss livestock and religion in the same section, nor had I planned to discuss my mother's hysterectomy or my great-grandfather's missing teeth. The stories demanded to be told, though, and from them emerged a patchwork portrait, a whole composed of fragments. Such an approach is not without problems, for my early readers have told me I have "more characters than a Russian novel." In a way this is fitting, I think, for rarely have the stories I've collected been told to me in a linear, orderly fashion with individual actors introduced in orderly rows. The characters, past and present, stumble over each other, generations and locations are conflated, and eventually the underlying purpose—whether that be edification, cautionary tale, or simply humor—outweighs the execution. While I have endeavored to unravel such knotted narratives, I have on occasion managed to create new tangles; despite my best efforts, the end results have been anything but linear. As a result, I remain attached to the patchwork—an imperfect metaphor, admittedly, but one far more effective than the worn

image of the family tree. Because I have labored over this patchwork so closely for such an extended period of time, I have not always been able to see its shortcomings. As such, I take full responsibility for any inaccuracies the following pages may contain, and I hope this brief overview of content will provide a useful guide to assist the reader in seeing the portrait made from patches.

The current chapter can be viewed as the backing of my literary quilt, the often unseen fabric anchoring the other fragments and allowing them to form a cohesive whole. It isn't the most attractive aspect of a quilt, but it's perhaps the most necessary; without it, I would be left with a decorative quilt top lacking substance and stability. Though the preceding sections are by no means an all-inclusive study of relevant scholarship, they nonetheless encompass the thinkers and texts that have allowed me to navigate the tension between connection and critique—and that have forced me to critically evaluate my own culpability in the perpetuation of mindsets and myths. The themes and issues discussed here provide the context for my family's particular experiences, thus allowing me to evaluate the narrative as more than simply a collection of amusing anecdotes with a smattering of historical documents.

The family narratives relayed in the remaining chapters can be viewed as the distinct squares and snippets of fabric comprising the quilt top. Individually they are decorative and perhaps even utilitarian in some didactic sense, but it is through the underlying, connecting threads of inquiry the true function is made clear. In short, I have intended to question my own understanding of how the components have been assembled to produce my own sense of Southern identity. To make this process somewhat more manageable, I have separated the narratives thematically, grouping individual segments

into chapters exploring similar questions. The second chapter, “Our People: On Expectations of Class and Family Name,” is a collection of essays (for lack of a better term) examining the often overlapping demands of social class and family name. It introduces some of the principle characters in my narrative, and the family chart at the end of this section will provide a guide to the various connections to be addressed. There are indeed an almost unwieldy number of characters (though the names are generally easier to pronounce than the characters in a Russian novel) introduced, and each family name espouses its own particular interpretation of Southern cultural values. Each section, then, is intended to introduce both the family name and its inherent values, with the first essay serving as a more general introduction to the recurring themes and questions most central to my personal narrative. “Our Place: On Land and Labor,” the third chapter, further investigates family-specific values, including the influence and manifestation of religious beliefs and reverence for the agrarian lifestyle. This and the subsequent chapters represent both quilt pieces and batting, the unseen material, often uncomfortable to the touch, that give a quilt its shape and function. The surface fabrics are those aspects of family values we in the South typically allow ourselves to discuss openly, and the batting is comprised of the insinuated or unspoken aspects of culture—aspects whose influence is seen daily but rarely acknowledged without the puncturing of the carefully composed surface.

Expectations of gender are explored in Chapter Four, “Our Fairer Sex: On the Southern Lady.” This chapter also includes a frank discussion of my own ongoing struggle with depression and the ways mental illness is either stigmatized or ignored in different segments of my family. The final chapter, “Our Expectations: On Being Just

Like Family,” addresses questions that are the most central to my understanding of my own white, Southern identity—and they are simultaneously the questions most members of my family have ignored or outright refused to discuss. I speak, of course, on questions of race, a topic the older generations in my family have taken as the assumed, natural order of society. How do I question an ingrained hierarchy of racial assumptions? How do I formulate a meaningful critique of something most in my family are unwilling to discuss? The results of my efforts in this chapter feel somewhat incomplete, as more remains to be pondered and understood. Nonetheless, I can in good faith say I have taken the necessary preliminary steps, at the very least, to better understand an aspect of my identity I had ignored and taken for granted for far too long.

Each chapter is connected by what I’ve labeled “Interlude,” and these creative explorations are intended to serve as segues between the themes addressed in each chapter. In a way they serve as the quilting itself—the threads connecting the patches to the backing by puncturing the batting. These patterns and connections quite literally hold the quilt together, yet the casual observer may deem them of secondary importance to the quilt top itself. As expressed in the current work, they are intended to be both decorative and functional, serving as an invitation to the reader to reflect on the themes contained in each chapter. The final quilt component, the binding, seals the edges to hold in the batting and create a cohesive whole. My personal narrative functions as the binding here, connecting the scholarly and the familial, the collective experience and the individual.

I am but an amateur seamstress at best, and my quilt of words is unlikely to win any award at a local county fair. Still, it remains the most useful method of organizing my thoughts and reflections. However imperfect and flawed, this quilt is mine.

Unraveling the Characters: A Brief Family Chart

I am the youngest child of the misfit children of two distinctly Southern families. My father's lineage has typically worshiped the god of agrarian lifestyle, and my mother's lineage has typically worshiped the god of self-accomplishment. Both my parents failed to meet their families' expectations, but, despite their failures (or perhaps because of them), both have been able to open avenues of inquiry for me. The individuals and families I have included are as follows:

INTERLUDE: A TRANSITION FROM CONCEPT TO NAME

Patchwork

As my great-grandfather used to buy junk from the junk man, I can justify my lifelong tendency to be a packrat by saying it is genetic. From crescent wrenches to salt and pepper shakers, I usually cannot part with items holding any scrap of emotional significance. Few things, however, connect me to the past more persuasively than fabric. I unfortunately lack my older sister Julia's talent for turning remnants into something functional and beautiful, but she and I are rather a good team: I can't bring myself to discard anything of emotional value, and she eagerly seizes my ideas and attachments and transforms them into quilts, pillowcases, table runners, and keepsakes. This is a long-standing tradition for us, as my dolls frequently had quilted coverlets made from scraps of clothes I had outgrown but refused to throw away. Now that we are adults, her craftsmanship has developed exponentially, and my attachment to the tangible, tactile remnants of the past has only deepened over time.

We came by our love of fabric rather honestly, for both sides of our family boast talented seamstresses and cloth heirlooms. From our paternal great-grandmother my sister likely inherited her quilting skills; Great-Grandmother Bennett, who raised 13 children, knew how to cajole even the smallest piece of fabric into serving a practical purpose. Her ability to turn the practical necessity of a patchwork quilt into a work of art speaks to both her talent and her character—and it proves even a life of hard work need

not be without beauty. From our maternal lineage we inherited a different sort of fabric; Great-Great Grandma Granberry hand made our Grandma's and great aunts' wedding dresses, deftly forming the finest satin and the most delicate of beads into nothing short of a work of art. Grandma and her sisters saved scraps of fabric for Julia, too, but the scraps—everything from squares of velvet to delicate lace doilies—were generally chosen for their beauty rather than their function.

As our loved ones have aged and left this life, we've found ourselves the recipients of wonderfully eclectic reminders: from Great-Aunt Dot I inherited our great grandmother's wedding dress; from Great-Aunt Martha my sister inherited an entire closet full of fabric, ranging from the sturdy floral fabric used to make Aunt Martha and Uncle Ralph's drapes to some garishly orange polyester from the 60s; from Aunt Martha I inherited a silk quilt she made from her bridesmaids' dresses—dresses she had also made herself; from Uncle Ralph I inherited a trunk full of old clothes, presumably worn by his grandmother. From the sturdy—and remarkably petite—wool dress to the coarse, stained, but impeccably starched work aprons, I longed to reconstruct the past and extract the memories those materials had witnessed. By the time these items came to me, though, few were left living who had known their owners. I could reasonably conjecture based on style and craftsmanship when these items had been made and by whom they had been worn, but I couldn't know for sure how the corner of the apron had come to be patched, nor why the maker of the wool dress had decided to sew a tiny, hidden pocket into its inner lining.

If the fabric cannot tell me its story, I will endeavor to find its context. My attachment to family history has grown alongside my attachment to fabric, and, because I

have always found the family “tree” to be an imperfect metaphor, I have embraced the image of a family patchwork. I realize this is rather a worn symbol adopted by numerous Southern authors, memoirists and otherwise, yet I keep returning to it. In a way this is fitting, for Southerners have long been known to put commonplace items on display and tout their originality. I won’t go so far as to claim my family patchwork is particularly unusual, for there are certainly many others like it—and there are certainly many other authors who’ve crafted the metaphor with more advanced skill than I. Still, my family quilt begs to be displayed, its pieces examined individually and as part of a larger whole.

Some patches are rough and solely practical, like the sturdy blue fabric of Granddaddy’s work shirts. I never understood how he could stand the dark blue on the brightest of summer days; when he’d leave a sweat-soaked shirt on the porch railing, white swirls of salt from his perspiration emerged on the navy background as the shirt dried, serving as a visual reminder of the day’s labors. Some patches are distinct emblems of their respective time periods, like the hideous paisley print polyester blouse my mother wore when she sat for a painted portrait in the mid-70s. Others are almost exclusively for show, like the flouncy tulle-stuffed ball gowns with delicate sweetheart necklines Aunt Martha had made for herself and her sister Jenny to wear at some social function I never had the chance to ask her about. Some are a combination of practicality and ornamentation, like the camel-colored wool coat and matching cap Grandma bought for my brother Michael when he was small. The coat had been much nicer than the hooded jackets and coats we usually wore around the farm, but, as Grandma was perpetually terrified we’d catch cold if there were even a hint of a cool breeze, the coat had been selected for its warmth as well as its style.

These patches are markedly distinct, yet when I consider them together a certain portrait appears. They are all joined with similar threads—threads of Southern family pride, of tradition, of reverence for the past, of faith and hope, of hard work, of hardship. I am inclined to turn the patchwork in such a way that only the attractive patches are visible, for there are many episodes and events I am proud to share with others. To do so, however, would render an incomplete, dishonest portrait. The coarse patches of land and labor are often hemmed by the ugly reality of racial subjugation: I cannot run my fingers over the rough chambray fabric of Granddaddy and Great-Granddaddy's work shirts without acknowledging the shirts of the African American men working alongside them—men whose sweat poured just as freely, men whose children would grow up to work for the children of their white employers, and whose grandfathers had been the property of their white employers' grandfathers. I cannot marvel over the tiny infant's christening gown adorned with intricate embroidery without acknowledging the color of skin required to wear such a garment. I cannot bleach the stains of the past with the nostalgic attachments of the present. The threads of racism, of marginalization, of classism, are just as real and present as the threads of home and heritage. I cannot separate the threads without unraveling what I have set out to find.

These threads were woven together long before I was aware of their presence, and it was only when I began to consider my place within the patchwork that I discovered the enormity of my undertaking. To understand how these sometimes disparate patches have worked together to form a whole, and to recognize the tenacity of the threads and stitches connecting the pieces, is a task requiring both scholarly scrutiny and creative expression. So too is the task of understanding my family's role in silencing dissenting voices in

order to privilege the master narrative, an undercurrent of cultural assumptions and precepts to which much of the white South adheres, a responsibility requiring the frank acknowledgment of culpability. What follows, then, is an attempt to use the tools of historical inquiry, literary analysis, cultural criticism, and autobiographical reflection to understand the inner workings and outward manifestations of one particular, flawed Southern family patchwork—mine.

CHAPTER TWO
OUR PEOPLE: ON EXPECTATIONS OF CLASS AND FAMILY NAME

A Southern Inheritance

Few of my ancestors managed to amass monetary wealth significant enough to be inherited by more than one or two generations at best. Since the earliest traces of my family in the historical record (those I've been able to locate, at least), we seem to have firmly established ourselves as stalwart members of the middle class—not excessively wealthy, yet not so poor that we couldn't make respectable charitable donations (of time, property, and general benevolence) to benefit those beneath us on the social ladder. The degree to which any of my ancestors aspired to climb the social ladder remains open to interpretation, and, in the absence of a monetary family fortune, we've been impressed by the necessity of a more abstract inheritance—one many in the South find just as significant, if not more so, than a more tangible legacy. Wealth, after all, could be obtained by questionable means, but only an upstanding family could pass down manners as well as money (or in lieu of, as the case may be).

My first conscious acknowledgment of that inheritance came about quite innocently; a family tree assignment in junior high prompted frank questioning about my lineage. My parents, never the sort to complete school projects for their children, told me to call my grandparents shortly after supplying me with the needed details of our own immediate family. I phoned Lascassas, the small farming community where my father's parents live, first, poised with pencil in hand as I explained the nature of my mission.

Grandmother had me wait for Granddaddy to pick up the extension so they could both contribute, and I listened eagerly for the warm “Good evenin’” that would signify his readiness to begin.

“The first Dement in Tennessee was Charles Dement,” he began. “He arrived in the 1700s, and we are descended from his son Cader.”

This top down approach wasn’t precisely what I’d had in mind, but I didn’t dare break the chain of deference. I had learned through both spoken and unspoken rules that women usually deferred to men, and children always deferred to their elders. This was no burdensome task at the time, to be sure, and I followed the rules out of love and respect. Both lifelong educators, Grandmother and Granddaddy explained things in such a way that one was compelled to listen. If Granddaddy wished to begin in the 1700s, my tree would follow suit.

For the majority of my fellow seventh graders, I can only assume that the project went no further than the requisite poster and accompanying paper. I imagine a few of their projects may yet be lurking in a basement or attic, awaiting rediscovery—or relocation in the local landfill or recycling bin. What became of my poster I cannot say, but, once impressed by the gravity of my undertaking, I had quickly and permanently learned that constructing a family tree would be no simple, one-time task. The tree I’d drawn to serve as the background of my poster was adequate for the assignment (my artistic ability and creativity were evenly matched—hardly exceptional, but sufficient for the task at hand), but as my ancestral explorations continued I soon discovered that the tree was a problematic metaphor.

To list the names and relevant dates of my ancestors produced a large and rather impressive chart, but such cold details were poor representations of the individuals and legends they signified. The King family branch, for instance, efficiently listed the raw data of my maternal lineage. The charts failed to convey, however, the ecstatic gleam in Grandma's eyes the year she triumphantly addressed the gathering of mostly disinterested relatives, clutching the papers as though they were priceless records of antiquity rather than photocopies pieced together with Scotch tape. She had unrolled the chart before us with an aura of reverence—an aura most of us present politely acknowledged and then promptly attempted to ignore. She gravely told us how our ancestor, Sarah Woodson, had been one of the first residents of Jamestown. During an Indian attack, Woodson had bravely defended her family by shooting an Indian coming down her chimney. While I would later learn that Woodson didn't pull the trigger herself but rather reloaded the musket for the neighbor man who rushed to her aid (she did, however, hide her two young sons in a potato bin and under a wash tub, and she poured boiling water on one of the attackers), I cannot forget the gleam in Grandma's eye, nor her eager insistence that we should derive a sense of pride from being descendants of such an extraordinary figure. She was so proud, in fact, that when she learned we might be distantly related to Charismatic celebrity Pat Robertson, she wrote to him to introduce herself. The letter she received in response was a stern rebuke that she focus on more spiritual concerns rather than glorifying any shared familial connections; she continued contributing to his ministry in spite of this, and even a scolding from Pat Robertson himself couldn't completely remove the flash of family pride that sparked whenever she mentioned our ancestors.

I think perhaps family legends are especially tenacious in the South because we are compelled to hear about them—mainly before adulthood, during a time when we are likely powerless to openly voice our disinterest. Those seeds, sometimes latent, have a particularly pertinacious way of springing to life. Parents, sometimes in spite of themselves, repeat the stories to their children, and the process is continually perpetuated. When the seeds are sown in fertile soil—those handful of individuals prompted by choice rather than coercion—the harvest is virtually limitless. This limitless harvest is costly, however; the crushing weight of one’s ancestors can sometimes be an unwieldy burden to bear once one is made aware of ancestral expectations. Each family name signifies a specific code of conduct, a standard of behavior patterned after those broader social values for which the South has become known but tailored to reflect the specific values the family claims for its own. I became enamored with my quest to locate the origins of my family’s values and determined to prove myself worth of the excitement in my grandparents’ faces.

My introduction to oral history as an undergraduate transformed what had previously been a pastime into a legitimate academic endeavor, and the content of my history classes transformed the stories my older family members so richly enjoyed telling into legitimate emblems of the past. My older family members were delighted with my work, and I was eager for their approval. Unlike my forays into family tree building in junior high, though, I could no longer blindly accept what I had been told. Indeed, the deeper I dug into my family's history, the more apparent certain discrepancies became. When gently confronted with facts (and confronted might be too strong a word, as I have always avoided conflict of any kind), my relatives ardently defended the accepted versions of family history. When I could find no record of Charles Dement's Revolutionary War service, I was assured he had in fact been a patriot of the noblest variety. When textbooks and professors reiterated the cruelties of slavery, I was

constantly assured that my slaveholding ancestors had been good masters. When I read that few white Southerners in the antebellum era actually owned a Hollywood-esque estate, I was assured that my ancestors were in fact prominent plantation owners. When I learned the complexities and violence precipitating the Civil War, I was assured the War Between the States was in fact caused by states' rights, not slavery. When I studied the atrocities accompanying racial subjugation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I was assured that our people had always been "good to the coloreds." I was encouraged to become the family historian, yes, but it was strongly implied that I should tell the proper history.

To understand this proper history, I had to acknowledge the complex social fabric of the white South—fabric that masquerades as homogeneity on special occasions requiring racial solidarity while otherwise assertively declaring the distinction of each thread. In short, threads are separated by social rank, and those ranks are evidenced by prescribed behaviors and accepted trappings of social distinction. Perhaps foremost in the criteria for social distinction is the ownership of land, whether urban or rural. For the majority of my ancestors, land ownership denoted the intrinsic pride of deriving one's livelihood from the soil. Not since Thomas Jefferson's iconic yeoman farmer have agricultural pursuits been so highly valued as a way of life—though Jefferson's praise seems rather pale in comparison to the longevity of much of my family's attachment to the earth. From the earliest records I've found, my male ancestors have almost without exception had "farmer" listed next to their names in the "Occupation" column of Census records—a common occupation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, surely, but we seem to have remained more deeply rooted than most. For us, cities are foreign

landscapes—desolate, packed spaces of cold, inhospitable brick and concrete. We visit on occasion and marvel at their enormity, but urban areas much larger than the average rural county seat are almost entirely absent from my geographical heritage.

The plantation is the most obvious embodiment of this heritage, and we cling to it fiercely. In an undated, self-published manuscript entitled *The Holmans of Virginia*, one Harry Stuart Holman offers a particularly detailed declaration:

For the vast majority of the Holmans, life on the plantation and farm has become a memory. The paintings of the plantation homes and the family patriarchs who lived on plantations now hang on the walls of their descendants' homes, most of which are located in urban areas far from the ancestral homes.

I must interject here, for the sake of upholding family pride, that my particular line of Holmans remained attached to the soil and are even heralded elsewhere in the manuscript for their active nearly 1000 acre farm. These Holman descendants farm the expansive, flat acres of West Tennessee—a forgivable exception to the rolling hills of Middle Tennessee that comprise the majority of my genealogical cartography. This book had been amongst things bequeathed to me when my great aunt, Martha Holman Dement, passed away. She and Uncle Ralph had no children, and, when I showed an interest in our ancestry, she was eager to share her lineage as well. I don't believe she knew this particular Holman (as she, never shying from speaking her mind, would have corrected his sweeping characterization of urban-dwelling Holmans), but she did know I would be interested in the book and thus directed her executors to put it in the things set aside for me. I can't know if she was aware of the book's contents, but, as I promised her I would

include the Holman family lineage in my explorations of the past, I feel compelled to return to Harry Stuart Holman's veneration of Holmans from years past. He continues:

Other heirlooms of silver, heavy furniture, jewelry, and leather-bound books of the antebellum period also have survived in many of the homes of the descendants, who are thereby reminded of the plantation lifestyle of their ancestors. Fox hunting scenes can also be found in the homes of the Holmans. They are believers in the idea that being a Southerner is a state of mind. From the interior design of their homes to their reading material (*Southern Living* is a favorite), the Holmans have kept a certain attitude toward their identity. They know that their fathers were Southerners "of the manor born" and they are proud of it.

Their quiet feeling of self-assurance comes from the confident sense of knowing who they are. They realize that their forefathers were the leading citizens in various communities of the South. They were people who were widely respected in their communities, and their children still expect the same treatment. This feeling of expecting respect and preferential treatment in their respective communities, seen in the various family members of today, has prompted them to be very genteel, suave and relaxed in their manner. Like their ancestors, they continue to have a feeling of pride in their own worth, which could possibly be seen by others who don't know them as an air of superiority. In their various leadership roles, they command those under them with the quiet voice of one who knows that his commands will be heard and obeyed. Anxiety is not a part of the characteristic of these people, who are basically content with who they are and have been. They continue to carry themselves as gentlemen and ladies, as they have been trained to do for generations. The idea of doing the "proper" thing at the right time is worthy of some consideration in their minds. The family continues to be kind and gracious to others—liberal in giving. They entertain graciously and do so as often as possible. They may not live on the plantation now, but they continue to live with the same attitude, bearing, and genteel manner as their forefathers on the plantation.

For a great many of the Holman descendants of today continue to think that "the Old South" still lives. Symbols and designs of "the Old South" surround them in their homes, and they expect others to remember life as it was, just as they have done. Their memories and quiet thoughts often rush back to remember the quiet days of plantation life when they were young. They can recall the laziness of the hot summer day with wading in the branch, fishing, swimming, or lounging in the hammock or on the lawn. They can recall blacks walking the hot roads with mules and

wagons. Though they work or live in urban areas now, they can remember the smells of wood fires burning in the fall, roses in arrangements in the house and honeysuckle on the fence in summer, and peppermint and spices at Christmas. These descendants in the cities love to think back about those sounds of the mourning doves, quail and whippoorwills, the hounds barking as they chase a fox, and old family servants singing as they work or offering a kind word of encouragement. Best of all, they think on the olden days on the plantations, when the extended family was so important.

These were the days when the shoulder of a favorite “Auntie or “Grandma” was always nearby to help provide security. When family blacks, as well as parents, were constantly with them—day and night—they were indeed happy. When favorite friends and distant relatives frequently visited, stayed with them, and joined them in dancing, dining, and hunting, they were experiencing some of the happiest times of their lives.⁶⁸

Having never met this particular Mr. Holman, I can only conjecture about the extent to which he had been influenced by the likes of Thomas Nelson Page. Because I have personally witnessed many of the artifacts and tendencies he describes (at least within my particular branch of the family, that is; I can’t speak for the Holmans of Texas and elsewhere), however, I can definitively attest to the longevity of Holman family mythology. Aunt Martha remained fiercely proud (and perhaps rightly so) of the solid Jackson Press, a sturdy cabinet her ancestors had brought from Virginia by covered wagon, and her home, like many other Southern homes, was furnished with various tangible reminders of previous generations. The crystal dish she gave me as a wedding present had belonged to her parents, and I wore the same penny in my shoe the day I was married as she had when she married Uncle Ralph in 1951. It may be too soon to tell if the penny has brought good luck to my marriage, but I considered the gift an honor as I, a great niece, was not the first to whom she could have bestowed the talisman of good fortune. They had no children, and so their inheritance—material and otherwise—had to

be disbursed more selectively. Whether or not she would consider her designation as being the only family member I ever heard use the word “nigger” as part of that inheritance, I honestly don’t know. She used the word as a descriptor with no apparent malice, telling my siblings and me during one visit that we were passing “Nigger Ridge” on our drive through the country. She said the word only once, but her tone of voice in describing that particular area of the community reflected a subtle but ingrained air of superiority: the people residing on that ridge occupied the poor scrub land and the ramshackle houses for a reason.

As Aunt Martha’s formal education had focused primarily on matters of agriculture and home economics, I doubt she had actively studied the ideology of D.W. Griffith and other such figures I had been taught to regard as the sources of racism on such rare occasions when the term was mentioned. I imagine Aunt Martha had learned, much as I had, through observation that we should be kind to those with a skin color different than ours—but I suspect our education differed in that I was never taught *why* we must remain separate from them after the necessary pleasantries were uttered. In short, I had inferred through navigating my way through the public school system that my black classmates had different lives from mine: I knew we were different, but it never occurred to me to consider myself superior—nor did my parents ever suggest I should adopt such an attitude. Had I attended school prior to integration, I might have reached a mindset closer to the one Aunt Martha had so effortlessly espoused. Aunt Martha and the majority of those in her generation spent their formative years believing segregation the rightful, natural order of society: the races were separate because the white race was superior. The Holmans were but one of countless white Southern families to accept this

mindset, and this assumed superiority provided another plank in the self-constructed pillar of respectability.

The Holman family lore, like many family legends, has at least a grain of truth, but that truth must be balanced with an equally sized grain of salt. As such, I feel it necessary to explain the grains of truth within my various family legends before delving further into any exploration of their veracity. As any genealogist or historian can attest, certain details have invariably been lost to the pages of time. What I've spent over a decade collecting is really only the beginning; as such, what I offer here is not an all-inclusive litany of dates and facts. Instead, I offer a collection of what I've been told tempered by what I've been able to verify. What I offer is a reflection of a cultural inheritance, a bequest of familial legends and ideals so deeply ingrained I cannot fully disentangle myself from it. My family's story has some remarkable characters, certainly, but the majority have been ordinary people living ordinary lives. That the paths of so many different families crossed to make my particular lineage has been heralded by some in my family as "divine providence." While the hand of the Almighty has almost certainly been present in many of our lives, I cannot in good faith say that He preordained the marriage of a Holman and a Dement, or that He urged the Renners to move from Greene County to Bradley County so that a Renner and a Bennett could meet. Like most families, such happenings are largely chance—assuming one subscribes to the theory of chance, that is. I find my family members' explanations for our existence represent the entire spectrum from divine providence to sheer coincidence, with most agreeing that the Almighty has some hand in our affairs. For my mother, chance is "a theory derived by the intellect of unregenerate man," and the Lord himself saw to it that His Word would be

shared through the unions of certain families. For others in my family, the secular concept of chance is quite a wondrous thing to ponder, should one be inclined to wax philosophical or poetic. I am neither philosopher nor poet (nor am I inclined to presume to speak authoritatively on deliberate, divine acts), so I shall simply relate what I've been told and what I've learned, and leave the rest open to interpretation.

From what I can tell for sure, the King side of the family, my maternal grandmother's line, arrived first; we make claims of having been in Jamestown, but, as I'm not as zealous a genealogist as perhaps I should be, I've been unable to confirm this for sure. The Dements, my paternal lineage, arrived from France sometime in the early 1700's. Legend has it Dements were Huguenots—and I've even heard a few brave Dumonts (as we would've been known in the old country) were instrumental in saving the life of a once or future king of France. The validity of this tale seems questionable at best, but it still floats around from time to time—usually with the presumed family crest (sans explanation of symbolism—an explanation many would like to find but few seem to know anything about). Huguenot or otherwise, a John Dement was born in North Carolina in 1723, and (according to what I've reconstructed from Census records, at least) he went on to father the aforementioned, legendary (to some) Charles Dement.

Much like their fellow pioneering settlers, the first Dements in Tennessee added their names to county charters in the early years of the nineteenth century and set about establishing themselves within their local communities. The Renners, my paternal great-grandmother's lineage, had arrived in Greene County roughly the same time as the Dements were signing the Rutherford County charter, but their paths weren't destined to cross for at least a hundred years. The Bennetts, my paternal great-grandfather's line,

didn't arrive in Tennessee until over a century later, choosing instead to eke out their humble existence in central and northern Georgia. The Bennetts and the Renners became acquainted in Bradley County, just over the Georgia state line, during the 1920s. The acquaintance culminated in the marriage of Andrew Franklin Bennett and Clara Adla Renner in December, 1928, and descendants of their thirteen children continue to populate the area around the original Bennett homestead.

The McDowell clan (my maternal grandfather's line), despite having arrived in South Carolina in the mid-1700s, had only one descendant venture into Middle Tennessee, and then only long enough to obtain a graduate degree at Vanderbilt University and marry a beautiful girl from Tullahoma in her hometown in 1951. While young Edward Allison McDowell, III, was courting Mary Ann King at Vanderbilt, other romances were blooming elsewhere in the state. Two years before the McDowell and King wedding, Ruby Geraldine, the oldest child of Frank and Clara Bennett, married Joe Jack, the third son of E. Miller and Ruby Dement. Nearly thirty years later, Edward and Mary Ann's only daughter, Elizabeth Scott McDowell, met Edwin Wallace Dement, Joe Jack and Geraldine's third son, on a college campus, and they became unsuspecting (and often unwilling) participants in the perpetuation of Southern family heritage. That I, their youngest daughter, have become so interested in family history is a matter of some bewilderment to them—but a matter of great pride to my grandparents.

And so I find myself investigating Dements, Holmans, Bennetts, Renners, McDowells, McCords, Kings, and at least a dozen other connected families. If such a pursuit seems unwieldy and laborious, it's with good reason. No foray into a Southern past is simple, particularly when issues of heritage and family pride are involved. My

investigations are met with responses ranging from indifference to stern but passionate invectives on how I should proceed—and what I should avoid. Some remind me that our people were pioneers and patriots, pillars of their communities with reputations I should praise and preserve. Some are subtler than others, some are more eager to share than others, and some are completely uninterested in my pursuits. The grip of familial legacy is either engulfing or relegated to the periphery of our social consciousness, with the threads of connection growing respectively thicker or more tenuous. Regardless of the strength of connection to genealogical specifics, though, certain attitudes and behaviors have been embedded, almost without exception, for generations. Southern values are distilled selectively according to class and social status; a family lacking in wealth may compensate with manners and reputation, but to do so they must remain committed to upholding a stricter code of conduct than most. The intangible legacy, in other words, must be carefully preserved through word and deed in order to remain part of a certain social class.

The means of preservation vary from family to family, and the emphasis on certain values or mannerisms over others become a competition of sorts when multiple families disagree over which qualities or behaviors should be considered when vying for the unspoken superlatives of “most respected” or “most prominent.” In short, each family adopts mannerisms and values preapproved as being standards of respectable behavior—or, more precisely, each family strives to continue to uphold the mannerisms and values adopted by their ancestors. Some families (The Country Club Set, my mother calls them) live in the suburbs, are in the upper echelon of white collar workers, and drink like fish at their various social club gatherings, usually in proximity to a golf course or

tennis court. Others are teetotalers, respectably employed, and content to withhold comment on the choices of others. Some are teetotalers, attached to the land, avid churchgoers, and remarkably adept at looking down their noses at those who don't adhere to the same values. Other families live in run-down houses, drive only used vehicles, but keep their yards, homes, and children as tidy as possible within their limited means (being poor, after all, is no excuse for not being presentable). Still others have no wish to participate in the games of propriety, whether for reasons of income or indifference, and proudly (or, at the very least, apathetically) display their broken-down vehicles on blocks in their front yard. Those of the self-declared respectable middle class may therefore justifiably consider themselves superior, as they at least have the good sense to put non-running vehicles—often of the same make and model as those serving as lawn ornaments—behind the barn out of sight of the neighbors.

We recipients of such a self-proclaimed “respectable” cultural inheritance are polite but distant to those beneath us on the social ladder, whether because of their race or their class, and we must endeavor to marry respectable individuals from the same rung or above. We attend college and engage in respectable, usually gender-appropriate professions, and we raise our children to be upstanding, respectable citizens. We are generally devout church goers, but direct references to Christ are saved for Sundays, mealtimes, and funerals. We do not drink publicly (most of us, anyway, unless the social occasion should dictate otherwise) because we must remain in control of our public persona; we might grow tobacco (if we absolutely need the income), but we must not consume tobacco products. If we consume, discrete chewing is preferable to smoking—but to embrace dependence on a chemical is to admit a lack of willpower or, worse, a

lapse in moral judgment. We must, at all costs, remain in control of our actions and how they are perceived by others. Membership in various respectable organizations solidifies the reputation we wish to perpetuate, thereby serving both self and society. Above all else, though, we must uphold the honor of the family name and show ourselves worthy champions of the cultural values we have been compelled to inherit.

Every Old Crow: A Brief Introduction to my Maternal Lineage

To know one's father manages the bank and owns the largest hotel in town imparts a certain inalienable dignity, a confidence that can't be rattled no matter the circumstance or setting. To know one's father achieved this with only an eighth grade education added a layer of pride, but boasting about this achievement can be done only in the most humble manner possible. Whether she was marching through the Food Lion to retrieve the two twenty-five pound bags of dog food each week (she would have gotten the fifty-pound bags, but unfortunately her physical stature of five-foot-two never quite caught up with her mental stature) to sustain the half dozen Siberian huskies in the kennel behind her house or whether she was sitting down to an elegant lunch at the Walking Horse Hotel, Mary Ann King bore that inalienable dignity with ease. The hotel where she had spent her formative years had long since been razed, but she lived her latter years (once she had declared the trappings of country club society life "pusillanimous" and had retreated to a farm on the outskirts of town) with the same air of entitlement and privilege she'd worn so effortlessly as a child. Her daddy owned the town, in her mind, and she never forgot the respect his position afforded them—even when she had given up all other aspects of their social position and most of Tullahoma's residents had long since forgotten his role in the town's development.

Because Grover Cleveland King, Sr., had carved his eventual wealth from relatively little, both in terms of formal education and initial capital investment, he could still hold his head high in the community with the inherent pride of being a self-made man in spite of his relatively urban existence (the truest form of the self-made man, after all, was one for whom the soil provided sustenance). His penchant for hunting and

fishing restored the much-heralded connection to the natural world, but his habits of smoking and drinking (sometimes to excess), though accepted in some circles, would have earned him the subtle scorn (for we must never deride someone openly; such a thing would be unseemly) of the more wholesome country folk to whom his bank and hotel stood as emblems of urban life. Furthermore, his willingness to flout minor social conventions (a willingness that might have made him appear less than morally upstanding to the aforementioned wholesome country folk) when it suited his needs might have raised eyebrows in some circles. A 1929 article in a local newspaper, *The Manchester Times*, details his public trial for a charge of violating state game law by hunting without a license. The jury acquitted him, but the state seemed unsatisfied and “asked for a new trial on the ground that the evidence did not sustain the verdict of the jury, and that it was not in accordance with the law.” Grover’s defense “was that he had purchased a hunting license, but that it had been lost.”⁶⁹ Such a defense seemed to be enough to convince the jury of his peers, and the state prosecutor’s request for a new trial was never granted.

It’s possible his willingness to thumb his nose at what he deemed arbitrary state game laws stemmed from a sense of self-assurance, hedging on arrogance, that had been hard won. The seventh of eight children and the youngest of the three boys, his father’s death in 1898, when Grover was thirteen, forced him to leave school and join his older siblings in supporting the household. He followed his older sister Lina King Paty to Tullahoma shortly after the turn of the century and joined her and one of their brothers in a new business venture: the construction of a three story, eighty-five room hotel on the corner of Lincoln and Atlantic Streets. The King Hotel opened for business in 1917, and, as it was located directly across from the railroad depot, it soon became a favorite

stopping place for travelling salesmen. The hotel had not been Grover's only construction project in the first two decades of the twentieth century; he married Maie Louise Granberry, daughter of a well-respected grocer, in 1913, and they welcomed their first child—Grover Cleveland, Jr.—in January 1914. When Grover Sr.'s sister and brother left to build a new hotel in Florida, he assumed sole responsibility for the thriving business, and its success led him to other ventures—including three more children—in the years to follow.

His management of the Farmers and Merchants Bank and the operation of the King Hotel are a matter of great family pride; the 1920 Census lists him as “Banker,” but the census worker must have been instructed that the title wasn’t sufficient, for “President” is written above banker. The 1930 Census lists him as a hotel manager, and it lists his home’s value (he and his family happened to be living in the hotel at the time) at \$75,000. Ten years later, the census taker again noted his occupation as President of

the State Bank—but his involvement at the hotel was still ongoing, so it's possible he chose the greater of the two professions at the time. The same 1940 Census names his highest level of education as eighth grade, but he seemed to have demanded more of his children: all four were college graduates, with his youngest, Mary Ann, earning a degree in Psychology from Vanderbilt University. Grover was certainly proud of his darling daughter and had urged her to complete a degree once she'd had her fill of cotillions and sorority dances, but Mary Ann would one day tell her grandchildren her chosen subject matter was nothing short of pusillanimous.

With his oldest and youngest daughters being named “Miss Tullahoma” as adolescents—and his oldest going on to be named Miss Vanderbilt of 1931—Grover, or “Poppy,” as he was known to his children, could be considered a success in almost every sense of the term. *The Tullahoma Guardian* declared that he was “well versed in all ramifications of business ... He has hundreds of friends who admire him for his many fine traits of character.” His children never knew want—so much so that his youngest child was adamant about the responsibilities associated with their wealth. One rainy evening, his wife Maie and their girls had been out shopping when the family car had a flat. A local boy was toiling away changing the tire when Mary Ann declared, “Why, Mother—don't you have any ‘sideration for that poor boy outside? Why, he's just a poor boy, and we're rich!” Maie asked her youngest why she felt the family was rich, to which the girl responded, “Cause—we've got this big gramma car, I've got all those clothes, and Dot has all the gold and jewels she could ever want.”⁷⁰ Whether or not Dot (the oldest daughter, Dorothy Louise) had all the gold and jewels she wanted is difficult to say, but Mary Ann certainly remained aware of her family's position. The “Polkadots” (a

whimsical nod to longtime editor Polk Ross) section of the Tullahoma newspaper once observed, “Mary Ann King is negotiating for a pony, and already has her cowboy hat and chaps.”⁷¹ Her negotiations were apparently successful, for she rode her pony Toots all over town, including up the steps of the Farmers and Merchants Bank—and once even into the lobby.

A 1938 article in the “Familiar Faces Around the Town” section of the local paper provides what seems to be an embellished account of Grover’s achievements—but, despite such possible editorial liberties (one wonders how well Grover knew the author of this particular section), it does seem to provide an accurate depiction of Grover’s youngest daughter:

Ha, we fooled you. You thought it was another big Tullahoma Banker, but he is just a big buggy and horseman. And don’t think he doesn’t know his gasoline buggies. Although Grover Cleveland King is known as the President of the Farmers & Merchants Bank of Tullahoma, his fondest remembrances are connected with his early business career at Morrison, Tennessee, as a buggy and horse man. He graduated from this to the banking

and financing business in 1917. As you well know he is President and Manager of Tullahoma's only Hotel, the King Hostelry.

Grover was born in Coffee County in 1885, and tramped through the mud of that vicinity of Viola schools, and from there to McMinnville's High school, and then to top his education off he went to business school in Louisville, Kentucky, for one year. But he did not learn anything about percentage and rates until he started in his present Banking business. Mr. King tries to convey the idea that his hobbies are hunting and fishing, at which he spends considerable time, but we really believe he likes to see his youngest daughter, Mary Anne [sic] handle a horse and sulky and accompany him on his outings. We have never seen the fish, nor the game, so you will just have to take Grover's word for his ability as an Isaac Walton and Nimrod enthusiast.

Mr. King is one of those rare business men with varied business interests who can really close the doors of his counting house, stick a cigarette in his mouth and be off without dragging his business into his pleasures. That hair that you don't see on his head was scratched out by Grover, trying to figure a way to cut your payments down and still let you drive the car. He says they don't worry you much, and we really don't believe that Grover allows too many worries to take all his hair out.⁷²

While family stories from my mother and her brothers corroborate the year in business school, the line about McMinnville High contradicts the Census records indicating his highest level of education. The "Prominent Tennesseans" edition of Who's Who Publishing Company in 1941 names the business college as Bryan and Shatton Business College, but no family records remain of his time there. The same article describes Grover as "one of Tennessee's leading business men and citizens, taking an active interest in all civic affairs which tend to better his community."⁷³ That involvement in such civic affairs would also better his own reputation was only a secondary concern, of course.

The banking business seemed to have lost its luster for Grover in the mid-1940s. A 1952 article in *The Tullahoma Guardian* touts him as "Owner of City's Largest Hotel,"

and, like the 1938 article, the details of his background may have been subject to artistic license:

G.C. King Sr., who still owns the King Hotel, was born in the northern part of Coffee County. From about 1909 to 1922, he operated a bank and a grain and livestock business in Morrison.

Then in 1922 he came to Tullahoma and established the Farmers and Merchants Bank in the present-day location of National Jewelers on Atlantic Street.

He operated the bank until 1945 when he closed it “because of too many regulations.”

“At the time I closed the bank, we had a million dollars in deposits, and it took us three or four months to get depositors to come in and get their money,” Mr. King said recently. “Some of them we had to send checks to.”⁷⁴

The nature of the “regulations” Grover found so irksome is unknown, but his legacy as a banker and prominent business man remained intact as his health declined. The unexpected death of his son, Grover Cleveland, Jr., in 1955 was a blow from which he never fully recovered. With G.C. Jr., went hopes of keeping the hotel running, and Grover sold the hotel to his former fellow Rotary Club member John Harton in 1961. Harton attempted improvements but found the aging building too much of an investment, and the building changed hands several times—including being purchased by Mary Ann’s then husband, John McCord—in the 1960s. Grover’s death in October 1962 and the death of his wife Maie less than a month later marked the end of an era. The hotel was sold for a final time in 1969 to Mr. H.L. Noblitt, an investor in Shell oil. The building was razed in 1970, and the new Phillips 66 Service Station announced its grand opening in September 1971.⁷⁵

Stories of “Poppy” King continued to be passed down to his grandchildren and great-grandchildren long after his death; the King Hotel and its owner had become memorable fixtures in the minds of many who passed through Tullahoma during World

War II, when the town became home to a massive military training installation, Camp Forrest. Like other area businesses, Grover had capitalized on the influx of travelers by converting the hotel's spacious dining room to additional bedrooms. The lobby served as home base for reporters and bystanders eager for a new bit of news, and the hotel even boasted Hollywood dancer Ann Miller among its wartime occupants. For young Mary Ann, a teenager during those exciting years, to romanticize those days in her stories and repeat them almost endlessly to her children and grandchildren seems a forgivable offense; there had been nothing grander in her mind than the hotel, and no man more self-assured and capable than her father. When Mary Ann died in 2002, her older sisters found themselves with bittersweet reminiscences of the young spitfire who had once demanded a nickel to stop pestering Dot and one of her beaus. Their father was particularly proud of his youngest daughter's assertiveness, and he wryly admitted his partiality in one of his favorite sayings: "Every old crow thinks his baby's white as snow."⁷⁶

Humble Beginnings: “Reflecting Upon Memories of Old Chicken House”

Humility isn't a characteristic frequently attributed to Southerners. A certain measure of something masquerading as humility is necessary to maintain social graces (openly boasting is unseemly, after all), but even the poorest, most marginalized members of Southern society are more likely than not to maintain a fierce sense of pride. Given the degree of bloviating demonstrated by some of my family members, I was somewhat taken aback to realize an entire branch of my family seemed almost completely lacking in that hallmark of Southern culture; unlike others prone to volunteering a litany of laudable facts and names, this branch is reluctant to brag about their accomplishments and ancestry unless expressly asked to do so. Despite counting two West Point graduates (one of whom became a distinguished judge) and several military officers, several successful businessmen and women, skilled craftsmen, well-respected educators, and several medical professionals (including an orthopedic surgeon) among those present at the yearly family reunion, the Bennett clan remains remarkably unassuming about their endeavors. When Frank Bennett married Clara Renner on December 23, 1928, they were more concerned with the necessities of daily life than the imperative to uphold or uplift the family name. To be fair, much of their behavior (hard work, self-reliance, and Christian charity) was familial heritage ingrained for generations. That heritage, though, was one handed down for private rather than public gain: they sought to do rightly by their fellow man primarily because they had been taught it was simply the right thing to do, not because it would secure their position in the eyes of others.

Their position, in fact, was a rather humble one; neither family was wealthy by any stretch of the imagination, and Frank and Clara had both been accustomed to contributing to the family's income when others their age were still concerned with dolls and fishing poles. Frank was the second of ten and Clara the eldest of nine, so both learned early the responsibility of caring for younger siblings. As such, it's not surprising both kept careful records of household expenditures; Frank kept a log of his spending habits during his years as a single man, and Clara dutifully kept the Flint Springs Baptist Church Sunday School Treasury records (even up until the morning of her marriage to Frank, no less). After they were married, she continued to catalog what some might think the mundane details of their lives—but it is in those very details I could begin to understand the kind of life they lived beyond what I had witnessed in my formative years.

As one of several dozen great-grandchildren (I've yet to commit the exact number of us to memory), I saw Great-Grandmother and Great-Granddaddy once or twice a year; I generally only had a few moments to be paraded in front of them, along with my siblings, for a growth and accomplishments update before relinquishing the platform to cousins waiting in the wings. Great-Granddaddy's funeral was on my tenth birthday, and he was buried in a suit and tie—only the third time, along with his wedding and his fiftieth anniversary celebration—he'd worn anything other than overalls. On special occasions he'd trade his work shirt and worn overalls for a crisp white shirt and a newer-looking pair of overalls, but that was the extent of his wardrobe as far as anyone still living can remember. I would come to know Great-Grandmother a little better in the years following his death, and she continued life mostly as usual by quilting, canning, and tending her garden, until her body gradually slowed and eventually refused to

cooperate. I had marveled over the tiny stitches on her quilts (she had made one for each of her thirty-three grandchildren, along with countless others), and I had long ago noticed she and Great-Granddaddy would both smile and quietly hum along when my dad, accompanied by his autoharp, sang old hymns underneath the massive oak in their side yard. Nobody else paid much attention, but Great-Granddaddy would show his gums every now and again in his version of a smile. I was always told he chewed tobacco because it eased the pain in his nearly toothless mouth, and his one and only hospital stay (prior to that, he'd taken an aspirin once but, after determining it made him feel worse, never turned to traditional medicine again until his final days) was something of a legend because, after asking his nurses if he could chew while in their care, they had agreed on the condition he remain tidy. They needn't have worried, for not a single drop of tobacco juice could be found on his bed linens or his hospital gown. When my grandmother went to see him, she waited quietly in the hallway for the doctor to finish a checkup. The doctor, not knowing who Grandmother was, shook his head in amazement when he left the room as he remarked, "That's one tough old codger in there."

The tobacco legend included, I had a cursory understanding of their character and work ethic, but only after Great-Grandmother passed away in 2003 was I made aware of the veritable treasure trove of documents the Bennetts had stored away. On the surface they looked like ordinary spiral notebooks and scraps of paper, but the collection as a whole meant far more to me. It was nothing short of marvelous to discover Great-Granddaddy had purchased five pounds of bananas, some new socks, and a movie ticket a month before his marriage, or that Great-Grandmother had canned eighty-six quarts of strawberries in one month in 1947. The records weren't always consecutive, they

followed no consistent order, and some years were missing entirely. The children had added to the documents with poems and reminiscences over the years to mark special occasions (for instance, someone once tried to calculate the number of biscuits Great-Grandmother must have made), and most of their contributions included references to the multi-hole, family-size outhouse still standing in the backyard (the family didn't have indoor plumbing until after Grandmother was in high school). Aside from my firsthand knowledge of the outhouse (thankfully not in use by the time I came along, though all of us great-grandchildren were often reminded of its existence and its purpose) I didn't discover any of these records—collected in what the surviving Bennett children lovingly refer to as “Mother's box”—until both my great-grandparents were gone, so I had to reconstruct some of the circumstances of their early lives, particularly before my Grandmother's memories begin, through alternative means.

*Products sold off of farm
1940*

9. tobacco	\$.10	20	7 hines ^{1.13}	5.49
11. tobacco	23.35	23.	K.D. Westenburg 5 A. laul	125.00
^{3 times} carried mail	.75	13	1 cord wood	3.75
^{2 times} Carried mail	.50	13	tobacco ^{60 hands}	2.50
15. cord wood	3.75	12	artie ^{nick 1.25}	3.50
17. Carried Mail	.50	21	tobacco	.50
20 Carried Mail ²	.50	20.	1 1/2 bu peas	2.25
27 Carried Mail ³	.75		1 bu peas	1.75

To fully appreciate the context of my great-grandmother Clara's labor in particular, as well as her reluctance to magnify her own achievements, I can turn to a yellowed newspaper clipping from the 1977 *Cleveland Daily Banner*. The headline reads, "250 Acre Farmer Still Going Strong at 90," and to include anything less than the article in its entirety would diminish from its charm and candor.

Once a little fourth grade boy who skipped as many classes as he attended, W.A. Renner, now 90 years old, says he has amounted to "nothing," although the elderly gentleman now owns a 250-acre farm.

As a Greenville fourth grader he wanted to quit school for several reasons, with the major ones being he simply did not like the school and also because he had to help the family of ten earn a living.

"You shouldn't even be talking to me," he said with a modest, somber expression. "You should be out talking to people who have made something of themselves, people who have got an education. I'm afraid I haven't amounted to much."

Born in 1887, the wise gentleman had a rough start in life, mainly due to the death of his father.

"My father died when I was only 2 years old," he said. "I don't even remember a thing about him. All I can remember is my mother and my eight brothers and sisters."

The death of his father, though unusual in this day and age, was not back then. A rattlesnake bite left him weak and sickly. It wasn't long after this he contracted typhoid fever, according to Renner. Medical complications arose when the family doctor (general practitioner for the entire local area) said he could not give the ailing father the medicine he needed for the fever due to the poison still in his system from the snake bite. It wasn't long after that W. A. Renner's father died, never recovering from the original rattlesnake bite.

"After my father died, I guess I never really cared much about anything, especially school," Renner noted. "That's why I never could get interested in my studies. Oh, I learned how to figure and how to read, but most of that has left me over the years."

Recognizing the fact his mother needed help raising the huge family without the aid of a father, W.A. or called by many

“Billy,” decided it better to help around the farm than pursue and education.

“I look back now and wish my mother would have taken a switch to me and made me go to school and made me learn, but I just loved the farm too much,” Renner explained. “I cared more for horses and cows than I did books.”

“I remember one time my mother gave me a filly colt and that started it all,” he continued. “Just as soon as I had earned me enough money doing some work for other farmers I went out and bought me a match for that filly and that’s when I took up raising colts.”

Raising colts became Renner’s first actual business. Not returning to school, he continued his colt ranch and soon became widely known for his colt farm. Selling colts supplied him with all the money he and his family needed, even though they were still poor, he said, even by those day’s standards. Because of his family’s continuing monetary stress he took up other small jobs, including a brief time on the railroad, in which he was paid 80 cents a day.

“Now that railroad work in the summer is what is hot,” the sprite, little man stated with a smile. “That was some hot work, just let me tell you. We used to cover some awful long distances on that railroad.”

But it was during his days of working on the railroad that he met Miss Louise Bible. The two were married in 1906. Renner was 19 years old at the time.

The couple lived in the same area, Greeneville, for the next 10 to 15 years before Renner bought land in Bradley County. He already owned land in the Greeneville area, but decided it was time for a move where he figured the land might be a little better. So he and his wife moved to Bradley County near the same location where they presently reside.

On his new Bradley County farm he raised corn, wheat and cattle. Here, he was happier than he had been in a long while for he was still able to farm, he said.

“Back then it was either work, steal or starve, so I worked hard to get my wife and me started on our new farm,” he said. “I used to have to work on other men’s farms for 50 cents a day, but now I was my own boss. Maybe that was foolish but it was important to me.

“I was always too hard-headed and stubborn to listen to other men sometimes,” he continued. “They might suggest I do something else. Well, I’d always listen to what they had to say but in the end I would just do what I wanted to do. I just wanted to raise my crops and colts and be my own boss.”

And now, approximately 50 years later, Renner owns a much larger farm than the one he first bought upon his arrival into Bradley County. This one is just down the road from the first one he bought.

Now located on Dalton Pike, just outside of Cleveland, Renner still works on his farm. But many changes have affected his life even during this period of Bradley farming.

His wife died in 1962. The couple had nine children—six girls and three boys. Living on his farm alone for the next four years, Renner then married his present wife, Bertha, who now lives with him on the Dalton Pike farm.

“W.A. has always felt kind of bad about no education and feels people who have education are better than him,” she said. “All I know is we have a fine farm and home and he has worked hard all his life for this. He still outworks his grandsons.”

Even at the age of 90, Renner still works eight to ten hours a day on his farm. He is either mowing hay, raking it, driving a tractor, or out in the shrubs of his land picking grapes and berries for his wife.

“My sons, grandsons and I sometimes stay out in the fields until dew falls at night,” he said. “I still work lots of times until the sun goes down and sometimes even later than that.”

Almost three years ago the couple got a puppy, wanting some more company for the huge house. They also felt the puppy could be made into a good cattle dog. It was a collie, and was named Boss.

Boss now follows his master everywhere—to the fields, the orchards, the pastures, the barn, and even sits with him during the quiet periods when he is inside the house because of bad weather or darkness.

"He's a good dog," Renner said in a somewhat saddened voice. Patting Boss' head, he brightened a little and smiled, "We used to take you newspaper, The Banner, but Boss got to where he wanted to read before we could. And normally after he finished with it, we couldn't read it very easily."

Ninety years after his birth in 1887, Renner has accumulated a family large enough to be considered an army. Besides his nine children, he has 45 grandchildren, 96 great-grandchildren, and three great-great grandchildren.

Seven of his nine children live in and around the Cleveland area. They are Mrs. Frank Bennett, Mrs. T.C. McCoy, Mrs. Tom May, Mrs. Fred Pinckard, Mrs. William Hannah, Marvin Renner, and Oscar Renner. One son, Paul, lives in Tampa, Fla., while one daughter, Mrs. Ada Clabo lives in East Brainerd.

Though he has to spend time in his house at night or during bad weather, he says he can't stand being "cooped" up inside; he is an outside person. And when he does stay inside he normally can be found sitting in a straight-back, straw bottom chair, one he has had for years. There are certainly more cushioned, more comfortable chairs and couches in the two-story home, but this is his favorite chair, he said.

“I’d hate to have to stay in the house very long,” he said. “There’s not much to do. I don’t watch much television because I don’t really like it. I watch the Sunday morning sermons starting at 7 o’clock, but that’s all I really like. There’s a lot of television shows I’d take off if I could. Of course, I can’t run somebody else’s sha-bang, much less my own.”

Why is W.A. Renner so content with the life he is living now?

“Because so many people my age and younger get into bad shape,” he said. “I can only be thankful that the Lord has held me up as well as he has.”

“People have been good to me all my life,” he reflected. “This is what means so much because when you start out with nothing like I did, you appreciated it even more. Because people have always stood with me and backed me up is the reason I’m alive today. I guess it would take a book to tell you everything that has happened in my life.”

He is not wealthy, he says, but he has all he wants to make him happy. He admits the 250 acres and the 50 head of white-faced cattle on his farm are beginning to become too much work for him. Because of this, he is uncertain about the future of his farm, one he has owned since moving to Bradley County 50 years ago.

“I’ve always loved the farm,” he smiled, looking down at his wrinkled, farm-worn hands in his lap. “I guess if I had my life to do over I’d start it out like I did this one—raising colts, corn, wheat, cattle and being your own boss.”⁷⁷

Banner Photo—Norton
W.A. RENNER'S HOME HAS MANY COMFORTABLE CHAIRS
...But This Straight-Back, Straw Bottom Is His Favorite

When I first discovered this article nearly forty years after its publication, I found myself moved by its simplicity. My great aunts, Frank and Clara's daughters, recalled how Granddaddy Renner had always felt self-conscious of his lack of education. His children and their offspring certainly thought no less of him for this lack; he is remembered still for his unassuming charm, his hard work, and his quiet smile. My grandmother, the oldest of Frank and Clara's thirteen children, has often told me of the watermelons Granddaddy Renner would stow in the spring house prior to family gatherings, pulling them out of the icy water in the middle of a hot afternoon and splitting them open on wide planks balanced on sawhorses. Modern refrigeration, though perhaps more efficient than the springhouse, could never replicate the magic of the chilled melons or the joy of such a simple pleasure in a life marked by seemingly endless labor.

The Bennett children, themselves now parents and grandparents (and even great-grandparents), have frequently told me their father was only half joking when he would tell people he'd grown his own laborers because he couldn't afford to hire help. They all recall long days and hard work: from cajoling Bob and Joe, their mules, to pull a plow to

helping their mother preserve untold hundreds of quarts of produce, their time was spent in service to the family's needs—and, on occasion, its wants. Clara, ever resourceful, could turn flour sacks into clothing and quilts. When the occasion necessitated, though, she could also construct the latest fashion featured in the Sears and Roebuck catalog, once making her youngest daughter, Brenda, a suit to rival Jackie Kennedy's latest fashion statement. The suit had been made for a special occasion indeed: Franklin (Andrew Franklin, Jr.), the seventh of the thirteen, graduated from the United States Military Academy at West Point in 1961, and Brenda and her siblings wanted to look their very best for the special day. Franklin (often known as Andy to his friends) would spend over twenty years in uniformed service before retiring as a Colonel, and he drew on his military experience and his formative years on the farm during his lengthy career as a General Sessions Court Judge in his native Bradley County.

Such talents and strengths are never deliberately boasted about; when members of my generation ask about them, we're met with gentle laughs and warm smiles. My grandmother never volunteered stories of her experience running the gee-whiz, a small plow, for her father until I found a picture of her astride Ole Joe, the mule. She laughed when I asked about the picture; the day had been exceptionally hot, so her father told her to take a break from the plow and give the mule a drink from the pond. Apparently Ole Joe was rather thirstier than she realized and plunged his head quite abruptly down into the water—so abruptly that

she tumbled off right over his ears, landing squarely in the pond. Her younger brother Raymond, the eighth of the thirteen, would tell me later that Joe was the taller of the two mules. When Franklin and Raymond would bring the mules in from the field, Franklin, being the taller and lankier of the two, would ride Joe. "Because I was shorter and rounder," Uncle Raymond explained to me, "I got the short, round mule."

With the wonders of social media, I've had the unprecedented opportunity to mine for remembrances like these, posting pictures and snippets of stories in hopes of prompting other unshared memories. In some cases I'm met with affirmations of facts I already know from various historical records, but at other times I've been fortunate to be the recipient of candid reflection. My grandmother's sister Katherine, the eleventh of the thirteen children, offered a reminiscence echoing her Granddaddy Renner's humble frankness. When I asked what memories were prompted from a picture of Great-Great-Granddaddy Renner taken when my father was a toddler, she answered:

Family closeness, watermelon parties, Granddaddy's big farm and seeing how hard he worked- yet enjoyed it. Their beautiful home with fresh flowers and wonderful meals. My oldest sister Geraldine "our Leader and Hero". Loving all our nieces and nephews. It has been GREAT to be a part of the RENNER, BENNETT, DEMENTS legacy. This legacy of hard work, strong character, trustworthy, fairness and spiritual involvement has set a high standard for many generations to follow.⁷⁸

Number One Son

With the possible exceptions of being elected president of the band (and then only as a joke) and being named “Most Musically Talented” as a senior in high school, I can’t recall a time when my father has been publicly recognized for anything. As he hails from a family for whom public accolades such as Farm Bureau Service Recognition awards and Lions Club Lifetime membership plaques are all but mandatory, this failure to secure such recognition was worrisome indeed. From the discarded barber chair with the cracked green leather seat (I still don’t know why he felt compelled to rescue it from the side of the road, but we thought it great fun as children) to the lame donkey with overgrown feet and an insistent hungry bray (the first of many such animals he’d add to our farm), he had a penchant for finding old and broken things and giving them a place of value, even if no one else could see it. In family pictures, most of the time he’s the one looking off to the side, an odd expression on his face and an unflattering glare on his glasses. No one thinks to tell him to remove his glasses until it’s too late, but on those rare occasions when someone notices him and takes the time to coax out a less awkward smile, a hint of the warmth and generosity I know so well is evident in his expression. He’s really quite a funny man in an offbeat sort of way, but you must be prepared to enunciate carefully and face him when you speak, for years of machine shop and farming equipment have left his hearing dulled. His siblings are terrifically successful, and perhaps it’s for this reason that his seemingly meager accomplishments have always been overlooked. He’s not wealthy by any conventional measure, and he learned all too painfully that following family tradition (and being the only one of his siblings to do so,

no less) in attempting to make a career of farming would leave him in debt—despite having a separate, full-time job. His humble but respectable employment as a machine shop foreman pales in comparison to his retired Lieutenant Colonel older brother and his prominent orthopedic surgeon younger brother, and I dare say neither of them has had to experiment with combinations of scrub brushes and hand cleaner to most effectively remove the embedded machining grease from beneath their nails and in the creases of their fingers.

His work shirts, though neatly pressed, always smelled of machines, and he'd bring mysteriously small measuring tools and carrying cases home in his breast pocket. I was fascinated by these treasures (and sometimes we got to keep the little boxes and put them to good use in our dolls' house), certainly, but the name patch above his pocket was marvelously intriguing as it seemed important to wear one's name on one's shirt. It never occurred to me that having one's name on a door or a desk plaque was a more traditional symbol of success, or that saying "My dad is a machinist" would result in a sympathetic but dismissive "That's nice" from my fourth grade teacher on Career Day. A classmate whose father was an executive for a cardboard manufacturing company was chosen instead to speak about how her daddy's job showed the importance of good math skills—but I'd wager now her daddy probably didn't know the creative math of stretching a dollar to its very last penny like mine did.

The company name on my daddy's work shirts changed a few times (whereas the cardboard executive, if he had to move his name plaque to a different company, likely did so by choice), but Daddy buttoned the shirt with the same stalwart resolution no matter the name on the front. He had a family to provide for, and a generations-deep sense of

responsibility urged him forward through the exhaustion spurred from hovering just above the poverty line. I didn't realize until much later how close to poverty we actually were, because naturally it wasn't a suitable topic for dinner table conversation—and no one in the family would be uncouth enough to mention our situation while we were present. Being homeschooled and rarely around anyone outside the family, my siblings and I never realized it wasn't typical to get socks and underwear as birthday and Christmas presents. Daddy went to work every day, we had food on the table at every meal, and we were blissfully happy to scramble over every inch of our small farm wearing whatever combination of hand-me-downs or thrift store finds best suited the weather. We were always clean and presentable if we went somewhere, and on special occasions (weddings, funerals, and family reunions, specifically) we appeared to be exceptionally well-behaved due to the fear of spoiling our good clothes. A careful observer might have noticed I wore the same dress to my Uncle James's wedding as my sister had worn to our Uncle Bill's two years before; our piano teacher might also have noticed I wore the same dress to my first lesson as my sister had to hers. No matter the event, we understood from an early age that our public behavior was a direct reflection of our parents—and of our father, specifically. It simply wouldn't do to let him down, and our parents received frequent compliments from strangers about how remarkably well-behaved we were. Little Eddie might not be the most successful in the family, but no one could have ever said his children weren't impressively well-mannered, even if they were dressed a bit oddly.

Despite his best efforts to lead by example, we never could quite master tucking in our shirts or wearing un-wrinkled clothes. For him, work shirts and dress shirts were

pressed with equal care, though the latter were worn far less frequently. We were fascinated by the can of shoe polish he kept in his night stand; his dress shoes, though infrequently worn, were impeccably clean. His occasion to wear them increased somewhat when, for reasons I still don't fully understand, we were abruptly wrenched from the cocoon of homeschooling and thrust into the alien world of public school just before I began third grade. I, having rarely met a stranger, fared better than my introverted older sister (and I dare say third grade is an easier time to assimilate than seventh grade). My sister and I excelled academically, and fortunately many of our peers in the advanced classes paid little attention to our clothes. I don't know that any of my Quiz Bowl teammates noticed my father's clothes on that rare and glorious occasion when he was able to take me to the county-wide competition. To me, giving him a reason to wear his freshly-polished dress shoes and neatly ironed dress shirt was a far greater reward than the crisp five dollar bill my teammates and I were handed when we were defeated.

Though a change in the company name on his work shirts rarely affected our daily routine, one name change left us seeing him only on the weekends—he was sleeping while we were at school, and he left for work before we returned home in the afternoons. Believing few things couldn't be expressed or improved with construction paper and crayons, I left him a note one night before I went to bed to tell him I loved and missed him. That began a flurry of daily exchanges where I'd tell him of my daily woes and triumphs, and I eagerly awaited each of his responses with glee. One morning I found a small mirror sitting next to my daily note—he'd written the note backwards, transforming our correspondence into a delightful, secret game for just the two of us. My reply was

upside down, and his subsequent response was written in a spiral. I don't remember when the letters stopped or why, but for a handful of weeks I had been privileged to see a side of Ed Dement few people took the time to notice.

With the passing of time often comes the shifting of priorities (though we were always, always cautioned to “keep your priorities in order” and to “be prayerful and careful”), and I became more concerned with my friends’ opinions and less concerned with what my father wore and thought. My brother, two years older than me, had excelled socially due to athletic interests (to call them talents would be somewhat misleading) and average academic performance. Despite being entrusted with farm equipment and other responsibilities unsuitable for my sister and me, my brother’s relationship with our father was often strained, due partially to typical teenage rebellion, I’m sure. When Daddy’s warnings to “keep your priorities in order” went unheeded, Michael’s flimsy cover-up stories for less-than-upstanding activities were met with the cryptic response of “that old dog ain’t gonna hunt.” This saying, of which I was fortunately never a recipient, was perhaps the only occasion our father let grammar lapse. Much of our childhood had been punctuated by insistent inquiries of “Who?” if we slipped and said “me and Michael went outside,” rather than the proper “Michael and I.” Why “me and” had become his chief grammatical cause I can’t say, but it’s been all but eradicated from my lexicon.

My siblings and I tested his patience, certainly, particularly when my brother moved away to college and left us girls as the only farm help. My sister and I worked diligently but were poor substitutes for sons when it came to the more physically taxing activities like stacking hay; our single foray into stacking the hay for transport from the

field into the barn was so laughably inadequate Daddy insisted the extra work of handling each bale twice (once to stack it in the field, once to stack it in the barn) would be far less demanding in the long run than anxiously waiting for our wobbling tower to come cascading off the wagon when the tractor moved. Julia's legs were too short to comfortably reach the tractor's pedals, so I soon learned to somewhat competently use the tractor to cut the pasture, rake the hay, and even occasionally pull the hay baler. I have never regretted being the only one in my immediate family to pursue a degree in a field other than agriculture, but few of my academic achievements have left me feeling quite as accomplished as seeing the neatly raked alfalfa field that would free up an hour or two of precious daylight for my father.

Despite trusting me with the tractor and its various accessories, he couldn't quite bring himself to trust me with the wheel of the family car when he and I would go places together. After we moved to Indiana the summer I turned fifteen (and I still refuse to adopt the label of "Hoosier" until someone can tell me exactly what it means), trips to Tennessee to visit family became overnight affairs necessitating at least one family member remaining behind to care for the farm. My sister and mother eagerly volunteered, leaving my dad and me as the most frequent representatives of our branch of the family tree. On the first of these trips I felt compelled to fill the empty space with idle chatter, prattling almost incessantly as Daddy drove, as he did most all things, conservatively (we should go five miles above the speed limit—no more, no less—and we should always be courteous to truck drivers) toward the first of our designated rest stops (everything must be done in an orderly fashion, after all). As the miles passed, I realized he would comment when he felt something was worth saying or noticing, and the

silence in between was neither awkward nor uncomfortable. We soon became content to reside in our own thoughts, sharing with each other only when necessary or edifying to do so. As we traversed highways and back roads, I became privy to stories, some of which I'd heard but most of which I hadn't. With one bend of the road came the story of an escaped bull he'd courteously returned to a neighbor's barn (only to find out a few days later it wasn't the neighbor's bull); with another bend was the story of when Uncle Kenneth, my granddaddy's first cousin who lived up the hill from one of my parents' first homes, had unintentionally overheard my mother scolding her dog ("I'll whip your butt" were her exact words, as Uncle Kenneth so gleefully recounted at the next family gathering); on a narrow bridge came the story of when Uncle Ralph, having warned a passing motorist not to try to cross the flooded river in his low-slung car, had been beseeched by the same motorist a few moments later to help retrieve his car from the rising water (Uncle Ralph, who had been busy cultivating corn in the field next to the river, told the man he must pay a five dollar charge for making a fool of himself—and that he must walk the quarter mile through the hot, dusty field to retrieve the log chain to hook to the tractor so that Uncle Ralph need only briefly pause his day's activities). At a crossroads came the story of the one and only time Uncle Ralph had been late in forty-three years of working for the same company because someone had run a stop sign (naturally, he'd still been on time the morning he had a flat tire; only circumstances involving others could disrupt his punctuality); on a quiet, tree-arched road came the story of the fire that had threatened Daddy's barn and his livestock— and how he, ever practical and ever mindful of the natural world, could do nothing but fall to his knees and raise his arms to the sky, asking for God's mercy. The fire died suddenly before help

arrived; he had no rational explanation for its sudden end, leaves half-burned, aside from Divine intervention.

The stories generally halted when the vehicle did; if we were stopped, we had more productive things to do than reminisce about days gone by. His hands were never idle when there was work to be done, whether of his own or in the service of others. When he finally began letting me drive for portions of our trips (an honor that signified the pinnacle of adulthood for me), he remained in instructor mode for much of the time, cautioning me about the merging truck ahead or warning me to watch my speed. When he dozed off for a few moments (I'm not sure which was the more powerful motivator—trust or exhaustion), I kept my hands at ten and two, even if the speedometer did meander more than five miles above the speed limit. As the beautiful and terrible process of aging began to lay siege to his parents, aunts, and uncles, our trips became more frequent, as did my driving privileges. Our trips took us from hospitals to nursing homes, then finally back to more familiar places when home health care became necessary. I thought perhaps I should try to spur some reflective, meaningful conversation to help us both cope with the inevitable, but he gently rebuffed my efforts and instead told the same stories, again. When Uncle Ralph died, Daddy and I made the trip together as my mother was still recovering from surgery and my sister was needed to look after the farm. I don't remember who drove down, but he and I took our customary rooms at Grandmother and Granddaddy's house as we had so many times before.

Because they so often said, "Eddie, you drive," when we visited, it didn't have to be said the day of the funeral. He capably steered their massive Lincoln Town Car in the funeral procession with the same understated mastery that had guided everything from

pickup trucks to airplanes. As children we were fascinated with his stories of flying single-engine, two-seat planes with Uncle Kenneth. Daddy's solo flight, however brief, and the few hours he lacked to earn a pilot's license were nothing short of mythical. Somehow it seemed easier to imagine him flying a plane than riding a motorcycle; he'd operated both vehicles before we were born, so imagining our quiet father darting through clouds or whizzing around the corners of a country road was rather an enjoyable game. In reality, I doubt he'd done much whizzing as the motorcycle had been a vehicle selected for its fuel economy rather than its agility. Eventually, he and my mother agreed even the most fuel-efficient motorcycle was ultimately impractical: he'd worn his insulated coveralls and suffered through the bite of cold wind to keep riding it in winter, but his health was of greater value than the money saved on gas. I suspect he might have continued his winter rides through gritted, chattering teeth had fatherhood and the logistics of transporting children not intervened. Skid loaders, forklifts, bulldozers, all manner of farm implements, and a variety of used vehicles all obeyed his touch; if it had wheels and could be steered, he could undoubtedly direct it as he wished. It was he who gently guided Aunt Martha's wheelchair to the gravesite, and they shared a private smile when he bent over to assure her he wouldn't dump her out of the chair on the uneven ground. "You'd better not," she'd retorted, "or I'll spank you."

If such banter seemed out of place in a cemetery, the two of them paid little mind. Without any children of their own, Aunt Martha and Uncle Ralph had been exceptionally close to my father and his siblings when they were growing up, and they'd become "Aunt Martha and Uncle Ralph" to children from several neighboring families as well. Despite his natural inclination toward engineering, my father had pursued a degree in agriculture

lest a generation of Dements pass with no degreed representative carrying on the agrarian family tradition. Since Great-Granddaddy Dement had earned his Bachelor of Science in agriculture from the University of Tennessee in 1915, Dements had been compelled to uphold their status as leaders in the agricultural economy by merit of their degrees from reputable institutions. When Daddy decided, after earning his BS in Plant and Soil Science in 1972, to make his living off farming his father's portion of his grandfather's farm, he had determined to live in a ramshackle old farmhouse until Aunt Martha intervened. "You'll stay here with us," she'd said, and the matter was closed. She took great joy in introducing him as "Our only son who came full grown—and hungry," and she took even greater joy in sewing his socks and underwear together to be discovered on his honeymoon with my mother (when asked about it, though, she merely said, "Now do I look like the kind of person who would do something like that?"). My siblings and I considered them to be bonus grandparents, and few compliments have resonated more deeply than Aunt Martha's warm "We're proud of you, honey," when I had an article published—or her placement of my graduation invitation on their refrigerator (none of the other great-nieces and nephews had made it onto the fridge, so I felt particularly honored).

Daddy and I stopped to check on Aunt Martha the day after the funeral, and we found her looking resolute in spite of her grief. She'd spread her jewelry on the kitchen table (quite a sizeable—and valuable, as I would learn—collection accumulated from sixty years of marriage), and, because her eyesight was failing, asked us to help her sort it and label it for distribution among her surviving family members. She had other things for us as well, and she set about her home with a determination to get things in order: she

bluntly told us, “I miss Ralph, and I don’t want to be here without him.” We returned a few weeks later for Daddy to sign some papers, and her body, considerably more frail and worn than when we’d last seen her, seemed to be existing on willpower alone. We helped her look through closets, sorting and labeling as we went. In one upstairs closet she told me to pull out a blue dress she’d made and worn to their twenty-fifth anniversary celebration. “I’m going to be buried in that,” she said. The home healthcare aide nodded at us, confirming that Aunt Martha had made this wish known several times before. The remainder of the closet’s contents were of limited interest to her; when I found some quilts she’d made, she dismissed my admiration with a wave of her hand. “You like them? Take them.” When I commented on the wicker doll carriage in the corner of the room where my sister and I had slept when we visited as children, she told me it had belonged to her and her sister Jenny—and she asked if I’d give it a good home. I promised her I would, and she patted my hand warmly. “That’ll be fine,” she said. When she sent Daddy out to check on some things in the garage, I told her how much I’d treasure the doll carriage and the quilts. She motioned me closer, then slipped her two remaining rings off into my hand. The two bands had belonged to her mother and grandmother, and I felt my tears spilling onto my cheeks.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you,” was all I could think to say.

“You’re welcome, welcome, welcome,” came her reply.

As the day came to a close, Daddy bent over her wheelchair to ask if he could pray with her before we left. Her tears came suddenly, the sobs shaking her frail body. Though she had never shied away from speaking her mind, I couldn’t remember seeing

her so vulnerable and visibly emotional aside from the few dignified tears at Uncle Ralph's funeral. "Did I say something wrong, Aunt Martha?" Daddy asked.

"No," she managed, "It's just what I needed to hear."

He prayed for her to have strength to do what she needed to do, and for her to be comforted until she could be with Uncle Ralph again. She breathed a deep sigh and resolutely wiped her eyes. He hugged her gently and asked if we could do anything else for her before we left. She shook her head no, and I bent to hug her goodbye. Once Daddy was out of earshot, she squeezed my hand, adding one last remark to the "I love you" we had just exchanged. She looked up at me with a faint smile and a warm but stern mandate:

"You take good care of my number one son, you hear?"

A Good Dement

To observe three generations of stoic Dement men in the same room, visibly shedding tears, was almost more than I could stand. Good Dements do not show emotion except when absolutely necessary. We do not discernibly cry at funerals (with the exception of widows, and perhaps small children), but women, being the weaker, more delicate sex, may be permitted to show misty eyes after viewing or mentioning the recently departed. We are adept at hand and shoulder patting, exchanging sympathetic nods and pleasantries with friends and family as we perform generations-old feats of showmanship. We display our grief in the form of flower arrangements and casseroles, and sometimes in sympathy cards embellished with an appropriate scripture or platitude. We comment on who sent what from which florist, and we remark at the inescapable family gathering that the casserole-making aunt has outdone herself again with the latest concoction of broccoli and cream of something soup. We say we will miss the departed, but we do not show our grief beyond an easily dabbed-away tear or two, and perhaps a slight waver in our voices.

Perhaps the setting permits the temporary reprieve in tradition. Perhaps because we are alone in a hospital room, rather than putting on the Good Dement face for the public in the funeral home, we are permitted to cry. Perhaps even generations of stoicism are no match for the sudden awareness of the inevitable, no matter how we might try to fight it. No one has said, "Granddaddy is dying," but we all know it to be true. Instead of admitting this, we send out a steady stream of numbers and percentages, diligently relaying the information bleeping on the hospital monitors, regardless of if we know what it signifies. As visiting hours in the Intensive Care Unit come to a close for the

afternoon, we gather around the patriarch's bed, grateful that the nurses have overlooked the three visitor rule. Grandmother waits for us to say our goodbyes first. My dad, gentle and loving but emotionally impenetrable, loses his composure for the briefest of moments. The strain of seeing his father, so strong and capable, rendered so weak and helpless, is too much to stand. Daddy takes off his glasses, the tears coming freely as he stoops for an embrace. "I love you, Daddy," he manages through his tears. Granddaddy's tears are just as free, and, though his voice shakes, the sentiment is clear: "I love you too, son." Having rarely conformed to the Dement standard of grief, I am not surprised by my own weeping.

The man to my left is undoubtedly a better Dement than I. A two-time Army combat veteran, my brother has perfected the stoic gaze. He's strong, capable of handling military and personal emergencies with efficiency and thoroughness. He's managed to keep his eyes calm even when mine are brimming with tears, and he seemed to handle this bittersweet visit with characteristically controlled emotion. Perhaps it is the sight of my tough, six-foot-three brother roughly wiping away his tears with his shirt collar that moves me to abandon Dement protocol entirely. Perhaps it is the feel of Granddaddy's dry lips on my cheek and the sound of his weak voice telling me he loves me that moves me to consider my place in this family.

Despite being too emotional to be a Good Dement, I've stubbornly tried to find my connection, even going so far to insist that Dement remain part of my legal name after I married. Once word of my interest in the past began to spread, I became the inheritor of a slew of papers and photographs as the older generations have passed away. "You're the family historian now, Rebekah," the surviving relatives say, handing me

more assorted shoeboxes and scrapbooks. I suspect they do this partly because no one else would like to store mildewed yearbooks and yellowed newspaper clippings, but they're also expecting me to document why ours is the greatest family—to show why Good Dements have always been such, and always will. Few are greater champions of the Good Dement mythology than Granddaddy himself, and his pride in my interest in family history both motivates and halts my progress. On the first day of my last visit, he asked, "How much longer for that PhD?" He was too weak to keep his attention on specifics, but I could not erase the countless times he had nodded with approval when I shared my latest find from county and state archives with him. I deliberately avoided sharing some of the less flattering bits of historical evidence, both to keep his version intact and to spare myself the pain of challenging him. When he saw a list of the slaves our ancestor owned, he smiled at the proof of our family's prominence. When I saw my ancestor's name attached to the purchase of a twelve-year-old girl, I masked my feelings of shame by adopting the "look how well our ancestors did for themselves" reaction in front of him. I didn't dare tell him how I wept when I found the bill of sale at the archives. How could I give voice to my criticism and risk wounding a man I so deeply love? How can I embrace his legacy while denying his prejudices? How can I scrape away the pretense and the protocol, the millstones of family tradition, in order to find how the pieces of the past have shaped me into who I am today?

INTERLUDE: A TRANSITION FROM NAME TO PLACE

Seasons

It's the steady *schluck, plop, schluck, plop* of overshoes in the mud, a constant, reflexive struggle with the wet earth to place one foot in front of the other. When you were a child, you imagined the sound wasn't that of your father's overshoes but was instead a wayward elephant you had to follow and protect. You learned fairly quickly not to let your imagination disrupt your chores, lest your elephant-following adventures be cut short by a playful (or sometimes not so playful, depending on the length and severity of your daydreaming) swat on your behind. The row of metal clasps closing the rubber flap around each leg makes a faint clanking sound, like the rattle of a harness or the clink of a chain, but the noise is obscured when the mud is deep, overpowered by the suction resulting from each footstep. You become adept at gauging the depth of mud by the color of the ground, and you generally follow the tracks of those before you, both animal and human. To rush would be to foolishly risk sliding and falling; it is better to keep your steps deliberate and your rhythm steady.

The fences must be mended, the animals fed, the equipment maintained, regardless of the relentlessness of rain or the tiring trudge over rain-soaked ground. You know the rain is necessary, though, and at times the slopping about becomes a welcome activity as you consider what this hard, early spring storm will bring. The smell of damp livestock mingles with the sweet smell of hay when you pause to listen to the rainfall from the safety of the barn door; you switch off the barn's lights to let the evening

envelope you in its wet darkness, and for a moment you forget your soaked jeans and the swath of hair plastered to the side of your face. Even the best rain gear can't guard you completely from a torrent such as this, and you wonder how your older relatives coped before the invention of micro-fleece and ultra-lightweight, water-shedding coats capable of keeping out one hundred mile per hour winds. One thing remains constant between you and the previous generations slogging through the elements to fulfill the day's responsibilities: the flashes of lightning punctuating the ever-darkening sky remind you of the warm, well-lit home waiting to receive you. You make the trek back to the house as quickly as possible, slightly rushing the daily routine of checking gates and doors, making sure everything is secure for the night.

When the rains halt and the sun works its magic, it's the bare, pungent soil teeming with the promise of life. You pause from tilling the soil to grasp a handful of cool, upturned earth not yet warmed by the sun, sifting it gently through your fingers before returning to the tasks at hand. It's the gusts of wind, still holding traces of winter chill but decidedly hinting to the warmth of months ahead, rustling the budding trees as it incites the young livestock—and even a few of the older animals—to snort and stamp and gallop for no apparent reason. You follow a generations-old routine of preparing soil and seeds; the equipment has changed over the years, but you are still reliant on the earth and elements to work with you rather than against you. In a few short weeks you'll see all manner of shoots and stalks, and you'll mind each crop according to its kind. You'll watch over the emergence of new life from both soil and beast, assisting the survival of the fittest (within good reason, of course). You can help the blind calf by affixing a bell around his mother's neck, but there's little you can do to help the breach foal, likely dead

before it entered the birth canal, aside from giving it a solemn burial. You can do nothing to erase the killing effects of a hard, late frost except till the lifeless seedlings, now a sickly, pale green, back into the soil from which they had so eagerly sprung and portion out more seeds to be sown. The second planting takes the place of the first, and, though they are smaller than they ought to be when summer arrives, the crops remain standing.

It's the smell of baked earth, hard and cracked beneath your dusty boots, and free-flowing sweat, even in the shade. The rhythmic hum of buzzing flies and swishing tails would be poetic if the winged parasites weren't seizing every opportunity to torment your livestock—and you, when given the chance. You relieve the animals' suffering as best you can with various chemical sprays and powders, but the animals often turn to the more traditional remedies of meandering through the pond or standing head to tail with a pasture mate to form an effective, pragmatic partnership. When you are young you roll up your sleeves so the sun's bronzing power can touch as much of your skin as is modestly possible, paying little heed to warnings of its short-term and long-term effects. When you are older and too practical for such vanity, you wear long sleeves on the brightest days to protect as much of your skin as possible, urged by the memory of your great-uncle having the tips of his ears removed to stop the spread of skin cancer. Even though the sunshine is plentiful, you cannot waste it; your days are long, and at the end of each day your shirt, no matter the style or fabric, will have a swirling pattern of salt from your perspiration. At night the tree frogs and crickets are all competing to be heard across the stifling stillness, and you wonder how your grandparents could sleep on such nights before ceiling fans and air conditioning.

You cannot let the daily heat lull you into complacency; cooler seasons are approaching, and you must prepare for them while you can. As the days begin to shorten ever-so-slightly (but the heat remains an almost constant certainty), you continue the process that's been done so many times before. The hay must be cut and cured, but rather than scythes and other hand implements, you cajole the aging, patched up haybine into service for another season. Its rotating bars on the front of the bine push the tall grasses, clover, and alfalfa flat to be shorn with rhythmic efficiency by the cutter bar in the belly of the machine, its rows of mechanical teeth like tiny scythes laying the grasses flat where they once stood for the sun to complete the curing process. In a day or two (or even in a few hours, if the day is especially hot and dry), you'll return and rake the dried foliage into tidy windrows. The heat and humidity will determine how much longer the hay must cure before being gathered and stored; whether by pitchfork into haystacks or by tractor-powered balers into compact bundles and rolls, the harvest must follow proper process and schedule. To bale the hay before it has cured will result in insidious mold destroying the bales from the inside out—or, worse, destroying your barns and your harvest. The microscopic organisms lingering on damp, under-cured hay harbor the power to cause chain, chemical reactions. Insulated from the outside air by layers of hay, the bacteria fester to the point of spontaneous combustion if left unchecked, reminding you again that your alleged power over natural processes is not limitless. You may be able to preserve spring and summer grasses as fodder for your livestock in the cold months, but you cannot conquer a lowly bacteria if you fail to fully recognize its power.

You spend more time behind the wheel of your tractor than the wheel of your car, stopping only for meals, sleep, and to hook and unhook from needed equipment. The

mechanization of agriculture made the farmer's work more efficient, certainly, but not any less demanding. You work when there is light to do so (and sometimes when there is not), and your place at the dinner table is almost always designated by a manual for some piece of equipment; to make repairs yourself is far more sensible than hiring a mechanic. Whether by hand or machine, you painstakingly harvest and store, harvest and store, harvest and store. Within the span of a few weeks you've gone from praying for a small breeze to stir the sticky air so you can breathe to tugging your jacket lapels up around your ears in the evenings. Soon the sleek hides of the broodmares and cows are obscured by winter coats, and they're grateful to be separated from their half-grown colts and calves.

It's the distinct memory of an animal you no longer own (though her offspring are still in your fields). The lone Jersey cow, always aware of her privilege of being fed grain twice a day, seemed more insistent in the cool months. Though she'd never purposefully injure them (and was in fact prone to rubbing against them for pets and scratches), your children quickly learned to stay out of her path once the door was unlatched. The cow became accustomed to their squeals of delight when you interrupted the steady streams of milk rhythmically whirring into the milk bucket to send an arc of milk shooting into one of the waiting barn cats' mouths. The hot milk steamed in the cool air, and the cats waited eagerly for their portion of the night's bounty. To milk the cow by hand was an inefficient use of time, but the single cow provided sustenance enough for your family and two calves—and the cats might have refused to keep the mice out of your grain bins if you hadn't dutifully measured out their daily compensation. To rest your forehead against the cow's warm side, your hands manipulating the udder with

motions you'd repeated so many times you no longer had to think about them, was a welcome respite from the physicality of the day's work.

It's the crunch of leaves underfoot, and the chill of an unchecked wind darting around trees and buildings. It's the weanling colts, snorting and cantering away from threats both real (in the form of the indifferent hound dog passing through their pasture) and imaginary (a tuft of grass waving in the wind is the closest thing to a threat you can see). You ignore their antics and continue your daily routine until the dog's incessant barking alerts you to something out of the ordinary. You see the colts galloping headlong toward the fence, and you realize they've galloped through the strands of electric wire they've obeyed since birth. Emboldened by their success and the brisk wind, they continue their mad run into the cow pasture, trying to get the cattle to join in their disregard for established boundaries. The cows cease grazing momentarily and a few of the younger members of the herd take half-hearted sidesteps away from the colts' path, but the collective remains unmoved by the equine antics.

It's the moment you lose sight of the colts, and you listen to their thudding hooves and pray silently they turn before the stretch of barbed wire fence—the fence you keep meaning to make the time to replace. You're on foot, and a grim scene awaits you when you reach the barbed wire. The beautiful chestnut colt stands, too shocked to fall, the blood from the open gash on his chest coating his white feet. The dun filly and the bay colt are off to the side, their wild run now halted as their companion can no longer join them. As you approach you find the gash is deeper than you first thought; the barbs dug into his flesh as he ran through the wire, slicing his chest in an ugly, jagged line. The colt turns to you with frightened eyes. You stroke his blazed face and force yourself to speak

in soothing tones; his last, labored breaths will be as peaceful as you can make them.

You pay the neighbor with the backhoe \$100 to bury him the next day, and you take down the remaining barbed wire, rolling it up around a fence post and leaving it out of any animal's reach in a dusty corner of the barn.

It's the call you must place to the same neighbor a few weeks later, and you hope the temperatures haven't been below freezing long enough to prevent his work. You find it strange to not hear the indignant nicker of the Shetland pony when you tend to the chores after the neighbor has left. The pony has been with you for over twenty years and has never once let you forget her importance, even up until this, her last day. She has always been a part of your children's lives; "Princess is my pony" was one of your eldest daughter's first complete sentences, and you've lost track of the number of crayon portraits bearing the pony's name. Princess was exceptionally patient and gentle with small children, plodding along in a way that set even a nervous child at ease. If a small passenger were to wriggle about unexpectedly, she halted the instant she felt something awry in the saddle. She accepted her duties with marked regality, demanding her food before that of the larger horses as just compensation for her efforts in instructing your children on proper horsemanship. When the children grew larger, though, she took it upon herself to teach them courtesy: if they urged her to move too quickly on a particularly warm day (or on any day, once they reached a certain size), she would remind them to be mindful of their mount's comfort by swiftly and deftly removing them from her back. Her method of choice was the cedar tree in the side yard, as its branches were the perfect height for unseating her precocious young riders. True to her training, though, she always froze in place once riderless—and her rider was significantly humbler

upon retaking the saddle. You watch your children stroke that familiar fuzzy coat on that last afternoon, and you realize it's been many years since they had to stand on tiptoes to reach the pony's coarse white mane. The pony acknowledges her children with a flutter of her nostrils; her body is too tired to produce the sound you all know so well. She leaves your life with the same dignity she demanded when she entered it.

The freezing temperatures soon give way to the first snowfall of the season, and, though you know your day's chores are made more difficult by the snow, you cannot ignore the feeling of serenity the soft white blanket gives. You watch the bird feeders as you have so many times before, never tiring of the comings and goings of the various winged creatures flitting like feathered gems in the bare tree branches. It's the little brown wren flitting around your porch, its head tilted inquisitively as it searches your empty flowerpots for something edible. This wren reminds you of one of your grandfather's favorite stories of watching a wren family on his porch as a boy—a wren family whose nest was conveniently located in the pocket of the coveralls his father had left hanging just under the porch's awning. The wren leaves tiny, mischievous tracks in the snow blown on your porch, and you're surprised to find your cheeks are damp at the poignant simplicity of the memory.

It's the frigid stillness when the evening's chores are done. When you were young, you would steal a few moments between the end of chores and the beginning of dinner to hide yourself in the old green wooden swing on the side porch. You'd position yourself out of the path of light pouring from the kitchen window, and you remained silent as your siblings kicked their boots off and stomped the hay out of the folds of their pants (if they remembered) before going inside. The cold began seeping into your body,

biting at your extremities. You deliberately wriggled your toes so that you could mark the precise order each went numb. You haven't been able to feel your nose for at least an hour, and, while your mother wasn't watching, you snatched the thick toboggan from your head and ran a gloved hand through your hair to let the cold penetrate to your follicles. "What are you *doing*?" came your mother's irritated voice from the kitchen door. You'd suffer longer for keeping dinner waiting than you would have from hypothermia, so you followed her back inside, stopping only to send one farewell puff of breath into the night air.

Eventually, as the years pass, the cold becomes more tiresome than exciting, and you look forward to the days when the hatchet, its handle worn smooth by decades of use, can stay dry for a change instead of chopping through the layers of stubbornly regenerating ice preventing your livestock from accessing the water in their troughs. Once you've talked over the idea sufficiently with your neighbors and with the men at the feed store, you decide to invest in water trough heaters to spare the hatchet—and your forearms—a few hours of effort. You install them without incident and enjoy the sight of rippling water as a replacement to white sheets of ice, and you use the extra time for other tasks—until you realize the old bay mare is flat refusing to drink from her trough. You lead her to it, pulling off your glove to trail your fingers in the water and show her it's safe, but she snorts and tugs away from you, her lower lip trembling (the saggy lip is her one physical flaw, and she uses it to her advantage) as she implores you to bring back the old way of doing things. She's pushing thirty years old, so you spend the time you gained from no longer having to chop ice by taking her a personal bucket of water—a bucket she demands you fill twice. You are relieved when she finally concedes that her

pasture-mates are still alive despite having drunk from the foreign contraption, and she nonchalantly noses past the floating heater as though she'd never objected to its presence.

It's the smile you find has involuntarily crossed your lips when thinking about the fussy old mare and the pains you'll take to please her. It's the weariness in your bones, but the assurance you'll carry on the next day as you have for the days before. It's the harsh uncertainties and subtle beauties of the world around you, and the knowledge that your role is relatively insignificant in the scheme of things. It's the squish of the mud beneath your boots when you crunch through a thin layer of ice; it's the evidence of the new season gradually stepping in to take the place of the old.

CHAPTER THREE OUR PLACE: ON LAND AND LABOR

Sun Time

I lay on the sun-warmed deck boards, too tired and stiff to do more than a cursory check for dirt or bird droppings. The artificiality of the air-conditioned indoors has numbed my extremities, reducing my thoughts to a muddled repetition of tasks and obligations. I fling an arm over my eyes, sighing as the heat penetrates my body inch by inch. When I wake half an hour later, sweaty, baked, blissful, I'm sure the neighbors must think me some sort of oddity for laying directly on the boards when a perfectly good table and chairs are just a few feet away. They must also think me an oddity for talking to the living things around my house; cooing at birds, rabbits, and the occasional squirrel (but never at skunks—they're outside the realm of my appreciation for suburban wildlife); tenderly caressing the leaves of my plants; taking half an hour just to do nothing but be outdoors. My suburban yard is but a humble echo of my formative attachment to the soil and the nurturing power of sunshine—and perhaps the only remnant of my agrarian ancestry is my penchant for digging bare-handed in my flower beds, tucking in bulbs and seedlings, feeling an inexpressible joy when things begin to grow.

From my bed of deck planks I imagine the generations of farmers from whom I descend, humble and otherwise, turning grateful faces skywards on the first warm, sunny

day after a long winter, embracing its restorative power to awaken and rejuvenate the frost-laden soil and the dormant trees. Livestock eager to shed their winter coats leave tufts of hair clinging to trees and fence posts—hair that will soon find its way into songbird nests. The actions of the intertwined natural and human worlds are dictated by the rising and setting of the sun, prompting the adage of “making hay while the sun shines” and the invective to disregard the clock and work as long as there is light to do so. The advent of daylight savings time proved a frustration to a great many farmers, and I heard the older men in my family insist more than once that the fool idea had been instituted only so politicians could play golf. Though the demands of society forced them to begrudgingly adjust their watches along with the changing of the time, some of the older generations still insisted on the distinction between “sun time” and “clock time.” In fact, my great-grandfather Miller Dement, having been born and well-established on his farm long before the silly notion was ever instituted, flat refused to ever adjust his watch; I don’t think he ever forgave those fool politicians for disrupting his working relationship with the sun and the tasks at hand.

I’m afraid my life is dictated largely by clock time, and such moments in the sun are fewer and further apart than I would like. Nonetheless, the restorative sunshine that has thawed my extremities and my brain is the same that has lent its life-giving force to generations before me. I am a long way from the farm and cannot claim to derive my livelihood from the soil, but I am equally as eager as my ancestors to offer my gratitude to the sun.

Shrine of Nature

For Miller Dement, a relationship with the natural world was far more intimate—and far more substantive—than a relationship with the clock. Because a farmer's livelihood depends upon the successful manipulation of natural processes, his appreciation of nature is both pragmatic and reverent. He must harness the power of water and wind to cultivate his fields, and agriculture for him is both a science and an art. He looks to the soil for a sense of sustenance deeper than the mere growing of food, always seeking to be a participant, in harmony with the rhythms of the natural world, rather than a mere observer on holidays and hunting excursions. Such intrinsic, daily pursuits are too time-consuming to allow much opportunity for poetic reflection, particularly in the days before machinery expedited the labors of man and beast. I suspect Miller cultivated his poetic tendencies with particular care in order to nurture his blossoming relationship with Anna Ruble McSpadden. "Ruby," as she preferred to be called, and Miller, having met at the University of Tennessee in the early 1910s, regularly exchanged letters after Miller graduated. Though most of the letters that have survived are from Ruby, Miller's veneration of nature nonetheless echoes in her remarks. In one of her early letters, she asks, "Did you know you had missed your calling? You ought to have been a poet instead of a farmer."⁷⁹ This is not to say, of course, that Ruby was oblivious to the more regimented aspects of an agrarian lifestyle. She closed one letter, "Well I must say goodnight for altho I'm not a farmer I do get up real early."⁸⁰

Miller must have assumed his activities would bore the young undergraduate, for Ruby was prompted to give this response in October 1916:

Dear Mr. Dement,

...Why do you think I'm not interested in hearing about what you do on the farm? I am, altho I'm not a farmer yet I'm deeply interested in the subject. I have to be for my brother and I have big discussions over all sorts of problems and I may need to know a lot about farming some day when I get to be a Home Economics extension worker, for you know I must know how to make a garden and how to grow bigger flowers than the neighbors.⁸¹

Growing "bigger flowers than the neighbors," though said here partly in jest, suggests a hint of Southern pride and position: the size and type of flowers in one's yard, like most other public displays, rarely had one meaning. She makes continued references to her affinity for farming, closing one letter with measurements of time familiar to both of them: "It is far past farmer's bedtime and is student's bedtime now so I'd best say good night."⁸² With references made to both rising and turning in according to a farmer's schedule, she eventually concludes, "Yes, I think I'd make an excellent farmer," and then goes on to provide support for her assertion: "You know I've been taking agriculture."⁸³

Following her graduation in May, 1917 (before which she assured Miller, "I'm sorry you can't be here for commencement but I'm glad you are farming"⁸⁴), Ruby took the opportunity while on a short vacation in June to see family in Swannanoa, North Carolina, to reflect on the connection between the larger, natural world and the art of agriculture itself. She writes:

It is just now about sun down but it doesn't get dark for so long I woke real early this morning and it seemed most an hour before the sun came up altho it was bright day light. The sun has to come up over one of the mountains before it can shine in the valley. I wish you nature lover could be here in these mountains. I think you would say they were just as grand as the level fields of Middle Tenn, but I really don't see how people can live here off the little farm plots. I guess Tennessee's Middle section is the dimple of the Universe so far as farming is concerned. It is all grand because it is Tenn, and is in the United States.⁸⁵

Her assertion that “it is all grand” was likely a representation of her genuine affection for the natural world—and it might also have been a representation of a change in her letter-writing habits: “Dear Mr. Dement” had been replaced by “Dear Miller.” This new level of familiarity seems to have emboldened her to firmly rebuke his self-doubts:

You are older than I and far wiser thru your years of experience but let me give you a bit of advice—Don’t you ever think of giving up farming for any sort of office work. Don’t you know any fellow who loves to watch the soil turn over at the side of a plow, who loves to watch the sunrise and sunset, who loves the odor of growing trees and grass in the spring, would be perfectly miserable shut up in a building all day. You can’t fit a square peg in a round hole you know. We each one have our own special corner to fit in and yours, I think, is farming, but mine, well I don’t know just exactly what it is. Won’t you please tell me what you think it is.⁸⁶

I have no record of what Miller’s response was (or how flattered he was by Ruby’s demure, seemingly subservient request for guidance), but I suspect he intimated Ruby’s “own special corner,” like his, should be closely related to the land. In the spring of Ruby’s first year teaching Home Economics at a school outside Knoxville, she mused, “I wonder if spring is really here to stay, it certainly begins to feel that way. Aren’t the apple trees beautiful? I want to stay outside so bad, a farmer certainly is to be envied in the spring.”⁸⁷

Despite Ruby’s previous assurances—and her apparent envy of his closeness to nature—to the contrary, Miller seems to have thought himself less than successful in his chosen profession. An April 1918 letter from Ruby suggests her admiration for the unpretentiousness of the natural world extended to the man as well as the land he occupied:

I know you sometimes feel as if you were a failure, get blue and despondent. I wonder often if I was meant to be a school teacher, if I’ll ever be a very great success. As I get older and realize more

responsibilities, I feel more and more a greater love and admiration for our parents who have worked so hard and sacrificed so much for us of this generation.

I wish you wouldn't be so self-condemning, and think that because you are a farmer who cares not for hard manual labor, that I don't admire you for it. That is just the reason I do like you. What do I care for polished finger nails, soft white hands and all the other things that go to make so-called gentlemen? Nine cases out of ten they aren't real men. What do I care for the little polite, commonplace, meaningless remarks that make a man's conversation sound witty and bright when perhaps he couldn't possibly make a decent living. Good common sense is a lot more attractive to me. I'm sorry that you've thought that I was the kind of a girl who would be attracted by any of these. You've read *When a Man's a Man*, haven't you?

Aren't you a college graduate too? And I wonder if I have mastered the things that make for culture—no indeed I haven't hardly started yet, my B.A. degree is only a beginning, just as your B.S.A. didn't give you an education, it merely opened the gateway so you could get an education after you finished college. Perhaps you don't feel that way about it but I do.

It isn't the polish and cutting that gives the diamond its value. Its pricelessness depends on its purity when it was a diamond in the rough, if it is then full of flaws and faults no amount of polishing can make it perfect, while the finishing of a perfect stone only makes it more pleasing to look on, but does not increase its value or make it one bit more precious, all that was determined by its character when it was a rough stone. I'm not saying not to try to acquire any polish or qualities that the world demands—by all means do it if possible—but I mean to say that to me it isn't the polish that counts but what is behind and beneath it all.⁸⁸

For Ruby, a great portion of the “behind and beneath it all” that mattered most was the intrinsic connection to the land. As their letters increased in frequency and intimacy, she reiterated:

Don't you know how I feel about farming and a farmer's life? It is true I've never lived on a real farm but I know what farm life is and I like it. I'd never be happy living anywhere but in the country I think, and when I fall in love with a man I'm most sure he will be a farmer.⁸⁹

She assured him of specific farm-related tasks she found enjoyable, insisting she eagerly helped her neighbors in threshing barley and wheat.⁹⁰ Her descriptions moved easily from the practical to the poetic; the weather, as it is for most people deriving their livelihood from the land (to this day, members of that side of my family rarely end a conversation without discussing the forecast and current weather conditions at least once), was a frequently visited subject:

I hope by now you have had as good a rain as we have been blest with. Everything was getting so dry here but it wasn't as bad as you wrote of, but now things are looking better and the sky is so clear blue, it looks as if it had been washed. We had a gentle rain nearly all one day and night. A good part of the wheat and hay was in so most of the farmers just breathed a sigh of thankfulness and relief.

I think sometimes we forget to be thankful for the rain, the sunshine, and the wind. Even the storms have something in them to make us thankful.⁹¹

I have no way of knowing how much of this sentiment existed before their relationship or how much was expressed as a means of impressing him, but the idea of finding value in difficult circumstances seems to have appealed to him.

The first full letter I have in Miller's own words reveals internal storms of a sort; though undoubtedly moved by the beauties of nature and the intrinsic satisfaction of working the land, he, more so than Ruby, was keenly aware of the decidedly un-romantic aspects of a farmer's life. He speaks candidly of exhaustion and frayed nerves, of self-doubt. As evidenced by her previous reassurances, he continued to navigate cyclical waves of self-doubt regarding his chosen profession. As it so poignantly captures each aspect of his uncertainties, I include the majority of the letter here:

Cortner, Tenn.
Feb. 20, 1919

Dear Ruby: --

I guess I should have answered your letter last night but I had been up late for several nights and it was telling on me for you know loss of sleep will tell on anyone and especially on a fellow who leads a strenuous life. I do not feel tired till I sit down at night and then I do not want to read much or write I do not mind talking and then is when I do the greater part of my thinking. I have had about a three minute nap to-night but the phone rang and spoiled all my dreams. I sat down to write to you and of course being tired I must think to you and before I knew it I was dreaming to you. It seems that since I had the "flu" I never get rested. Sometimes I think I'll have to quit the farm for so long as there is work to do and I can see to go, I go. I want to stay up with the work so much that I almost strain my own nerves. I guess you will laugh about a farmer's nerve being tired of work, but I have complications with work. I want so much to be a success financially, to be one of the best farmers of my community, to stand for something in my old home community, to solve some problems that I don't tell now for I am afraid you would not love me if I told for I could not say what I want to say with written words. Last but not least I think of, I plan for, I dream of, I love a girl who says she wants to help someone make a home. But I must not say that.

Ruby, how could you ask a fellow like me to help you overcome your faults when I have so many. You say you are selfish, I am intensely so sometimes. I have grown up to think my own way fight my own fights, amuse my own self. I generally let the other fellow alone so long as he does not bother me. I had no pal as a boy, Dock is perhaps the first one I had. In your "unsent" letter you said you wanted me to help you love life and humanity and help you enjoy life to its fullest extent. I am afraid you are asking too much Ruby, I enjoy life most of the time for I believe I was made like a young mule just to work and as a rule the harder I work the better I feel even though I am tired. The things I come in contact with I seem to get more out of than most people and I have learned to enjoy them and never mention them but perhaps I could learn. I am afraid I am losing touch with God and nature for things do not seem to touch me so easily as they used to. It used to be that I could go out into the night and look up into the stars and catch the spirit of wonder till I could almost cry for joy. The same was true of the sunsets and sunrises, but as I look back I see I have joined the mad wish for the dollar for a place in the eyes of the world and have given up time to develop that finer sense, that communion with nature. Sometimes I think it has all gone over into my love for you for at times my love rises like a huge wave till I can hardly stand it. I get a cool, matter of fact letter from you the crest of the wave is broken and it soon has gone back to its old

level but there is ever present the undercurrent of love that will not let me go. I guess I could not make you enjoy the things I enjoy for I have felt so long that they were mine because other people did not see them or want them or enjoy them.

You make me happy? If there is any one living who could it is you. You selfish? Who could call a girl selfish when she is willing to work and support herself and help her sister to a better education, to a higher nobler life? If that is selfishness give me more selfishness. I admire, I love the people who work. I love the day laborer, I love him for his plodding patience, but I despise (look down on) the fellow who is always looking for short hours and long pay and a sitting down job. It is the patient, the eternal plodder I love, the fellow who tries to make his calling honest and honorable.

“Let’s” just call your letter a letter and not fuss about it being a thunderbolt or a ray of sunshine. What do you say.

Ruby, you were right. Way down deep in my heart, my soul, my inner being I do not want to be forgotten, but the more I think of my love to you the more I see that my love should not stand between you and your ambitions, your friends, your home, your calling in life, your dreams. Everybody wants to be loved and so do I, but that is only natural so what claim I have on your love that the other fellow has not? Take that position, Ruby, take it, girl, I can wait. I need to wait, I ought to wait for I have some fights to make, some troubles to overcome, some problems to solve. When I have finished them I can tell you all about them if I win, but if I lose I guess I won’t tell you what they were and won’t want you to love me. I am depending on God and time to help me...

I was about to forget to tell you that I forgive you everything you ask for they are past. You put them away yourself with your last two letters. I cannot forgive you and Dock for saying that I know more than you two do. It makes me ashamed to think of how little I know. You two just knew me at my best, that is all.

Ah! If I could only feel that it was right for me to love girls like you and Ellen and Neta, then I would feel easy. I could say with all my heart and soul that I want your love not Ellen’s nor Jean’s nor anyone’s way but in your own way.

Good Night!
E.M.D.⁹²

For reasons I don’t entirely understand, their growing intimacy came to a startling halt. Miller had likely always known he desired Ruby as his wife, and she resisted the

idea for as long as possible, telling him flatly in several different letters she loved him as a friend and no more—but, given their apparently mutual flirtation, her protests might simply have been reflections of the maidenly modesty expected of young Southern women. Indeed, when his letters halted entirely, she appealed to him through a connection perhaps deeper than friendship alone:

Powell Station
March 31, 1919

Dear Miller—

Please let's make up and won't you write to me again. I'm sorry I let my bad feelings get the best of me and make me say mean things. Why can't I control my feelings like most everyone else does. I can't understand why you ever learned to love me, I've so few loveable traits. Do you, can you love me yet, after you've seen how mean I can be? Please teach me how you keep yourself so broad, so thoughtful of others, so considerate.

Write me a letter about your spring plowing, about the trees budding along the river. Don't you love the odor of budding willows? Don't you love the spring sunsets. I saw the most beautiful gold lined clouds at sunset the other afternoon.

Tell me about the little lambs and the chickens. Tell me all about your spring work and then re-read the letter I wrote just after you were here, and the last "unsent" one.

Please excuse me for asking these things for perhaps you don't want to ever write to me, but I miss your letters so much.

As ever,
Ruby M^{c93}

As their exchange of letters continued for the next year, her appeal to his better nature appears to have been successful. It did not, however, safeguard her against his wounded pride over unreciprocated feelings. Just as she had implored him to continue their correspondence by appealing to their shared affinity for the agrarian lifestyle, so too did he impress upon her the restorative and unifying potential of the land he all but worshipped:

If you were here now for the next six weeks nature would likely help take away the hurt. It seems each time I am with you I hate to leave worse and this time I had a burden on my heart for you but I was not permitted to deliver it, but now things have grown so since I left they help take away some of the hurt from missing that. As far as you can see from here there is not a bare spot except what has been turned or working since last fall by man. The apple trees are almost in full bloom and their perfume is almost intoxicating. This afternoon there was a gentle South wind and just at sunset a group of clouds came steaming up from the southwest from behind the orchard on the hill and gave the prettiest effect of a pink snow storm one could imagine. How I longed for you to be here then, but I do that each hour of the day. I wonder if those things would mean so much to you after all, if you could worship at my shrine of Nature with me, seeing thru my eyes. I have wondered if it would awaken in you a something, a sympathy such as only a woman seems to have. I wonder if you would feel something stir, a sympathy with all life in your inner being as I do when I plant and grow seeds and plants or the little pigs come up to me as I sit down on the grass and root my overalls, pull my shoestrings and nose in my pockets in all their baby innocence until they learn to eat corn etc or as I do when I pick up a newly hatched chicken and he stands in my hand and picks at any loose skin of a corn or any speck and talks his innocent baby chick talk or when I hover him with my hands and he expresses his gratitude or when I go out into the pastures and a young lamb comes up to inspect me with all that innocence and yet that mischief (saying catch me if you can) that belongs to the wild things; or when a big night moth walks from a limb onto my finger and hangs there helpless yet trustingly with all its God-given beauty. Could those things ever mean so much to you as they do to me? If they could then we could take away the hurt and maby [sic] I could feel I was not asking too much of you.

Ruby, girl, I do not want you to work too hard getting your things ready for I want you strong and well but I'd love to have nature to help me take away all hurts. Later I'd feel free to go to the mountains or seashore for a week but here would be the test for that hurt.⁹⁴

Miller's "shrine of nature," it seems, was not simply some indiscriminate portion of the great outdoors. He expresses a passing interest in the mountains and the seashore, but only the pastoral tranquility of Bedford County, Tennessee, could provide the regenerative spiritual connection his soul so desperately craved.

This letter, signed “Lovingly,” indeed seems to have further awoken something in Ruby. Within a month’s time, their letters spoke of concrete plans for building their life together. As was characteristic for the couple united in part by their shared nature, their plans were a mixture of the practical and the fanciful. Ruby may have been correct in her previous assumption that Miller ought to have been a poet—or, at the very least, that he harbored a desire to share his poetic inclination with others. One of his letters to her reveals a poet’s sensitivity, certainly:

I have almost despaired of giving to the world my feelings that are poetic, that would be a balm to humanity in its heartsickness, either by means of music or tongue or pen. When I catch the spirit of nature, of the hills I feel sure that it would do someone some good could I only pass it on, for it healed my hurts. I think I could be contented if God sees fit to give us a boy or girl or both or several who could have my poetic feelings and what is behind your reserve and could give them to the world in song or story, by music or pen or oratory till it could be said that theirs was a life of service. Sometimes I have felt that I was called to give of my life to humanity, but I have no command of words as a writer or speaker, nor can I paint nor play any instrument. I often think of what you told me about Syd W. telling you to practice that piece of music till you felt it and I wondered if it was your way to express what was in your soul or whether you had some other way that was easier.⁹⁵

I can only assume Miller was contented when God saw fit to give them four boys in the years following their marriage, and I have no way of knowing whether he felt any of the four had inherited his poetic feelings. The documents I have in his hand from the years after their marriage—mostly farm records and check stubs—are far more mundane; if fatherhood left him any time for poetic reflection, I have no evidence of it. He did, however, impress upon his sons one of “the two big desires” of his life, as he had described it to Ruby—“to be a man in the greatest sense of the word, a manly man, a Godly man, a man who is just and honorable and honest and a gentleman”⁹⁶ (the first

desire, of course, was to marry Ruby). Such a man could always find solace in nature, certainly, and all four of their sons remained attached to the land in some form or fashion. Their “life of service” may well have been different from what Miller had envisioned, but it seems he and Ruby succeeded in implanting the rejuvenating capacity of the family shrine.

The Unclean Beast: The Spirit and the Natural World Collide

Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear. For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from *the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers*, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.
I Peter 1:17-19 [*emphasis added*]

They that trust in their wealth, and boast themselves in the multitude of their riches; None of them can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him. . . *Their inward thought is, that their houses shall continue forever*, and their dwelling places to all generations; they call their lands after their own names. Nevertheless man being in honour abideth not: *he is like the beasts that perish*. Psalm 49:6-7, 11-12 [*emphasis added*]

When my older sister Julia was twelve she saw a demon in the back barnyard.

Alluzya, the flighty bay mare who generally spooked at the sight of her own shadow, had stood immobile in the hall of the barn when Julia was turning the mares out to pasture as we did every night after they finished their grain. Generally the mares were eager to go as leaving the barn meant they'd soon be getting hay, but on this night Alluzya stood motionless, staring with frozen concentration into the dusky lot. Once Julia saw and recognized the creature for what it was, she commanded it to leave in the name of Jesus; it vanished, the mare snapped out of her trance and left the barn, and Julia returned to the house with no further incident. When I said my prayers that night, I asked the Lord to never let me see such a thing. I believe there is more to this world than flesh and blood, but I have no desire to see it.

Talk of spirit beings, malevolent and otherwise, was fairly common in our home. Generational curses, demons attached to families or regions, should be routinely confronted and renounced. We did not war against flesh and blood; our wars were

against things few would have acknowledged outside certain Charismatic or Pentecostal circles. “He shall give His angels charge over you”⁹⁷ was more than just a comforting thought, and speaking in tongues (or “praying in the Spirit”) was the safest way to mediate between physical and spiritual worlds. Such belief systems would be acceptable for a poor family hailing from the hills of Appalachia where snake handling and other radical displays of belief abound, but it was rather unseemly, to say the least, to be espoused by the son of devout Presbyterians and the daughter of lifelong Methodists. Being the offspring of respectable, strictly denominational middle-class folks, my parents should have taken us to a reputable church with a recognizable name to let us establish our spiritual roots from popsicle-stick Sunday school crafts, Bible-story-themed coloring pages, and the occasionally memorized Bible verse. Instead, we learned to read from the Bible (and, once entrusted to be left unsupervised, we made a great game of finding the most disgusting Old Testament stories possible), we never doubted the existence of the spirit world, and our popsicle-stick crafting skills remained underdeveloped.

The ringleader of our merry band of faith had been my Grandma, a former lawyer’s wife and socialite who’d become radically changed in the Jesus Movement of the early 1970s. As is the case with most formative experiences, I had no idea ours was different from most. Talk of spiritual matters was so ingrained we thought everyone regularly peppered their speech with scriptures and impromptu prayers; I was probably at least seven or eight before I realized this wasn’t the case. As an adult, reading Lee Smith’s novel *Saving Grace* brought a flood of memories, for the narrator was the first individual I’d seen outside my immediate family to so casually drop scripture into daily conversation. The novel featured a character startlingly like Grandma, but not for any

physical similarity. The novel's narrator, Grace Shepherd, spent her formative years under the spell of her father Virgil, a snake-handling preacher with absolute, unwavering certainty in his faith—and an uncanny ability to inspire almost unquestioned devotion from his followers. Grandma was no less charismatic than Virgil Shepherd and took her faith just as seriously, but when she prayed for strength to take up a serpent, it was to chop off a snake's head with a hoe when she caught it stealing eggs from her chicken house. My siblings and I could have been the only children in Middle Tennessee to have our colds and childhood ailments declared demons of infirmity to be bound and cast into the unclean beast (we assumed that meant snakes, rats, possums, and other such creatures), and Grandma was quick to tell us, "It's just demons," if we complained about an ill-mannered classmate or an unfortunate event.

Our spiritual connection to the natural world was not limited to casting demons into vermin. Animals (the clean ones, at least) had souls and were thus susceptible to spiritual influences. As such, we were advised to pray against spirits of stubbornness when our pony refused to be caught or saddled. Whether the prayers affected her or we simply became more adept at forcing her to cooperate remains a subject of some debate, but we found it comforting to think that God cared about the wellbeing of our animals as much as we did. "His are the cattle on a thousand hills,"⁹⁸ we were often reminded, and we naturally assumed this divine ownership should be extended to other occupants of our farm as well. Each pet who died was honored with a cross bearing his or her name (one of our grandmothers had given us a set of acrylic paints, and I think the majority of the set was used in service of the departed), and we read scriptures over the small mounds of dirt near the apple tree as a eulogy to our fallen furry friends. The cross signified the cat

or dog (somehow the chickens always got left out of the burial rites, though) would meet us again someday, and, as the number of crosses beneath the apple tree multiplied over the years, I imagined a raucous reunion indeed when we would eventually come to the pearly gates.

The wild creatures had spiritual significance as well. In addition to the unclean beasts serving as receptacles for the demons that tried to afflict us, the beasts of cleaner varieties were reminders of God's handiwork and were to be respected as such. When a hawk had been struck and killed by a passing vehicle, Grandma paid a taxidermist to preserve it, wings arched as though preparing to take flight, for our continued edification. Two smaller birds, a screech owl and a kestrel, joined it on her mantle, and rarely would she pass them without pausing to stroke their feathers and comment on their beauty. As a small child with a far too vivid imagination, I made sure I slept with the blankets over my head when we stayed the night with Grandma, just in case my dreams of the glassy-eyed birds springing to life should ever come to pass. It was easier for me to grasp (and to sleep while thinking about) Grandma's unique appreciation for songbirds: seeing a mockingbird meant she was to pray for my mother (so much so that she was inspired to give us a taxidermied mockingbird), seeing a cardinal meant she was to pray for my Uncle James, seeing a chickadee meant she was to pray for my Uncle Bill, and so on. I'm not sure how the symbolic value of each bird had been determined, but she was steadfast in her commitment to the system—and apparently thought her children required extra prayers, as she expanded the system to incorporate certain colors of cars as well as certain kinds of birds.

Not all of our religious upbringing was quite so startlingly unorthodox; before we started attending church regularly (Grandma, disgruntled with the social club better known as her local Methodist church, had encouraged us to take “where two or three are gathered”⁹⁹ quite literally), we routinely had family Bible study and prayer sessions that could have been part of any Evangelical home. We particularly enjoyed the “Our Daily Bread” verses, as choosing a brightly colored rectangle of cardboard, each one embossed with a different Bible verse, from the plastic, loaf-shaped container in the middle of the kitchen table seemed almost like a game. Would Michael get a verse about minding your parents? Would Julia get a verse about seeking the Lord? Would I get a verse about the deceitful heart? These verses, naturally, could be discussed with our Presbyterian grandparents, but the casting of demons into unclean beasts was Grandma’s territory alone. We mentioned the souls of our animals to Grandmother and Granddaddy a time or two; they seemed understanding about the graveyard under the apple tree, but one bewildered look from Grandmother was all it took for me to understand that we could tell her about caring for our animals, pets and livestock alike (though the distinction between the two was often purely semantic), but not about praying for them. The beasts of burden were ours to care for, certainly, but their spiritual significance was not a topic suitable for the polite conversations we should have in a respectable, middle-class home.

I’m not sure whether it was intentionally orchestrated or merely chance, but I never attended a Presbyterian church service until I had nearly reached adulthood. The church services of my youth (once we ventured out of the house, that is) had been raucous, boisterous affairs with lots of clapping and audience participation. The congregation would come to order and take their seats only when the preacher delivered

the Word for the day, but even then movement was encouraged. When a member of the congregation nodded at Deliverance Revival Center, it was almost certainly in agreement with the preacher and was generally accompanied by an “Amen,” a “Hallelujah, Glory be,” or similar such affirmation. The congregants were mostly poor, with the exception of a one-time semi-professional golfer whose Sunday clothes were rarely worn more than once (I know this reasonably for sure, as I made a point of mentally noting his attire each week) and to whom we all looked expectantly each time a special collection was taken up. Those of us of clean but limited wardrobes seemed to revel in the freedom of expression: all had equal voices (though some were markedly tone deaf) in God’s house.

When a member of the congregation nodded at Northminster Presbyterian Church, however, it was just as likely to be the nod of a stealthy nap as a nod of agreement. Seeing my grandparents and their fellow enrobed choir members—all of respectable name, profession, and attire—solemnly open their choir books was rather a different image than the foot-stomping, arm-flailing praise and worship leaders I was accustomed to seeing at Charismatic churches. Choir practice, though less solemn and formal than the Sunday morning service, was also orderly and efficient. Though Grandmother had supplied me with a *Smithsonian Magazine* she’d had handy in the car (one must never be without something edifying to read, after all) when I was visiting, Betty Coleman, the choir director, had different plans: she eagerly foisted a choir book in my hand upon our introduction. “You can join us!” For a small, soft-spoken woman, she was surprisingly forceful. I soon discovered I didn’t know the parts of proper harmony: I think I’m an alto, and, though I can technically read music, I still don’t know which notes I should be following. Fortunately, my impromptu, formal-part-jumping harmonies were

of little consequence as most of the choir members had hearing aids—and, if any of them are like my grandmother, they may well have left their hearing aids in pockets or purses until needed for the Sunday sermon.

Sunday School at Northminster during one of my visits was somewhat familiar territory, with the notable exception of the median age of my fellow classmates. As a visitor, I elected to attend my grandparents' class rather than seek out the handful of members nearer my own age, and I was greeted with warm smiles. The lesson for the day was on the signs and wonders of Pentecost, and the teacher honed in on the verses about speaking in other tongues. He asked those in attendance to share their experiences with such undignified displays of hysteria, and my own dear grandmother relayed a time she'd attended a service—unwittingly, I'm sure—where such indecorous expressions took place. "It was just plain scary to me," she said, eyes widened at the mere thought. Several other members expressed such fears and concerns, and I, as guest, was thankfully exempt from contributing to the discussion. The teacher proceeded to explain that speaking in other tongues was intended to be some sort of divine inspiration for learning new languages—certainly not the foolishness Charismatic and Pentecostal denominations currently encouraged in their services. If my fellow pupils had known that my own parents were frequent tongue talkers, and that I too had once heard my own voice uttering words I didn't recognize in a response I hadn't purposefully made, my warm welcome would likely have been remarkably short-lived. Fortunately for all those in attendance, I kept my experiences to myself and continued to enjoy the privileges of being the granddaughter and guest of well-respected, traditional church members.

When spoken by grandparents like mine, “This is our granddaughter” becomes something of a magical phrase, granting entry into the vital emblem of social status that is the Southern denominational church. With the exception of necessary relocation, as in cases of marriage or employment opportunities, both sides of my family have been the sort to be featured on plaques as lifelong members of a respectable, denominational church. Length of membership is not necessarily a reflection of sincerity of belief (nor, to be fair, is the relationship inversely proportional), but we’ve never taken any chances when it comes to how church membership might be viewed by those around us—and, perhaps to a lesser extent, to the Lord Himself. To move to a different church within the same denomination might be acceptable if absolutely necessary (in the case of a church closing, for instance), but changing denominations entirely was questionable unless necessitated by extenuating circumstances. Uncle Ralph, for instance, had left the Normandy Presbyterian Church when he married Aunt Martha. Fortunately for his soul and his social standing alike, they redeemed themselves by becoming fifty-year members of the Normandy Methodist Church—and by bequeathing equal amounts to the two churches when they shuffled off the mortal coil.

Within this familial code of religious conduct, it’s no small wonder my parents’ church-hopping (we went where the Spirit led) was a matter of some consternation. “I keep hoping you’ll find some nice Presbyterian church,” Grandmother would sigh. We always managed to disappoint her in that regard, but we children soon became adept at selectively editing our church-going activities to help soothe her worried mind over the status of our socially acceptable spiritual upbringing. Ladies’ meetings to collect canned goods for the needy, quiet Bible studies, and church potluck suppers were all acceptable

items of discussion and could be embellished as needed. The laying on of hands, prophecies and interpretations, tent revivals, being slain and/or drunk in the Spirit, and being anointed with oil (literally and liberally) were decidedly not items to discuss, lest Grandmother furrow her brow and wring her hands with worry over what would become of her grandchildren being subjected to such strange, troublesome expressions of belief.

As a child, I have to admit Grandma's brand of faith seemed more appealing. After all, how could I possibly enjoy heaven without Snowflake, my beloved cross-eyed cat, or Dusty, the scruffy mutt dog who followed us loyally over every inch of our farm? I couldn't resign myself to accept that the creatures around me simply rotted beneath the soil when their lives were over; it seemed too cruel to create something of such beauty and personality if it weren't meant to be cherished forever. As an adult, though, I found something about the structure and reserve of the denominational church to be oddly comforting, despite my mother's insistence that the average Presbyterian sermon couldn't lead a flea to Jesus. The uniformity of the service each time I visited was a point of constancy, but part of me missed the unpredictability of a congregation more focused on the moving of the Spirit than the moving of the schedule.

I cannot presume to judge the earnestness of a congregant's belief based solely upon the chosen place of worship, and the occurrences of sincerity and charlatanism cannot be predicted by the name on the church sign alone. My ignorance of four-part harmony notwithstanding, I suspect I have fared better for my beast-inclusive religious upbringing. Had I been raised a strict Presbyterian, I might not have felt the natural, reflexive urge to pray for peace when my childhood companion, my faithful Shetland Sheepdog Ty, lay twitching in my arms, his old body gripped by sudden and powerful

seizures. To have the same loyal (unless he smelled something interesting, that is, in which case he developed a profound case of selective hearing) friend from kindergarten to college was a blessing indeed, and the vet's office was too far away to bring him comfort quickly. After his second seizure, a few seconds from the first, I prayed for God to end his suffering. His body stilled and his tail moved slightly, and, sitting beneath that tree and cradling my dear companion in my lap, I felt as close to the Lord as I ever had in a padded pew.

The Masonic Curse: A Meeting of Spiritual Belief and Cultural Values

We're looking at pictures of people who died before I was born so that I can affix faces to the names I'm writing and reading about. It's odd that I'm asking my mother about this side of the family, as she's generally always been a hospitably treated thorn in the side of her in-laws. As a former hippie from a questionably respectable family (Grandpa, despite being a highly successful attorney, was known to chew tobacco and had attended meetings of the local chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous, after all), Mama's unorthodox ideas about homeschooling us, not vaccinating us, and forbidding us from celebrating the pagan holidays of Halloween and Easter always seemed foreign to a family who prided themselves on being bastions of tradition.

I always thought she was exaggerating the disconnect from the family until my sister and I, while rifling through mountains of boxes in the spare bedroom of our grandparents' house, discovered a letter Grandmother had written to Mama and Daddy in 1981. She had carefully copied the letter into a notebook, printing neatly at the top: "Copy of a letter mailed to Eddie and Elizabeth," then the date. Within the letter she said she'd tried to be understanding about us not celebrating Christmas (the worldly side of it, that is—we had naturally been allowed to celebrate Jesus's birth) but was truly hurt and bewildered at us not going to the latest family gathering. In the same notebook she'd tucked away my father's weary response, saying they hadn't attended because he'd worked late and Mama wanted to stay home and cook his supper. My older sister and brother were toddlers when this took place, and I wasn't yet thought of, so until we found the letter we really didn't realize how much of Mama's anxiety (and later, apathy) over attending family functions had been bred by years of polite disdain. Disdain might be too

harsh a word, actually, for no self-respecting Dement would ever openly show disdain for a relative, whether by marriage or by birth. Instead, they would make on over her children, compliment her contribution to the meal, and then shake their heads over “poor Eddie’s crazy wife” once we were out of earshot.

Yes, Daddy would’ve been the natural choice for this task, as these pictures are of his grandparents and aunts and uncles, but, as a typical Dement, he’s out of doors making preparations to make hay while the sun shines.

“Yes, that’s Aunt Huda,” Mama says.

“You mean Aunt Roma?”

“Oh, right. Yeah, I guess that’s Aunt Roma.”

Fortunately I have enough context clues to make reasonably sure this is in fact Aunt Roma in the navy striped dress; we Dements are horribly inconsistent about labeling pictures, but at least one in this batch had been—and thus I know for sure that Aunt Huda was on the left in the orange checkered dress. These individuals are my great-grandfather’s siblings and their spouses, people I never met but have heard much about. True to tradition, we continue to refer to them by the all-inclusive designations of “aunt” and “uncle” even though they are technically my great-great aunts and uncles. They’re standing together in front of a fireplace I know well, for I’ve had my picture taken in front of it since before I was aware I was having my picture taken. After Aunt Martha and Uncle Ralph, the owners of this fireplace, died, I bought the clock that had always perched above the mantelpiece at their estate auction. Instead of keeping it for myself, I put it back. I couldn’t stand to think of the house being completely stripped of everything that had made it a home.

I click through a few more pictures, pausing on one of my great-grandmother, Ruby Wallace Dement. I remember her only vaguely, as I was quite young when she died. She'd married my Great-Granddaddy Dement in 1951, two years after his first wife died suddenly of ovarian cancer. "Miss Ruby," as her four grown stepsons came to call her, was an old maid and something of an odd duck by Southern standards; she was 48, had never been married, and had worked as a public health nurse in her native South Carolina. In the Census records she's listed as a boarder before she married (and earning quite a respectable income for a single woman), for both her parents died when she was in her early 20s. While he was courting Aunt Martha via letters in 1950 and 1951, Uncle Ralph, one of Miss Ruby's four stepsons, often lamented his new stepmother's apparent inability to prepare meals in a timely fashion. "We didn't eat lunch until nearly 1 o'clock," he wrote in one letter. Her egregious disruption of standard mealtimes aside, she was always a gracious woman, from what I remember, and seemed utterly delighted when my siblings and I made a game of presenting her with the largest, most perfect fallen oak leaf we could find in her yard.

My mom smiles. "Your great-grandmother was like a breath of fresh air in that family."

She's been engrossed in telling me about *33 Degrees of Deception: An Expose of Freemasonry*, the latest book she's been reading, so I'm a little surprised she's paying enough attention to the pictures on my laptop screen to make a comment. Mama has never lumped Miss Ruby in with her diatribes on the spiritual pride running rampant through the Dement bloodlines, and I've often heard her comment how Miss Ruby

seemed one of the few in this strange new family of stalwart tradition to treat her with genuine affection rather than the often forced displays of familial obligation.

I pause my clicking to listen, and Mama continues. “Oh, yes. I really think it was her prayers that saved your great-granddaddy’s soul from the Masonic curse.” Ever the believer in forces beyond flesh and blood, my mother remains convinced that Miller Dement’s status as a Mason allowed demons of infirmity to infiltrate his later years. If involvement in the Masons is indeed a curse, it was attached to the family long before Miller was born. The cornerstone of Miller’s great-grandfather’s house bore a Masonic symbol, and that cornerstone still sits in my grandparents’ yard. My mother, though not completely unsentimental about such an old family heirlooms, is certain the stone should be destroyed—or moved off their property, at the very least. The family curse, she says, clung to my granddaddy when he joined the Masons, and she would be horrified to know that at this moment I have Masonic mementos on my desk, waiting to be scanned and filed among the other family artifacts I’ve digitized and preserved. I brace myself for the inevitable jeremiad but am a little taken aback to hear something I’ve not heard before.

“I can just hear her now: ‘Now Milluh,’” Mama pauses when I look puzzled. “She had that thick South Carolina accent, you know.” I don’t remember this about her, but it seems a plausible detail. Mama continues with her reenactment: “Now Milluh, we’ve discussed this. We decided you’re going to let Eddie make his own decisions.” My father, it seems, had been next in line to follow the Masonic tradition; his granddaddy was a Mason, his daddy was a Mason, and, because his older brother had apparently not been interested, Eddie seemed destined to join the mysterious yet undeniably socially admirable organization. He’d gone to a meeting or two as a young man, but, once my

mother entered the picture, was made keenly aware of the dangers of joining himself to such cleverly disguised demonic powers. When Great-Granddaddy tried to press the issue in my mother's presence, Great-Grandmother intervened—not out of fear of the curse, I suspect, but out of respect for her grandson's autonomy. Whether she was spiritually motivated or not I cannot say for sure, but Mama's smiles about Miss Ruby are genuine.

“We tried to get your Granddaddy to read the book and renounce the curse,” she says. I've heard about this renunciation before, for Daddy had long ago repented of attending the meetings, thereby nullifying any claims the Masonic demons might've had to him. “He never would, though,” she continues sadly. I let the subject drop for the moment as I finish labeling my pictures and begin to put away my laptop and its various accoutrements. As I turn to leave, I spy a document, singed on the top, laying on the end table next to the couch. The singe marks I can easily explain; my parents' home burned in 2009, and the only salvageable items, aside from my parents' wedding rings, were the family photo albums tucked inside a glass front cabinet in the living room, the end of the house furthest from where the blaze began. The albums themselves were scorched beyond recognition, but the contents, miraculously, remain mostly intact. I thought I'd seen most everything that survived the fire, but this is new to me.

PRAYER OF RELEASE FOR FREEMASONS AND THEIR DESCENDANTS is the heading. No author is listed at the top, but I see there are prayers typed for each degree of masonry. I pick it up and ask if I can take it with me for closer reading, and Mama responds as though I've asked for her wedding band or some other priceless item. “But your Daddy needs to read over that again,” she protests, “and I don't even know

where to get another copy.” I assure her I’ll scan the document and return it to her the next day, but she remains unsure of its safety—and insistent upon their need for this typed collection of highly specific prayers. “I had Masons in my family too, you know.” This is news to me.

“Which side?”

“Oh, on the King side somewhere,” she responds vaguely.

“Was Poppy King a Mason?” Her grandfather, a self-made man who ran a hotel and a bank simultaneously in a small Tennessee town, seems a likely candidate for such a badge of social honor—an honor requiring a commitment that is in many cases as lengthy and as solemn as marriage itself, and as crucial to securing and maintaining one’s place on the social ladder.

“No, I don’t think so—but I think one of his brothers was, or something.”

This indeterminate connection is enough for her to have saved these prayers, though—and naturally she cannot let Daddy combat the Masonic Curse alone.

Service

A soldier's life is not a pleasant one. It is always, at best, one of privations and hardships. The emotions of patriotism and pleasure hardly counterbalance the toil and suffering that he has to undergo in order to enjoy his patriotism and pleasure. Dying on the field of battle and glory is about the easiest duty a soldier has to undergo. It is the living, marching, fighting, shooting soldier that has the hardships of war to carry. When a brave soldier is killed he is at rest. The living soldier knows not at what moment he, too, may be called on to lay down his life on the altar of his country. The dead are heroes, the living are but men compelled to do the drudgery and suffer the privations incident to the thing called "glorious war."¹⁰⁰

My only brother missed my high school graduation because of basic training for the National Guard, and he missed my big stage debut as an undergraduate because of his first deployment to Iraq. Our mother dutifully took pictures of both events, and I contented myself in knowing my big brother's military service was honorably following family tradition. Though my fellow thespians seemed intent on besting one another with witty and memorable biographical blurbs in the play's program, I decided my first (and ultimately only) bio should be concluded with "a special thanks to her brother Michael, a National Guardsman currently serving in Iraq." Referring to myself in third person in a finite amount of words proved to be both a challenge and a frustration. The bio didn't include the day our director had snapped at me during rehearsal for not knowing the lines I'd been reciting without hesitation earlier that week, prompting me to respond with almost uncontrollable sobs. Once my tears were spent, my lines gradually returned to me, and rehearsal continued.

Michael's first tour lasted just under a year, and if we were mindful enough of the time difference we could occasionally indulge in a conversation via instant messenger if the lines for international calls were too long. The ping of an AOL notification was

always a welcome sound, even if the dialup connection was temperamental and our conversations were brief. I logged in one morning before class to find MdTE82 online and eagerly opened a new messaging window:

Radraz016: “Hey!”

MdTE82: “Hey little sis, how are you?”

Radraz016: “Getting ready to go to class. How are you?”

MdTE82: “Can’t talk long, getting ready to hit the hay. We were in a firefight this morning. It’s a rush to have bullets whizzing past your head.”

After a few more exchanges, our conversation ended. My responsibilities took precedence over my troubled emotions, so I logged out and headed to campus—the first day of the summer session following my spring stage debut. I barely heard the instructor for my first class rambling about our perception of reality, noting only the change in pitch of his voice. He’d whisper, crouching near the desk, and we stared dumbfounded at him as he leapt to the center of the room, crying out dramatically, “If I put a giraffe in a blender, is it still a giraffe?” I needed the class to fulfill a general education requirement, but I couldn’t quite bring myself to follow the man’s passionate but disjointed approach. I’d begun feeling a tightening in my chest as he implored us to consider the fate of the giraffe, so I tried to calm myself with deep breaths and the assurance I could drop the class that afternoon. I did drop the class, but my deep breaths resulted in an ever-tightening feeling that was soon accompanied by stabbing pains in my ribs. I called a friend whose presence always cheered me, and we went to lunch as we often did. I attempted to laugh along with him but couldn’t shake the feeling of not being able to

draw my breath deeply enough, of drowning on dry land. He patted my hand when we parted ways for our afternoon classes; “You’ll be okay, Bekah,” he assured me.

The afternoon class was better in content only (and I surmised that dropping it likely wouldn’t help my physical state, either), and I rushed home convinced I was dying from the stab wounds of an invisible assailant. My mother, never persuaded by the hysteria of symptoms, told me to drink some water and pray and that I’d be fine. I tried to think about anything other than the pain in my chest and my inability to grab a decent gulp of air, and I eventually succumbed to exhaustion and slept a few fitful hours. When I woke, the same stabbing pain remained. I convinced my mother I wasn’t just imagining things, phoned my doctor, and was told to come to her office immediately. Upon my arrival, I was given an EKG and a few other tests, all of which I was sure would reveal some horrific ailment. As I sat nervously clutching my paper gown, my doctor laid a calming hand on my forearm.

“Have you ever had a panic attack before?”

My tests, it seemed, were perfectly normal. There was nothing physically wrong with my heart or lungs, but I still remained utterly terrified of what my body was experiencing. I kept the Xanax prescription hidden from my mother and found the clatter of pills in the bottle at the bottom of my purse to be a comforting noise. Michael never mentioned any such remedy following the experience, nor was he open to discussing what he had witnessed—at least not with me. He may have been made of sterner stuff than his overly sensitive little sister (“Baby Boo,” a moniker coined by our Grandma, had been one of his preferred nicknames for me when we were children), but I couldn’t help but wonder how Iraq had changed him.

When he came home on leave a few months later he was leaner, and his eyes darted around crowded rooms with an anxiousness I hadn't seen before. I took him to my favorite pub, and he refused to sit with his back to the room. "I just can't," he said. He was physically much the same, but something had changed. He brushed aside my concerns and did his best to muster typical big-brother toughness, but he was never quite the same. As a typical Dement man, though, he buried any unsightly, unmanly emotions he might've had and shouldered his burden without complaint. Granddaddy and Uncle Ralph greeted him with warm but grave handshakes upon his return. "That kind of experience can make you vulnerable," Uncle Ralph remarked to us—but not where Michael could hear him. In Michael's presence, we had to remain strong and commend his bravery—not comment on his drawn, troubled expression.

During his second tour in Iraq, my brother's service was made somewhat more manageable by the presence of familiar faces. Having served one tour together, it made little difference what political or familial allegiances might have been prior to his unit's departure overseas. Their new assignment, of escorting UN dignitaries rather than escorting supply convoys, was safer as well—though still not without its hazards, certainly. A bright moment came when his unit was charged with escorting an almost inhumanly thin Hollywood icon; Michael told me later that Angelina Jolie was incredibly gracious but looked positively breakable.

The unit developed other, more common relationships as well—more common, perhaps, but no less memorable. Michael recalled one young Iraqi boy whose leadership potential was admirable: some children had begged a Gatorade from one of the soldiers, and the boy, in an effort to be sure each child in their group received some of the exotic

beverage, grabbed a handful of straws and made each child sit in a circle around the bottle so that all could partake. Iraqi insurgents bombed the street where the children frequently came to talk to the soldiers on the day following the Gatorade feast; the death of children is an aspect of service for which there is no preparation. “Civilian casualties” and “collateral damage” seem inadequate phrases for such moments.

I’ve never heard anyone in our family openly discuss mental health beyond a vague whisper or two. We might mention stress or hardship, but never are words like “depression” and “anxiety” used in open conversation. To suggest PTSD or to acknowledge the fact that my brother carried at least two concealed handguns on him at all times (plus at least one in his vehicle) after his return would have been a breach of protocol, no matter what his desperate need to be fully armed might have signified.

The physical effects of wartime service are more easily measured, certainly, and seem to have been of some concern to our great-uncle Mac, Granddaddy and Uncle Ralph’s older brother, before his unit, the 100th Infantry Division, was deployed in fall 1944. Writing to his future wife on October 1, 1944, just a few days before he’d board the ship for a three day journey to Europe, he diffused the danger with characteristic humor:

Yes’m, I’ll promise - if I get my head blown off, I’ll just come back without any “brain pan” at all. Seriously now, I’ve often wondered what I’d feel like if I had to come back blind or with a couple of arms or legs missing. Dunno if I’d even want to come back. But if you want me to promise to come back minus arms, legs, “haid” and spinal column, I’ll promise. Hope they find enough pieces to reassemble me. Bet I end up with two left hands. That’d be awkward wouldn’t it?¹⁰¹

Regardless of his fears, Mac, like so many other young men, accepted his service as a duty to be borne without complaint. In another letter before his deployment, his time in

the Army is expressed as a temporary impediment to other plans, simply another item in the series of events in a young man's life.

There's lots of things I like (in answer to another suggestion) I like chocolate pie, flying, brunettes, hiking (without a pack & rifle), swimming, checkers, dancing, Chevrolets, church, ice tea & coffee, fresh pork, open fireplaces, storms, lightning and thunder, fresh turned ground, green woods and fields, Readers' Digest, Inner Sanctum mysteries, fixing anything, driving fast, overstuffed furniture, watermelon, big front porches with *padded* swings on them, good books and movies, and dogs.

I don't like smart-alecs, stubborn ignorance, green beans, buttermilk, squash, pumpkin, and cigars.

Ok, are you happy? I have a lot more likes, but the only other one I can think of now is I'd like to get out of this Army and start on that future of ours.¹⁰²

If he resented the interruption of his plans he gave only subtle indications, and perhaps a hint of frustration over his uncertain timeline and change of location. In one area he remained constant: the Army might have temporarily impeded his plans, but it couldn't disrupt his feelings for Louise. As he wrote on October 8, 1944:

I've written about all I can about what we're doing, where we're going and when we'll get there. All those add up to just one short sentence. I dunno, and if I did, I couldn't tell you. So about all that remains to be discussed is something that Uncle Sammie has no control over. That's me thinking about you.¹⁰³

By October 1944 Mac and his unit were crossing the Atlantic to see almost immediate action in Germany and France. His letters from the ship would be the last he would write for several weeks as November 1944 brought significant action for the division. When he was next able to write Louise, Mac's humor was intact but noticeably subdued.

Had another close call the other day. Jerry laid down an artillery barrage and a DUD landed about 5 feet from my foxhole. That's too close for comfort. Sure will be glad when this war is over... I'm liable to get hurt.

I took a hot shower yesterday for the first time in six weeks! See what I mean when I say the infantry has a dirty job? I

also got a chance to shave and I removed my “moostache.” I’d just as soon be without it now, as I know what it’s like to wear one. When I wear a mustache I look like I’m about 30 years old. After I got through shaving I was amazed to see how old I looked. This life is making an old man out of me, fast. Maybe I’ll get over it when the Krauts decide they’ve had enough.¹⁰⁴

His letters remained punctuated by his own unique phonetic spelling and wit, but, as the fighting continued into the new year, the price exacted for his service surpassed missed showers and physical exhaustion. The invisible enemies of fear and uncertainty proved just as formidable as the more tangible trials he faced, and his first letter in 1945 espoused but one central hope for the months to come.

I haven’t forgotten how to laugh or sing, but - it’s still kinda hard to completely relax at any time. I think it’ll take quite a while for me to completely unwind and be kinda happy-go-lucky. I don’t even know if it’s good or bad to be happy-go-lucky. Express an opinion plez. I guess it’s rather hard for me to be as happy as you are. The one bit of happiness that helps most is the way you and Mother stand behind me. I figure that somebody cares, and it makes it a lot easier to take the rough stuff.

You’re most wonderful, both of you, and I dunno how I’d take it without you two. Both of you build me up when my degree of blue is somewhere close to “midnight blue”. Maybe I should be more independent in my morale, but it’s a lot more pleasant to ask you to help out. (Excuse me - there’s a few shells landing too close for comfort. That ain’t good. It’s one of the reasons that I can never completely relax.) If they’ll stop that stuff, maybe I can go on writing. It’s hard to write when the concussion shakes the building. I think they’ve stopped now. (Maybe)

Now I can talk about shells while it’s *real* fresh on my mind. When shells come in, I’m tight inside. I guess I’m just plain scared. Anybody who says he isn’t scared is a liar. A hundred times a day I pray, “Please God, end this war soon.” There’s enough of us GI’s praying that prayer to make a real prayer for peace. He’ll end it one of these days.

At Christmas time we sang “Silent Night,” too. Most of us sang it with a tear in our eye and a lump in our throats. As we sang it, the big guns were booming and roaring out their message of death and pain and misery. Even if the enemy is sometimes like an animal, he’s a human being too. It’s hard to think of hating a human enough to kill him. That’s one of the things that I like about

the mortar. We shoot at “targets” and it’s a rather impersonal type of killing a man. We have quite a few to our credit, but no one person is exactly to blame. - Nuff of that.¹⁰⁵

Contemplating the value of a human life led him to consider other values as well, and he frequently found solace in imagining his past—and his future—with Louise. The irony of indulging such fantasies in the midst of his circumstances did not escape him. On January 16, 1945, he wrote, “I guess I’m living in a pleasant past instead of the brutal present. Sure, I could develop a cast-iron soul, but when I do that, life loses its value. So do my ideals and dreams and goals that I have set for myself. So, if I want to dream of us, it’s more of an escape from the present than too definite a plan for the future.”¹⁰⁶

When wishes to escape the present proved only somewhat effective, he, like so many others of his generation, viewed his service with a mixture of pride and horror. Louise had written him of returning home in uniform on furlough from the WAVES, and his response on February 17, 1945, reveals a cost of war not mentioned on recruitment posters or in war bond sales pitches:

How does it feel to go home in uniform? You’re rather proud of it aren’t you? I know I’m proud of mine. I have no dislike for the uniform at all, but I don’t like the war that goes along with it. If wars were fought so that men didn’t kill or get killed, it’d be a fairly nice game. However, it isn’t that way, and you have to be so hard inside to take it that you sometimes wonder if you have any heart at all. When you can look at a dead Jerry or GI and feel no emotion at all, you don’t have much heart left in you. But, you don’t dare feel any emotion. You break under the strain when you do. It’s a rough game.¹⁰⁷

Such a rough game required much of its participants, including the reevaluation of the duties and obligations of civilian life. As many white Southerners before him, Mac had been raised to view religion as a necessary component of respectable life, along with obedience to one’s parents, the maintenance of social customs and norms, and reverence

of the land. His combat experience served to deepen some of those formative values, but in a way he and his fellow soldiers might not have anticipated. He wrote to Louise of this change on March 4, 1945:

I went to church today, and the chaplain talked about something that I've been thinking about for quite a while. That is the difference in the meaning of religion before and after war. Before I got into combat, religion was just a kind of duty. My conscience hurt a little when I didn't go to church, but that was all. Now, church is different - it's a place to go to gather strength and courage and faith. I'm not alone in feeling that change. There are lots of others who are feeling and talking about the same thing. I hope none of us forgets the way religion has helped out over here.

Well, that's enough of the sermon. Maybe you'll find out the same thing in a different way.¹⁰⁸

Just as combat had forced him to fully consider the merits of religion, so too did it violently disrupt the pattern of life lessons a young man of his age and social status could have expected to encounter. The eldest of four boys, he likely anticipated going to the University of Tennessee (where his parents had met and had both graduated), performing admirably in his chosen path of study, marrying a girl of similar social rank and religious belief, settling down to a respectable life, and generally maintaining the traditions that had been established for generations before him. Along the way he might encounter misfortune in the form of sickness, premature death, economic hardship, or even natural disaster—but he could expect a life of hard work and good moral character to be rewarded accordingly. War has a way of upsetting such plans, of forcing, minute by minute, the reevaluation of priorities, both personal and familial. A letter from the end of March, 1945, holds more than just a catalog of the grisly sights he'd witnessed:

A war adds to your age fast - 88's and burp-guns, always ready to dive for cover, fear and dread - scared dirty people with all they own in a wheelbarrow - dead men beside the road with dust in their faces - ground pulverized by artillery - trees with no limbs - a

pillbox blown clear out of the ground by a bomb - gaping holes in four-foot thick concrete walls - dead horses with steaks cut from them by starving people - P-47's broken in two places - burning wagons and trucks - the smell of burning flesh - a man sprawled beside the road with no top on his head - a burned out tank - piles of dusty bricks that once were houses - trucks upside down beside the road - dead cows that have stepped on mines - prisoners of war - planes overhead - the roar of tanks - stop - go - duck - run - on and on - will it never end? No wonder men get old fast.¹⁰⁹

When Hitler committed suicide, Mac noted his fellow soldiers had little reaction. The war in the European theater soon ended, but the service of its participants did not. For Mac, acceptance of the horrors of combat, both immediate and residual, had been a necessary burden of service, and the remainder of his time in Europe allowed him to reflect on the primary coping mechanism he'd employed—an almost involuntary sense of compulsion. This compulsion didn't supplant fear but rather deployed in spite of it. He wrote to Louise of the power of that compulsion:

You were telling about your Italian friend and the Marines. Lissen lady - it's no sin to be scared. I've seen guys freeze under fire. I've seen guys swear they couldn't go back up into the line. But they went. I've felt that I couldn't take any more of it - but when the time came I took it. You gotta - there's nothing else to do.¹¹⁰

The acceptance of one's duty as a noble sacrifice for the greater good of family and country is a characteristic claimed by many Southern families for generations, but that acceptance becomes rather complicated when the greater good is claimed by both sides of a conflict. As I had been repeatedly reminded in my formative years that the Civil War had been fought in defense of states' rights, I had naturally assumed all of my ancestors had been loyal Confederates, eager to defend their God-given way of life. It came as some surprise, then, when I first heard whispers of a dissenting opinion. "Dements weren't overly fond of the McMillans," I was told. My early interest in

genealogy had informed me that my grandfather's great-grandmother had been a McMillan before marrying Joseph Andrews Dement, so I assumed perhaps her family had earned our residual disdain by declining to fulfill their obligatory service to the greater, Confederate good. Having an ancestor—even by marriage—capable of shirking such a duty seemed unthinkable, but the truth was far more complicated. Joseph's bride, Jane, seems to have been a loyal Southern wife and mother, dutifully raising children and recording their births (and their deaths, as five of her children did not live past their fifth year) in the family Bible. Surely such a subservient woman had come from loyal Southern stock? Her father, I discovered, had chosen to lead his family into a different sort of service. A Presbyterian minister, Edward McMillan moved his family, with the exception of his two married daughters, to Illinois a few short months before the war began. As though the desertion of the South in her hour of need weren't enough of a betrayal, the Reverend McMillan had supported his sons' decision to enlist in the Union army and had himself eagerly offered his service as a chaplain. As evidenced by a February 22, 1863, letter from his wife, Mary Ann, to Jane, Edward's religious convictions far outweighed any regional allegiance to the South:

Your father left home in July and has not been home since. He is chaplain to the 32nd reg. Ill. infantry. He stood it very well until the battle of Mattamora on the Hatchie River. I suppose the rapid march getting overheated – then the excitement of the battle and the labor after it, helping to take care of the wounded, losing sleep, want of suitable food to go all together proved too much for him. He had a long spell of jaundice, and general debility, then when he got better he took scurvy and suffered a great while from that. He is now pretty well. He thought at one time of coming home, that as might get better before getting leave of absence he thinks of not visiting home before the war is ended, if he can possibly hold out. His whole soul has been in the cause ever since the trouble commenced. I believe he would willingly sacrifice his life for his country. It is a great sacrifice for him at his time of life, to be

separated from his family. You know dearly he always loved home when he was younger, and much more now, but he says “we must protect our homes, by saving our government, for what would home or anything else be without government.”

His regiment is now 20 miles east of Memphis. Mr. McCreary from Colliersville, and at whose house your father stayed some days, has moved his family to this state spent last Thursday night with us. He used to hear your father preach in Ala. He thinks your father ought to come home – thinks a camp life too hard for one of his age. We often fear we may never see him again. If John were in the same regiment with him I should feel better. John is in the 122nd Left camp in Oct last. He is in Trenton Tenn. I had a letter from him 2 days ago. He is well – does not like a soldier’s life much, but says he will hold on and do his duty as long as strength lasts. “The government must be preserved.”... Your father did not know that Mr. Dement and Mr. Hare were in the army until Gen Palmer came. I knew it before but did not write it to him. After the Gen told it in town I wrote to your father about hearing from you and that they were in the army and were safe after such a bloody battle as they had at Murfreesboro. Where is your Uncle Matt and your Aunt Jane’s boys? Have you heard anything from my brothers? Tell Mr. D. when you see him not to shoot John if he can help it. John said he would shoot over Mr. D. and Mr. H. if he saw them. O how terrible the thought, that brothers should be fighting against brother. Parents should be thus separated from their children and all communication with them cut off. It must be dreadful to live in a country where war is raging. Where you have heard the roar of the cannon day after day not knowing how many friends were lying on the field either on one side or the other, or both. Well, great and merciful God overrules the affairs of men and he will bring good out of all this evil. Though many of his children may suffer pain and bereavements yet he will bring his own out of this furnace as gold that has been tried. ... Give our love to Mr. Dement when you see him. Tell him we hold prayer meetings every night in the week at our church when the weather is good and pray for the south as well as the north. Not that they may be victorious but that they may repent and return to allegiance.¹¹¹

Given the frosty tones still used to describe the McMillan family, I can only assume little if any love was reciprocated from Mr. Dement’s family. For Dements, even service to the Lord himself could be deemed dishonorable if not made secondary to Southern familial allegiance.

Service to the Lord is perfectly acceptable provided the Lord's will correlates with current social values. Following the resolution of that unfortunate conflict between the states, patriotic fealty to the newly unified nation became a foremost act of laudable civic service. The Southern soldier, of course, should hold his head a little higher than the rest because of his unique military heritage; the South may have been forced to concede the war, but not even defeat could diminish its pride in its military leaders. Mac Dement seemed to have been unorthodox, to say the least, in his viewpoints on this particular area of pride. He surmised, "I seem to have a broad enough outlook to get along with most anybody. I can't stand these dyed-in-the-wool Southerners who insist on fighting the Civil War. I think it's rather silly."¹¹²

Mac's younger brother Joe Jack apparently lacked his older brother's "broad enough outlook" when he was drafted following his high school graduation in 1945. Having never travelled far outside of Middle Tennessee, being the only Southerner in his unit was something of a culture shock. He was aghast at the seeming Yankee tendency to use "Jesus Christ" as a swear word, so much so that he remembered it distinctly nearly sixty years later when sharing details of his service with his granddaughter.¹¹³ He'd evidently remarked on such regional differences to his mother, as an undated letter from her, postmarked April 13, 1945, reveals:

As for your Mass. Boys—they came from homes very much like yours. Be interested in what they have to tell you about Massachusetts, ask questions and don't argue except in a very friendly way. One of Mac's best friends was from New York. You'll find a farm boy who can compare notes with you. Might find a 4H club boy. Go to church with some boy. You'll soon have a good friend. Every fellow likes to talk about home and after he tells you all about his then he will be willing to listen to you tell about your glads, etc.

Will write a long letter tonight but must get ready now to
go to the store.

Be a good boy.

Love,
Mother¹¹⁴

Whether he found anyone to talk about his gladiolas with him or not I can't say for sure, but I do know he gradually came to realize which distinctions between men mattered and which did not. His unit was part of the occupational forces in Japan, and he soon learned the individuals behind the uniforms often shared more common experiences than the leaders of either warring party would lead them to believe. The "Japs," he found, were quite ordinary people: though some of their customs and actions were foreign indeed for a young man from rural middle Tennessee, their most basic needs and desires proved markedly familiar. He met local farming families whose implements were archaic in comparison to the mechanized tools he'd become accustomed to using—yet the basic processes and desires remained much the same. He even toured one of three remaining dairy farms left in the area and was stunned to find one of the dairymen had studied agriculture in the United States and had cattle with American pedigrees.

Joe Jack also found familiarity in a place he mightn't have expected—in the shared experience of war. Reflecting on his experiences nearly sixty years later, he mused:

The average person did not want war. It was the leaders of Japan that wanted the war, not the average population. I even knew an ex-kamikaze pilot. He had a little shop right across from my office building, and he told me that he was drafted just like I was. And after he was drafted, then they made him all of the promises and told him it was such an honor to die for the emperor and all. They made promises to take care of the family and that sort of thing, but they didn't convince him—and he missed his flight by three days. His number was already up to make his kamikaze fatal flight, and

the war was over three days before he had to make that flight. So he was a regular guy, just like any other G.I. He was drafted. I suppose that's true in any war—that the regular soldiers, well, they don't want to fight. But they have to.¹¹⁵

Joe Jack might not have wanted to dust the citizens of the Nara prefecture with DDT to curb a lice outbreak, but, as a member of the military government in charge of public health and safety, he had to follow orders as instructed. He would follow such orders for twenty-one months until demobilization allowed him to return home.

He remarked many years later how his mother's letters, much as they had done for Mac, had sustained him while he was overseas. Her devotion to her sons during their times of service had deeper roots than maternal instinct, though; she had contemplated the price of service for the men of her generation as well. As American involvement in World War I became a certainty, she commented in a September 9, 1917, letter to her future husband, Miller, on the price of war:

I'm realizing more every day what this war is going to cost us. When no one was having to go that I knew or cared anything about I didn't think any at all about the war, but now with six Concord boys' names published in one accepted list the war is getting pretty close home.

One of the boys who graduated in the same class at High school that I did has taken the training at Fort Oglethorpe and is now in Columbia S.C. as a second Lieutenant. This war is going to make a man out of many a boy who wouldn't have been so strong without the training. I mean a man both mentally and physically and morally. It certainly has already done as much for this boy, I never saw such an improvement.

Hal McNutt got his orders Saturday to be ready any time at twenty four hours' notice.

Saturday I saw C.E. Peters of U.T. He sails the twenty ninth for Russia to enter Y.M.C.A. work.

I noticed an article in the daily, there is only three of last year's football team who are not in training camp.

It means a lot for a boy to give his life for his country. I think I know now just how it would be. The other day I had been thinking how I wished I could do more toward the war and all of a

sudden it came to me that would I have the moral and spiritual courage to give my life as a soldier if I were a boy. I hope I would, for slackers aren't wanted now days.¹¹⁶

Though I do not have Miller's response, I can safely assume he did not wish to be counted among the slackers. His registration card, dated June 5, 1917, notes he was nearsighted but prepared for service. A letter from Ruby in October of that same year reveals the outcome of his aspirations to serve his country:

I too am very sorry you could not pass the physical examination, but I believe it is for the best for you would never have enjoyed camp life, like you do the farm, and conscientious farmers are needed as much as loyal soldiers, the war must be fought at home as much as on the battlefield.¹¹⁷

Her efforts to console his wounded pride and bitter disappointment placated him only temporarily, however, and she felt compelled to clarify her position:

You said or rather asked if I would like you to tell my brother how I feel about young men going to war. He knows already, that I think if a boy or man can go and doesn't he isn't a true patriot but if he can't go but can stay at home and farm he is just as much as soldier as if he wore khaki on the Western front, so please don't think I mean you when I talk about folks being slackers and so on. Don't I know you were willing to go and are yet if you're needed. No sir, if I considered you one bit of a slacker I'd never write another line to you, but you are a patriotic farmer and speech maker, Hurrah for Henry Clay or Daniel Webster the second, keep on making your liberty bond speeches, and get well soon.¹¹⁸

I cannot know for sure whether Miller ever forgave his nearsighted eyes for rendering him unfit for military service, but I do know he embraced the image of the patriotic farmer to the extent that it was instilled in his sons. When the onset of World War II renamed the "Great War" of Miller and Ruby's youth World War I, the Dement family joined their fellow agrarians in supporting the war effort. As Joe Jack reminisced, "There was a complete mobilization and the patriotic feeling of everybody needed to produce to

capacity, and the farmers grew everything they could to support the troops.”¹¹⁹ Though Joe Jack had performed his duties admirably in Japan, I suspect he would have favored agricultural service over military. When I asked him during an interview how his rural upbringing had prepared him for the Army, our conversation revealed an important distinction:

Joe Jack: “Well, to some degree the little bit of mechanics that we experienced on the farm, and the ability to get along in nature—when you think about field marches, and enduring heat and things to do, and bivouac, setting up your own tent and living quarters, that sort of thing. You get an advantage there because of the rural upbringing, being knowledgeable of the farm and natural conditions. You know how to live in nature a little bit, rather than some guy that didn’t know anything but street lights and—”

Rebekah: “Concrete.”

Joe Jack: “Yeah. Concrete and pavement.”

The extent to which a Dement man’s rural upbringing advantaged him over a fellow soldier not fortunate enough to have such a foundation seems a subjective measure indeed, but the Dement man’s willingness—or, more precisely, his eagerness—to return to the farm after his military service is completed speaks rather definitively to the depth of his familial values. An undated letter from Mac to Louise, likely written in the summer of 1946, suggests an unspoken gratitude upon exchanging one mode of service for another:

Sunday

Hi Woman:

You’ll have to ‘scuse the weather for not raining—and not letting me write.

It’s a lovely day today. The sun is shining, the wind blowing, and the birds are chirping in the trees. It makes me appreciate farm life. It’s kinda nice.

Ralph and I really had a good time riding our respective motorcycles earlier this afternoon. It was very good riding weather, and we had a good highway to ride on. His motor will soon run circles around poor antique lil Carmichael [Mac's motorcycle], but he (C.) doesn't mind (Much).

In order to keep Aggravatin' [the dog] from running after the motors and wearing his feet out, we tied him to the walnut tree here in the front yard. He learned that he couldn't get away, so he just sat down and cried. I really felt sorry for him, but the crazy mutt will run after a motor till he wears all the bottom off his feet. A couple of weeks ago his feet were so tender he could hardly walk.

Farming is coming along in fine style. All the first cutting of hay is in the barn, most of the corn is planted, the sheep are sheared, and crimson clover is almost ready to cut. The first corn we planted is about 2 feet high now. It's growing like wild fire. I like to see corn grow. It looks strong and healthy.

We need Joe Jack home right now. He's the only one who'll keep the yard cut regularly. We've cut it only one time, and it's getting ragged again. The only trouble is that there isn't enough time for yard cutting. Mr. Miller insists on trying to take on more than we can do, and a ragged yard, an unpainted house and no time to write are some of the results. Oh well, maybe I can do my part of helping to get the place paid for, and keeping Mr. Miller from working too hard. If I can, maybe I can overlook the little things that should be done.

You know – I'm almost ashamed of myself for not writing – I see and do lots of things to write about, and then forget about them before I take time to write. I'm either working too hard or awfully lazy—I dunno which! (And don't you dare say it's the latter.) There's sunsets and sun rises (yep—I see 'em both.) and a million little details to write about. Yet—when I start to write they just disappear.

One instance that I remember in particular happened a couple of Sundays ago. Nobody was home but Ralph and me, and late in the afternoon we were sitting on the front porch talking. We heard a quail ("Bob White") hollering, and he sounded awfully close. We looked, and he was right outside the front porch, and wasn't worried about it at all. He stayed in the front yard for quite a while. He met a couple of chickens, and had them all puzzled. They didn't bother him, but they'd raise up their heads and talk it over among themselves. I'm not sure, but I think Mr. Bob White and his spouse are raising a family in the vicinity of the garden. It's a good place, because we never shoot at them, and don't let anybody else hunt them either.

I've just been sitting here listening—there's blackbirds clucking and chattering in the trees, and sparrows chirping and sheep bells tinkling. Somewhere I can hear a pigeon cooing, and that's all. No cars, no trains, no nothing but birds and sheep bells. It sounds good to me. I get a thrill out of just being quiet and listening. Actually it's pretty noisy I guess, but there's a difference in country noises and city noises. I prefer the former. It's easier on my ears I guess.

By the way—I hope you haven't changed your mind about sparing me a few days in July? I'd like to have you spend a couple of days here, and I'd also like to go to the mountains. Maybe we could do both? No rush—there's plenty of time to plan.

Tell you what—I'd better quit for now and go milk ol' Daisy.

Aufweiderschen,
Mac¹²⁰

He makes no mention of which type of service he prefers; both are undertaken with a sense of responsibility to fulfill one's duty. Military service was an obligation to one's country, but service to the land was an obligation to one's soul.

As with most of life's responsibilities, Dement men are raised to shoulder their duties with resolute determination. When he'd learned he was drafted, Joe Jack admitted to being angry at first. His older brother Ralph had volunteered for service, but on the same day Ralph received his orders from the Navy, Joe Jack received his summons from the Army. As a farm family with one son already serving, Ralph was forced to apply for a deferment while his brothers served. Once his initial anger dissipated, Joe Jack told himself, "This is my responsibility. I've got to go, and I'll do the best I can."¹²¹

I imagine Joe Jack's grandson fortified himself in much the same way many years later at his grandfather's gravesite. The blazing July sun beat mercilessly into his dress blues, and I saw his jaw flinch as he refused to let his emotions interrupt his duty of folding the

flag that had been draped across the casket. His movements were punctuated, purposeful, efficient. He performed his service admirably, just as he had during his tours of duty in Iraq. When he knelt to place the folded flag in our grandmother's lap, I saw the tears in my brother's eyes. He considered it a gesture of respect to our granddaddy's legacy to keep the tears in check.

INTERLUDE: A TRANSITION FROM PLACE TO PERFORMANCE

Hands

“You won’t be able to get a good reading from that finger,” she explained, weary but sincere.

The young nurse, eager to get the pulse oximeter in place, looked at the old woman quizzically as she considered the old man’s hand. Even in sickness, the blunt fingers were echoes of an earlier generation, suggesting a capability and strength that defied the increasing frailty of his body. Without looking, his wife was as familiar with them as she was with her own. She lowered her magazine to provide fuller attention to the nurse. “He caught that finger in a mill wheel when he was a boy, and that groove in it will upset your little machine.”

The nurse studied the scarred index finger and found it to be exactly as the woman had described. She slipped the oximeter onto his middle finger; he barely stirred as she gathered the rest of her data and continued on her rounds. When his hands did move, they pulled restlessly at the sheet, sometimes involuntarily, as he drifted in and out of willful awareness. At times his past and present merged, and he asked about hooking up the mule to the plow—a task his hands hadn’t done in at least seventy years but had nonetheless been ingrained in his memory. Decades of farm work had left his hands hardened, powerful, impervious to bee stings and other minor annoyances, yet capable of

patting a grandchild's cheek with palpable tenderness. Each day he had demonstrated expert craftsmanship by slicing a banana for the morning's cereal; he effortlessly guided the worn paring knife lengthwise once, twice, holding the fruit together to deposit perfect slices in fourths on top of each cereal bowl. She too could wield the paring knife with perfect precision; to watch her quarter strawberries was to watch an artist at work. Even when arthritis crept into their bodies ("Arthur and his cousin Ritis," he would always joke), their fingers rarely betrayed them and continued to perform those daily, artful tasks with unassuming accuracy.

Both lifelong educators, their hands had also conducted untold thousands of learning experiences, deftly directing their students toward new ideas and information. Her impeccable cursive had no doubt been made perfect from the nearly three decades she spent patiently instructing second graders on the dying art of penmanship (among hundreds of other skills, state mandated or otherwise), and, even in retirement, her hands had continued to hold open countless books as she read to captivated audiences. His audiences were equally as captivated as he effortlessly and masterfully demonstrated the myriad tasks required by the science of agriculture. From cajoling stubborn and aging farm equipment into working order to dropping delicate seeds into freshly tilled soil, his movements were deliberate, purposeful, and almost always yielded the desired return. The word "retirement" has little meaning for a farmer and a teacher, and their hands continued to instruct long after they ceased being regularly compensated to do so.

The curse of aging is the betrayal of the body; for a generation inclined to build their lives with their own hands, this curse is particularly painful.

Some months before that particular nurse had been instructed to move the oximeter one finger over, another nurse, in another city, had unknowingly witnessed the same level of familiarity between two of her patients—a married couple who had insisted they share a room in the county nursing home so they could recuperate together. Advanced Parkinson's disease, coupled with the anxiety of being away from home, caused the woman's hands to shake more than usual. She pulled herself up on the hospital bed, her hand quivering restlessly on the rail. Her husband, sitting next to her, slipped his hand over hers almost involuntarily, gently patting her fingers in a gesture of

understated intimacy. He shook his head when the nurse asked if they needed anything else, and his wife's trembling lessened when the nurse left and she was solely in his care.

He had served as her hands when her own failed, fastening buttons and hooks, opening jars and bottles, signing cards and letters. He performed these tasks effortlessly, sensing her needs as he would his own. Both had spent their formative years on a family farm and thus had been instilled with the necessity of craftsmanship. He, along with his brothers, applied the mechanical inclinations learned through working on farm machinery to Carmichael, their secondhand, cantankerous motorcycle. She, as one of Obion County's star basketball players, employed her dexterity on the court as well as in making stylish party dresses for herself and her sister. During the War, when her only brother was away, she and her sister had taken charge of the necessary tasks to keep the farm running. Many years later, when a precocious nephew offered to show her how to use the gears on the tractor, she retorted, "I've been driving a tractor longer than you've been born." In their adult roles of engineer and a homemaker, they'd constructed their home and many of its furnishings; her skill as a seamstress supplied them with curtains, quilts, and countless other items of both practical and aesthetic value, and his skill as a craftsman supplied them with china cabinets, shelves and tables, and personal modifications to many of their purchased items. In a humble serving tray, used at almost every social function they hosted, their skills combined; he had shaped the handles for both comfort and utility, and she had provided the needlework background to be both pleasing to the eye and to identify the tray's owner, should it ever be misplaced.

When he died, she allowed other hands to care for her but found no comfort in them. She made sure their affairs were in order according to their mutual wishes, and she

stubbornly willed her disobedient hands to sign each necessary legal documents in the months following his passing. After completing her earthly duties, she, having long since grown accustomed to obtaining whatever she set about working toward, vowed she would not celebrate their wedding day alone. She was buried on their sixty-first anniversary.

The various household items not expressly mentioned in their will were auctioned at an estate sale a few weeks after her death, and their worldly possessions were set on artificial display for strangers and loved ones alike to paw over and inspect. His younger brother, almost too feeble to walk unassisted, came an hour after the auction had begun. His sister-in-law had been the auctioneer's second grade teacher, though, so a parking spot had been reserved as close to the auction tent as possible. The couple had dutifully given their bidding information to the auctioneer but had never really needed to raise their assigned numbers to bid. The auctioneer always glanced in their direction, looking for nods or other gestures. On those few items where they did indicate interest, he asked by name, "You want to add to that bid, Mrs. D?" For the majority of the afternoon they watched, chatted, patted hands of people they'd not seen in decades. Their granddaughter brought them coffee in small Styrofoam cups when the warm winter afternoon grew chilly, stopping to squeeze the worn hands before clutching her own bidding number.

When the serving tray came up with another lot of assorted kitchen items, the granddaughter didn't hesitate to wave her number. Not caring to learn the nuanced actions of more experienced auction goers, she focused only on regaining possession of this particular tangible reminder of her great-aunt and uncle. Because the tray garnered little attention from the scavenging antique dealers stealthily drifting through the auction,

the granddaughter was able to secure the box containing her priceless treasure for a paltry five dollars. Other purchases she and her older sister made that day weren't quite so affordable, but their father never said a word when they brought box after box to be loaded into the car. His hands were accustomed to handling the unexpected with patience and ingenuity; in a moment of frantic despair, acute in a manner that could only be understood by a six-year-old-girl whose doll is in a fashion emergency, his younger daughter had once foisted a half-dressed doll into his grease-stained fingers. To fully clean the grease and metal powder from the cracks and crevices of a machinist's hands was a laborious task indeed, one the man generally undertook only on Sundays. Though this particular catastrophe occurred midway during the week, his young daughter was hardly concerned about the potential danger to her doll's dress. Rather, she fought angry tears over the seeming impossibility of forcing this particular dress on this particular doll. The man calmed her with one hand, turning the doll with the other. "Now look," he instructed. His square fingers grasped the gossamer fabric of the doll's evening gown (why else would a doll's change of clothes be so urgent?), unhooked it from the doll's protruding plastic thumb, and slid the freed sleeve up the doll's arm. A hasty "Thank you, Daddy," preceded the girl's departure, her despair quickly forgotten.

The boxes were handed to him on this day with grief rather than temporary despair, and soon the modest sedan was packed to the brim with the remnants of lives now departed. The three said little on the drive away from the auction; his younger daughter was lost in her thoughts, his older daughter was nobly suffering from the effects of a raging migraine, and he, never one to fill silence with needless chatter, focused on the road ahead.

They stopped for dinner, and his hands were quickly occupied in holding walking canes steady for his aging parents. The restaurant staff seated them as close to the door as possible, and the three generations—the man, his daughters, and his parents—settled into the routine tasks of conversation. Biscuits were passed and buttered, tea stirred, napkins folded. All movements were made with the involuntary grace of countless repetition, and the understated comfort of sitting down to a meal with family. When the older daughter's noble suffering became noticeable, the grandfather pulled a clean handkerchief from his pocket and spread it on the table. He carefully spooned chips of ice from his water, tilting his spoon to remove excess water before depositing them in the handkerchief for an impromptu headache remedy. A few deft twists of the handkerchief rendered a serviceable—if temporary—ice pack, and an ailing person, no matter how commonplace the ailment, could not reject a remedy from those worn and experienced hands.

When the man and his daughters left the next day, tender embraces were exchanged. The grandfather clasped his granddaughters' hands in his, giving each one a farewell squeeze. The strength of his square, blunt fingers remained though his body was quickly failing him. After his last hospital stay, the occupational therapist had directed his scarred index finger to printed dots on a laminated page, instructing him to pronounce a syllable with each dot to offset the tremors that had begun affecting his speech. He'd done so somewhat willingly, but his frustration over being betrayed by his body spilled over in vulnerable, private moments. No such frustration was given credence on this day, though, and his fingers and voice obeyed him. "Come back and see me soon," he

implored, his fingers repeatedly bending to touch his broad palm in his classic version of a goodbye wave.

When that winter dissipated into spring, the grandfather's garden remained untilled, the seeds unsown. As spring drifted into summer, age and infirmity slowed the once capable hands, relegating them to hospital beds and annoyance by medical devices and personnel. When the hands became still, the burdens they had so effortlessly carried lay dormant; those around him were too crippled with grief to carry on the work he'd left unfinished.

A year after his death, the younger granddaughter contemplated spending the day at home, quietly observing his memory and indulging in the still raw pain of grief. Instead, she readied herself for a classroom of undergraduate students, willing her hands to gesture more broadly than usual—a humble tribute to the hands whose lessons she hoped to emulate.

CHAPTER FOUR
OUR FAIRER SEX: ON THE SOUTHERN LADY

Mothers and Daughters

My mother's planned hysterectomy was quite a routine operation, and the surgeon was personable and highly recommended. As is the custom in our immediate family, we dispersed the tension of the pre-operative preparations with an odd combination of humor and prayer: we teased Mama about her stylish hair net and reiterated the now oft-repeated phrase "It's Michael's fault" (my brother, born at home, weighed well over nine pounds, whereas my sister and I were a more manageable eight pounds each at birth) just before bowing our heads and joining hands in prayer. When the anesthesiologist came to introduce himself, Mama gripped his hand when he offered it and, at the conclusion of his greeting, said, "I know God has His hand on you, young man, and He will anoint you to do your job well." He smiled good-naturedly and even included an "Amen" in his reply before assuring us he'd take good care of her. The nurses were similarly accommodating when she assured them they too would be anointed by the Almighty, and she was still giving Glory to God when the anesthesia finally took over her body.

Though my father and sister settled into the waiting area with no visible sign of worry, I couldn't fully distract myself from the gnawing anxiety in my belly. What if something went wrong? What if the operation weren't as routine as they'd thought? Just

as my over-active brain was concocting a particularly tragic scenario, the surgeon came in to inform us everything had gone better than expected and that we could wait for Mama in her room. I tucked away my unread book (I'd gone through the motions of turning pages but had retained little if any of its content) and followed my dad and sister to another part of the hospital. Remembering Mama's admiration for the work of a local florist, I spent the time while we were waiting for her to be brought up from recovery by ordering some cheery flowers. Knowing she wouldn't want the typical platitudes given with a Get Well card, I penned a brief personalized greeting to signify the occasion:

*Dear Ma,
We're sorry we done wore out your insides.
With love,
Your Young'ns*

She was brought into the room shortly before the flowers arrived, but she remained too groggy and disoriented to notice much of anything at first. When she could finally focus on her surroundings, I set the basket in front of her. "Who are they from?" she asked, her voice lilting with the after-effects of the anesthetic. I opened the card and handed it to her. She squinted, laughed, and then frowned: "But I don't know anybody named Young'n!" She laughed along with us even though she didn't quite understand why we were laughing, and we shared several more laughs once she discovered she could control the morphine drip feeding into her IV line. The nurses assured us she was ahead of schedule in terms of recovery time, and my father, as we'd planned, headed back to the farm to do the afternoon chores and get a good night's sleep. He was scarcely out of earshot when she turned to my sister and me: "I love your daddy," she explained earnestly, "but I'm so glad you girls are staying with me instead of him."

The three of us spent the next couple of hours agreeing Mama wouldn't miss any of her recently removed organs. Though still in considerable pain from surgery, she insisted she felt better no longer having to worry about the prolapsed uterus protruding from its assigned location. The nurses were amazed by her appetite and her complete failure to feel sorry for herself. They told us many of their patients would lay and moan pitifully, insisting only on a few sips or nibbles for the first meal. My mother, ever one to be mindful of ingredients, insisted on phoning the cafeteria herself to see if the dinner roll was whole grain and if the yogurt had artificial sweetener. She cleaned her tray, summoned a dose of morphine, and settled against the hospital bed to play Angry Birds on my tablet.

The combination of painkillers and the relative privacy of her room rendered Mama more candid than usual. She had always been straightforward regarding the physicality of the female experience (she had explained the menstrual cycle to me, calmly and matter-of-factly, when I was in the fourth grade, and we were familiar with the unpleasantness of her condition prior to the hysterectomy), but she rarely shared emotional details, either from her relationship with Daddy or her relationships prior to their marriage. Of the latter, she'd merely look at us tearfully and implore, "Oh, girls—make sure you have the right man, and thank God you've saved yourselves for marriage." My sister, of course, had followed this invective, and it wasn't until after I married that I confirmed the truth my mother had always suspected: "Bill wasn't my first," I told her.

"I know," she nodded solemnly, "but I'm sure you feel that experience was the worst mistake of your life."

I didn't have the heart to tell her I'd had "experiences" with several different men before my marriage, so I settled for the meekest "Yes, that's true," I could muster. She had never given us details of her life before my father—and, more importantly, her life before she became a Christian—beyond vague phrases, all of which were quickly followed by, "But that's all covered by the Blood of Jesus." She had no difficulty articulating the forgiveness of whatever sins she may have committed, but she refused to discuss the details. I'm not sure forcibly prying into her past would be beneficial for either of us, but her refusal to discuss her indiscretions spoke to a code of conduct that has been dictating female behavior in the South for generations. The virginal, saint-like Southern belle may be a myth, but her presence lingers in the form of prescribed mannerisms. Above all else, Southern women are to be pleasing, and we cannot perform that vital act if we burden others with our baggage and shortcomings. Because of this, our focus should be on the well-being of those to whom we are submitted, and even moments of candor between mother and daughter are generally limited to physicality rather than emotion. Connections between the two realms were few and far between unless addressed within the context of their mutual service to others. In my experience, this disconnect between body and emotion is most clearly evident in that most precarious of all feminine actions: the Southern woman's experience with sex.

Since reaching puberty, I had been warned in no uncertain terms that sex outside of marriage was a horrible sin. Within marriage, sex was presented as a passive action tolerated primarily for the husband's benefit. With such an emphasis on purity—and no mention of the possibility of pleasure—it came as somewhat of a surprise when I discovered sex wasn't chore-like at all. Aside from my awareness of its purely biological

application (I did grow up on a farm, after all, and learned fairly early that storks had nothing to do with the arrival of new babies), I never heard the word “sex” mentioned in conversation until I was in my twenties, let alone terms like “foreplay” or “orgasm.” My mother, though, found more indirect means of instruction, such as, “Don’t let a boy touch you down there,” or “Don’t spend too much time kissing.” Even this, though, was frank and open when compared to my grandmothers’ flushed faces when marital relations were mentioned. I didn’t hear Grandmother say the word “sex” until I was nearly thirty: she had appeared at the bedroom door while my mother, sister, and I were unpacking during a visit to ask if we wanted to hear a joke. She looked behind her furtively to make sure the men were settled elsewhere in the house, then closed the bedroom door behind her for good measure as she pulled out an index card on which she’d carefully recorded the following:

A minister told his congregation he wanted to play a game. He gave a single word, and a member of the congregation would respond with the name of a hymn connected with that word. The minister said “grace,” a congregant responded with “Amazing Grace,” and so on. The call and response continued enjoyably until the minister said, “sex.” The congregation fell into an awkward silence until a little old woman rose in the back of the church, cleared her throat, and said, “Precious Memories.”

Once our private, for-women-only laugh was over, Grandmother opened the bedroom door again and returned her scandalous index card to its hiding place. Had my sister and I not both been married, I doubt she would have brought the card out in the open.

Even though Grandma was the mother of seven children, she would have been mortified by Grandmother’s shyly shared joke. Once we reached a certain age, she became vigilant about protecting us from sinful influences, once fast-forwarding a scene from a Bob Hope movie that showed him peeking through a keyhole at a bubble-covered

Jane Russell lounging in a bathtub. She later forbade us from viewing the movie entirely, saying she didn't approve of the implications. Mama's vague exhortations on what manners of evil would befall us from being touched "down there" before marriage, then, were practically explicit in comparison to Grandma's approach. Though Mama's warnings about premarital sex might have been distinct for their incorporation of various scriptures pertaining to holiness and pure marriage beds, she certainly hasn't been the only mother in my family to issue such admonition—nor has she been the only one to avoid using overly specific language. In an undated letter sent to her oldest son, Mac, my great-grandmother issued cautionary advice almost worthy of inclusion in one of Mama's sermons:

Even if you did spend most of your furlough time with your gal - it was your furlough - and if you enjoyed it and had a good time and was happy we are happy too. I had thought I'd like to give you and Louise a little "lecture" on petting, but you aren't a boy any longer and Louise is old enough to know how to act- but I just want to say this. It is tragic that young people can't realize how much they are taking away from the years to come. Petting may or may not do any lasting damage when a couple don't even plan to get married some day, but for two people who hope some time in the future to live together, petting jeopardizes their future happiness. Your emotions are all used up and dulled, there isn't anything left for a new married couple to enjoy about being together so they soon are tired of each other and quarrel and divorces are what follows, and they can't keep it then- but they could have if they hadn't indulged in so much petting during their courtship days. The one undeniable good that resulted from the era of chaperones was that couples did their making love after marriage, and they had an entirely different feeling about it too - a feeling of freedom- and not one of guilt because they subconsciously knew they weren't doing right. Divorces were rare when chaperones were in style. So much for that - but remember my advice and if you intend to marry a girl treat her as if she were something very fine and pure. Don't spoil your future.¹²²

I'm pretty sure Mama's foremost concern for our future was our never-dying soul as she never spent much time talking about our future happiness. I suppose menstruation and childbirth are more palatable topics of conversation for Southern women (but not in mixed company, of course) because we've historically had at least some measure of control over them—and because the physicality of these experiences is more easily discussed than their emotional significance. Older generations would discuss such physicality only in veiled terms, usually, and then only if the experience was shared. My grandma, for instance, chose to wait until only my mother and my aunt were present before expanding on her theory of best practices for labor (“Don’t be afraid to scream,” she told them, “and don’t just lay there and whimper”), and both my grandmothers acknowledged the existence of menstruation in passing only (“Don’t over exert yourself when it’s ‘that time,’” they might say). My introduction to menstruation was remarkably progressive and scientific considering Grandma had just given Mama a book and a box of Kotex, and I dare say they never discussed physical relationships unless it was to reiterate who my mother, being the daughter of a prominent family, should and should not date. Given Grandma and Grandmother’s nervous expressions when I mentioned it was “bothersome to be a girl sometimes,” I never went into further detail about my struggles with feminine bodily functions. I suspect they might have been more open had I joined the ranks of motherhood, but I’ve never been curious enough to test that theory. My parents don’t seem particularly anxious for me to present them with a grandchild; in fact, Granddaddy has been the only one to outright ask, “When will you be having us a great-grandchild?” Having heard them discuss other childless married women in the family (“She never had any children” is one of the saddest possible descriptors to be ascribed to

a married woman—and an unmarried woman, if she wishes to remain respectable, must focus on acquiring a husband before having a child), I have a fairly clear idea what’s said about my childless state when I am not present.

To have lost a child rivals being childless in terms of sympathy evoked, but the loss must be grieved properly and accepted as an instance of “The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away,” or, to the less devout, “Just one of those things.” During one of my many research trips to the Tennessee State Library and Archives, I found Xeroxed copies of a few pages from an old Dement family Bible. I don’t know where the original is now, if it even still exists, but the two pages I do have¹²³ clearly show my ancestors, like many of their contemporaries, knew the pain of losing a child all too well. Of the eight children born to Joseph Andrews Dement and his second wife, Jane Joanna McMillan Dement, only four lived to adulthood (and one of those lived to be a much-celebrated 104); the four they lost all died before the age of five. I cannot know whose hand recorded the circumstances of three of those deaths, one of which happened while Jane’s husband and brothers were fighting on opposite sides of the unfortunate conflict between the states.

As is too often the case with the historical record, I have no tangible evidence of how Jane coped with this loss. Based on an 1863 letter from her stepmother, though, I know she was not alone in her suffering:

John is in the 122nd Left camp in Oct last. He is in Trenton Tenn. I had a letter from him 2 days ago. He is well – does not like a soldier's life much, but says he will hold on and do his duty as long as strength lasts. "The government must be preserved." Ed came near being in the army twice but somehow he did not get in. His health has been the principal hindrance. He is very well now and quite fleshy, is about as tall as your father and heavier. Joe is as tall as John and not so heavy. He is as straight as a shingle. Duncan is almost as tall as Ed – wants about an inch but not so heavy. Henry is getting to be quite a large boy. He is stout and energetic. I shall be without a little boy now. What shall I do? H. & D. have been my companions all the time when there was no one else to be with me; but soon they must act the part of men,

even now they have to be out much and leave me entirely alone. What a change for me! Surrounded as I have ever been with little ones, if not my own I had other peoples' little ones, and now might have some I suppose if I had help to take care of them. We heard of the death of your little Willie by John Hare when a prisoner. We felt a sympathy for you, having had experience in such trials; but when we remember that he that created them knows best what is for them, we must, as submissively as possible, resign them into his hands believing that they are taken from the evil to come. I have felt more resigned to my Willie's death since this war has been raging in our country, than ever before; and who knows but that your little ones may have some part to act in this dreadful civil war! Such wars have lasted 20 years, and our country is a great and extensive country.¹²⁴

Phrases like “infant mortality” and “life expectancy” are more easily digested without individual names attached to their respective statistics. Jane may have taken some comfort in knowing her boys had been spared from “the evil to come,” and, as other children and new added responsibilities filled the years following her losses, she may have had little time to mourn.

I cannot know for sure how Jane coped, though, as I've been able to reconstruct her life only indirectly: I have letters written to her by her sister, father, stepmother, and brothers spanning from the late 1850s until the early 1920s, but, with the possible exception of the entries in the “Family Record” of the old Bible, I have nothing in her hand. In the broader scheme of things, my as-of-yet fruitless search for Jane's voice isn't that unusual, for there are certainly numerous women in my lineage whose firsthand experiences I will never know. Why, then, do I feel the loss of her voice more distinctly? Is it merely her experience of being caught between two worlds, with loved ones on both sides of a ghastly conflict, that I find so fascinating? In a way, my image of her is a fitting reflection of the Southern female experience: her identity as an individual is secondary to her service to her family. In other words, her worth as a woman is

subordinate to her role as a wife and mother. To some extent this has been the plight of all women in patriarchal societies, but the condition is compounded in the South where women are paradoxically praised for their purity and capability while perpetually being reminded of their weakness and inability to function without male guidance. For most of her descendants, Jane's life has been reduced to her status as the mother of Albert M. Dement, eventual co-founder of the Tennessee Walking Horse. This reduction might be due in part to her father's status as a traitor to the Confederate cause (he was a Union chaplain), for we have certainly embraced other families by marriage quite eagerly when their deeds are noble and in sync with Southern values.

Grandmother seemed a bit startled one afternoon when I squealed, "It's her! It's Jane!" after I found a picture tucked away in a random box in the back of one of Grandmother and Granddaddy's closets.

I eagerly scanned Jane's face for something familiar, though what I was hoping to recognize I really cannot say. The rational side of my brain knows nineteenth century photographs were solemn occasions and that I mustn't over-indulge my imagination in seeing a certain sadness in her eyes. A less formal photograph taken several years later shows a similarly reserved expression—but, to be fair, her daughter and eldest

granddaughter are equally as serious. Only the younger granddaughter seems not to have recognized the solemnity required to be the subject of a photograph. Mattie, Jane's only daughter, knew loss of a different sort; her husband died after only four years of marriage, and she never remarried. After Mattie's father died in 1909, she and her mother formed their own household. The 1910 census records them sharing their home with 22-year-old Susie Richards, a white "servant." What became of the two African American "servants" listed with their household in the 1900 census I do not know, but by 1920 Mattie and Jane had no servants and had consolidated their household with Mattie's youngest brother Wilson's family.

I imagine Jane was never one to sit idly, and a 1919 letter written by her grandson, E. Miller Dement, suggests her strategy for coping with grief may well have been the same as her strategy for daily living. He writes:

I guess I ought to be going to bed for I am going visiting tomorrow thru Sunday for Father's Mother reaches her ninetieth birthday Feb. 23rd and they are planning for something like a family reunion. Each time I see her I think it will be the last for she is very frail but seems to have a great deal of vitality. She gets up and "paddles" around, knits, "tats," crochets, etc, stays busy nearly all the time but still they say she is weakening slowly. Each summer she seems to gather enough vitality to tide her over the winter.¹²⁵

Staying busy "nearly all the time" would not have been an uncommon trait for a woman of her generation and social standing, certainly, and her vitality tided her over into her ninety-eighth year. After her death in May, 1927, Mattie and Wilson continued their living arrangements. His sister's presence was likely a comfort to him when his wife died unexpectedly in 1929, and the two remained living together as Wilson's children reached adulthood and started families of their own. Mattie's surviving brothers (her younger brother David had died in 1883 at the age of 28) and their families remained close, so it seems likely she followed her mother's example of staying busy nearly all the time. Seeing her mother bury five of her brothers could have also provided a more somber example for Mattie to follow when her only child, Willie, was struck and killed by lightning in 1943. Whether it is easier to bury your child as a grown man or as an infant is a question I cannot answer.

I can reasonably conjecture both Jane and Mattie could derive some sense of closure in being allowed to see and hold their children before their burials. I

cannot, however, imagine what it must feel like to bury a child you have never seen or held. On my mother's side of the family, I grew up knowing my great-uncle, G.C. King, Jr., had died long before I was born. I also knew my mom's cousins, Dianne and Nancy, were his daughters, but I didn't meet their mother until after my own Grandma's death in 2002. When someone offered to introduce me to Aunt Searcy, I was expecting a frail old lady. Instead, I was greeted by a wide smile and a warm hug; as Mary Ann's granddaughter, I was instantly part of Aunt Searcy's family. She told me a Viagra joke the second time we met, and I soon realized there was nothing frail about this lady. She was eager to talk to me about her time living in and near the King Hotel; I had always loved Grandma's stories about the eighty-five room structure, and, being six years older than Grandma, Aunt Searcy was able to add to my reservoir. Her connection with the King family began early: her family lived across the street from the Kings, and she and young Marji King, just six months apart in age, became lifelong friends at the tender age of five. She paid little attention to Marji's older brother, G.C., as he was eight years older and rarely concerned with the antics of his little sister and her friend.

When US involvement in World War Two transformed Tullahoma into a boom town following the construction of Camp Forrest, a military training facility on the outskirts of town, Searcy and Marji, now teenagers, found themselves with unprecedented excitement. They attended USO dances and befriended a great many soldiers (but Searcy's daughters like to tease her by saying she'd only dance with officers), and Marji soon caught the attention of Richard Poitevin, a

handsome young soldier from Idaho. The two were married on February 2, 1946—and Searcy married Marji’s brother G.C., wearing the same dress Marji had worn, just four days later. Their courtship had been quick, certainly, but such hasty wartime marriages were common—and at least G.C. was marrying the girl next door rather than someone he’d only recently met. Their first child, Dianne, was born nine months later in the King Hotel, where G.C. Jr. was serving as manager. Their daughter Nancy was born in 1951, but she was only to know her father for a short time: he died of a heart attack in 1955 at the age of forty-one.

These facts I knew before meeting Aunt Searcy, and I assumed I’d only be learning details about her childhood. As I spent more time with my “extra Grandma,” as I’d come to call her, I found she rarely conformed to what I expected. Once I was introduced to the methods of oral history in an undergraduate history course, I set out with a fervor: I recorded anyone who would talk to me, and I spent every available weekend travelling to Tennessee in search of more interviews. On one such weekend, I joined Aunt Searcy and her youngest daughter Kathryn (Aunt Searcy remarried after G.C. died and had two more daughters) in visiting the Oakwood Cemetery in Tullahoma where my grandma, her parents, and several of her other family members are buried. Oakwood, I should mention, is one of two distinctly upper-middle-class cemeteries in Tullahoma: only white folks with old, respectable family names are buried there. Even in death, white Southerners must adhere to distinctions of class, family name, and race. While Aunt Dot, Grandma’s older sister, was living, she made sure her parents’ headstones always had fresh flowers, so on the

day of our visit we thought we'd place some ourselves in Aunt Dot's memory. We started with the McCord plot so I could pay my respects to Grandma and Grandpa, and we worked our way back to the older part of the cemetery where Grandma's parents and grandparents are buried.

While we were strolling toward the Kings (Grandma's parents) and the Granberrys (Grandma's great-grandparents), Aunt Searcy told me of the family names she recognized: the Hickersons, who had built two identical houses for their daughters; Dr. Dossett, who was called away in the middle of his dinner at the King Hotel when Aunt Searcy's younger brother Bob was born (and thereafter, even when Bob was a grown man, referred to him as "the boy who interrupted my dinner"), and whose only son was killed in World War II; the Gooch family, whose daughter Ruth was in Grandma's graduating class; and the Book family, whose son George—better known to all his friends and acquaintances as Fatty—had been a clerk at the King Hotel, and had helped teach Aunt Searcy and Aunt Marji to play poker in the hotel parlor. When we reached the King plot I recognized most of the names: G.C. King, Sr., my great-grandfather; Maie Granberry King, my great-grandmother; and G.C. King, Jr., Aunt Searcy's late husband. I had been here before with Grandma, but I never noticed the small stone near G.C., Jr.'s until this day. It said simply, "Mary, dau. of G.C. and Searcy King, 1948." I looked up to find Aunt Searcy smiling to herself, her arms crossed behind her as they often were when she shared stories with me.

“Yes, that’s our little Mary,” she said. For reasons unknown, both in terms of her ability to explain them and my ability to understand them, Aunt Searcy had gone into labor prematurely and had to be rushed to the hospital in Nashville once her doctor discovered the Tullahoma hospital simply wasn’t equipped for such an emergency. She had no memory of those days in mid-February, but when she woke she learned their daughter had lived less than a day; little Mary had been buried in a tiny casket while Aunt Searcy was still in the hospital. “I never saw her,” Aunt Searcy explained, “but then I was too sick to know what was going on.” If she resented the Kings’ decision to name and bury her daughter without consulting her (or, at the very least, consulting her parents), she didn’t say. Instead, she smiled at me with her characteristic warmth: “I suppose it was for the best that the Kings handled everything.”

After we left the cemetery and were driving back across town, she tapped my arm when we passed the First Christian Church she and her family had attended during her formative years. “You know,” she winked, “I was a Christian until I married G.C.—then I became a Methodist.” Kathryn chuckled softly at the joke she’d heard so many times before, and Aunt Searcy continued in a more serious tone. “The Kings weren’t very happy with me after G.C. died,” she confided. In their grief, Poppy King and Monner, as they were known in the family, had virtually ignored the feelings of their widowed daughter-in-law. They clung to Dianne, insisting she live with them in the Hotel, and even made suggestions of adopting her as their own, legally. Searcy was instructed not to leave Tullahoma, and the Kings were aghast when she began dating a bachelor by

the name of Hopkins. When she and “Hop,” as she and all his friends called him, married, they moved to Florida before the Kings could voice their disapproval.

Having two daughters with Hop (“I always tell people I had two Kings and two queens,” Aunt Searcy said) and spending nearly forty happy years with him before his death undoubtedly softened the loss of little Mary, but I still couldn’t fathom what it must have been like to have carried a child she had never seen. In her characteristic cheerfulness, though, Aunt Searcy never let her words dwell on the sadness. She is not the first woman in my family I have known to gloss over sadness, but her grief seems to have been processed more fully than others I have witnessed. When we were leaving the cemetery that day, I had stopped to say goodbye to Grandma—and to reflect on the two graves next to Grandma and Grandpa in the McCord plot. At the foot of Grandma’s grave are two tombstones marking the resting places of her oldest and youngest sons. Edward Allison McDowell IV, her first-born child, had been killed in a car accident in 1972. Eight years later, Thomas Morgan McCord, with the reckless invincibility of a newly licensed driver, had been racing some friends after sharing a few beers when he wrapped his car around a telephone pole. The impact killed him instantly, and the entire high school came to his funeral.

Grandma had unequivocally blamed herself for both their deaths, convinced she just hadn’t been praying enough or that she’d allowed some sin into her life for which these tragedies were just punishments. Rather than permit herself to process the loss, she flung herself into religious zeal and into doting on her grandchildren. In my sister’s deep brown eyes she saw a reflection of Uncle

Ed's reserve and studiousness. In my hazel eyes and outgoing personality she saw a reflection of Uncle Tom, and she once scolded my mother for attempting to dismiss my request to have the crusts removed from my toast. A simple "Tom always hated the crusts" was the only explanation she needed to convince Mama to give in. The two never really talked about their shared grief, for Southern women are almost always required to shoulder such burdens without complaint. I, happy with my crustless toast, was too young and not yet well-acquainted enough with the standards of feminine conduct to fully understand what their sad, shared smile signified.

I Remember That Dress

I spent the majority of the visitation hours before my grandma's funeral trying to contain the seething rage I felt boiling in my gut. I suspect some of the rage had to do with the fact that I was nineteen and generally angst-ridden, but most stemmed from my bull-headed assurance that no one in that funeral home could have possibly known Mary Ann King McCord as well as my siblings and me. She was our Grandma, absolutely and utterly devoted to us, and these twittering and markedly non-grieving people couldn't possibly have understood her. They couldn't have known the rhymes and songs she taught us, nor the intense pleasure she derived in turning up the record player as loud as it would go, opening all the windows, and sitting on the wicker porch swing listening to the building crescendo of Ravel's "Bolero." They couldn't have known how eagerly she showed us the latest movie she'd taped from Turner Classics, watching with delight as we'd act out Red Skelton's funniest routines or swoon over Tyrone Power's smoldering on-screen glances. They couldn't have known she taught my brother Michael to jitterbug in her kitchen, or that she'd kept our childhood drawings proudly taped to her walls long after we were grown. They didn't know who she was—they only knew who she'd been.

I didn't realize then that those visitors were paying homage to status, and that their actions were genuine gestures of Southern tradition. This was John D. McCord (of Lester, Greene, and McCord Insurance)'s mother, after all. Anyone who knew the McCord twins (and who didn't – Tullahoma isn't a very big town, and identical twins as memorable as my uncles are known by many) had to come pay their respects, of course, especially since their mother belonged to one of Tullahoma's oldest families. Never

mind that she'd long since sworn off the country club life, or that she insisted on bringing her household garbage to the dumpster behind John's office instead of paying someone to haul it away. Never mind, either, that she lived alone with a half dozen or more reclusive looking Siberian huskies, or that she hadn't attended a social function in more than two decades. What mattered now was who she had been, not who she'd become.

In spite of my anger, I had to admit that my aunts, the twins' wives, had done a wonderful job collecting and displaying some beautiful pictures of Grandma. Whether in elegant evening wear or layers of bathrobes and her mink coat (an outfit she donned during a power outage—and the only picture anyone fought over after she died), the spark in her eyes was the same, and the only thing that kept me from going mad. I didn't know then that I should've played my part better, that I should've smiled and nodded to those well-meaning strangers instead of scowling and hiding in the back of the room. I didn't know then that this was how people remember the dead in the South, that this is how things are done.

My rage percolated steadily until midway through the visitation hours, when two most welcome faces rescued me: Grandmother and Granddaddy. Grandmother hugged and kissed my brother, sister, and me with even more affection than usual, leaving pink lipstick on our cheeks. United only in their love for their shared grandchildren, Grandmother and Grandma had led startlingly different lives, yet both are undoubtedly southern ladies. The eldest of thirteen and the daughter of poor farmers, Grandmother and her family didn't have indoor plumbing until she was in high school. She worked in cotton fields and dairy barns, finally earning her way to UT with the aid of a 4-H scholarship. Grandma, on the other hand, had been handed the world on a silver platter.

She never lacked for anything, enjoying the luxuries of life until the glitter faded to emptiness. She was petite and startlingly beautiful, and she approached life with such outspoken vivacity that Grandmother didn't quite know how to respond to her. Upon finding Grandmother's high school yearbook, I remarked on how beautiful she was. "Oh," she demurred, "I was nothing compared to your other grandmother." What Grandmother felt she lacked in looks, she compensated for in decorum. A devout Presbyterian, Grandmother maintains proper social protocol at all times, mentioning God only when and where appropriate. Grandma, however, would preach Jesus to the grocery bagger at Kroger. To borrow the words of William Alexander Percy, Grandma "feared nothing except sin and no one except God."¹²⁶

Both of them aided in providing our basic needs, generally in gifts of clothing and accessories. Grandmother's gifts were usually the more practical of the two, but anything new—even socks and underwear—was special if it hadn't belonged to someone else first. Grandma kept us supplied with dolls and toys, and she indulged any inkling we showed toward creativity. When Michael pantomimed a harmonica player we saw in an old movie (Grandma kept us supplied in those as well), she rushed out and bought him a high quality harmonica with case and other accessories, most of which Michael eventually lost. She didn't mind, though, because he did learn to play a song or two—and we learned it would wake Apricot, our lazy orange tabby cat, from even the deepest of slumbers. Grandmother was concerned with our extra-curricular edification as well, often taking us to see interesting things like the old man who'd whittled thousands of canes, or the largest tree house in Rutherford County. I don't know that they were

competitive, exactly, but I do remember each one stiffening slightly when we'd mention what the other grandmother had done, said, or purchased for us.

I gather they never really had enough in common to care much for each other, but they both maintained a respectful civility at mutual family gatherings (which, fortunately for them, were few). Grandma's complete flouting of social conventions in her later years (few in her former social circle wore their sons' old tube socks to avoid being wasteful) rendered her a sort of oddity, and she never shied from speaking her mind, no matter the context. Grandmother, of course, was always the epitome of propriety, always playing by the rules of Southern behavior. I suspect their polite frostiness explains why Granddaddy never told us the connection until the day of the funeral, perhaps saving it for when we grandchildren would need it the most. As Grandmother went to give her condolences to Mama, Granddaddy joined us three by the photo displays. He pointed fondly at a stunning portrait of Grandma in her late teens, positively radiating in an elegant blue ball gown and the glow of youth. "I remember that dress," he told us. We turned to him incredulously.

"But Granddaddy..."

He smiled. "I met Mary Ann at a dance when she was wearing that dress." We stared. How could he have kept this to himself, all these years? We knew them as Grandma and Granddaddy, not as Mary Ann and Joe Jack. To think they could've met, long before her daughter Elizabeth married his son Ed, was almost more than we could imagine. We had seen pictures of them both, certainly, but somehow I'd never envisioned lives separate from their roles as our grandparents; those black and white images were simply younger versions.

Before her death, I'd been content to listen to the stories I heard without investigating them any further; my grandparents' version of the truth was enough for me. With Grandma gone, I panicked: how could I remember the King Hotel without Grandma here to tell me about it? How could I be certain of retaining what I had been told when my loved ones were no longer here to remind me? I had to find a means to ground their stories, to secure them in my consciousness in some tangible way. To do so, I would need to look past their roles as loving grandparents—I would need to meet the girl in the dress, to know her as an individual instead of just who she had been to me.

The Girls

I stood just a few yards from the charred wreckage a few days after the fire, frozen yet again in disbelief. Some kind men from our church had begun helping my dad chip away at the debris, and after each layer of burnt rubble was removed my mom and whichever of us siblings happened to be available at the time would swoop in like overgrown scavenger birds, pecking through the carcass of their house for items of value. Though the men mean well, I was fairly sure they didn't realize that each turn of the shovel and each toss into the rented dumpster was carting away another piece of my childhood, my life up until that point.

A fluttering movement caught my eye as I braced myself for that particular day's expedition. We'd already salvaged a few photo albums from the living room, the end furthest from where the fire began, but the majority of the other rooms in the house were completely destroyed. The movement came from where my old bedroom window should've been, so I pushed a few things aside to discover the fluttering came from the remnants of my treasured, leather-bound Edna Ferber collection.

A page from *The Girls* was separated from the rest, and I marveled to see that some of the words were still legible. This set of books, though among my favorites, was certainly not the most valuable item in the room. Ever the nostalgic one, I've long been the keeper of family heirlooms—the junk collector of memory, if you will. As such, I never seem to have enough storage space, hence why so many of my things are still in my parents' home. Before I began high school, my dad added shelves at the tops of three of my four walls, and I had arranged them gleefully with books, knickknacks, keepsakes—all grouped according to subject or individual. The handbags and other treasures my great Aunt Marji had crocheted for us as children were placed together on one end of my favorite book series as a child, *The Boxcar Children*. Grandmother had actually been the one to spark my love in those books (and in reading in general), but it had seemed logical to me to have Aunt Marji's cheerful-faced yarn dolls and personalized purses serve as a bookend for a series devoted to childhood adventure. Nothing remained of the books except ash, and of Aunt Marji's handiwork only a few tattered threads could be salvaged.

On that same shelf, I'd collected other childhood favorites, including the set of McGuffey Readers Grandma had bought for us. I placed Suzanne, my cloth doll with the blue yarn hair, next to them (her blue hair was a nice visual complement to the blue accents on the McGuffey covers), thinking Grandma would chuckle knowing I'd kept the dolls and books she gave me together. The McGuffey Readers, together with a couple of books from when Grandma was a child, could have been the only time she encouraged us to read something other than the Bible—but the dolls, somehow, never invoked her scrutiny as an unknown book would, perhaps because I gave them Bible names like Ruth and Mary (with the exception of Suzanne, of course, who had been named for my mom's

college roommate). I had a few other things on the shelf with items from Grandma and Aunt Marji, but I was careful to keep the hardbound collection of Reader's Digest Abridged Classics on a separate shelf entirely. They'd been given to me by Grandmother, and Grandma might not have approved of some of the titles—even if the content had been sanitized by the Reader's Digest editors.

The order of my little library certainly lacked the logic of the Dewey decimal system my elementary school librarians had tried so hard to make my classmates and me understand, but it seemed fitting to me to keep the collections separated—and I enjoyed being able to look at a section of shelf and smile at the memories it evoked. Now that only charred fragments remained, I couldn't help but mentally reconstruct where my various collections had been. On the shelves above my desk, where the Edna Ferber set had resided, I had once stored one of my most prized possessions: a copy of William Hazlitt's *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* that had belonged to Aunt Dot when she was at Vanderbilt. She had always insisted academics weren't her forte, but she was more of a scholar than perhaps she ever realized. She always, always labeled things meticulously, preserving images and texts with almost archival precision. The Hazlitt text might have been the only time we had bonded over a book, but she had long since recognized my affinity for all things antique. Because of that, she had bequeathed my great-grandmother's wedding dress, an elegant, petite silk gown made by my great-great grandmother, to me in her will. After the fire, only remnants—forever sullied by soot and water—remained.

Grandma had been a slightly more haphazard guardian of the past. She kept a great many tangible memories of days gone by, certainly, but she was just as likely to

encourage us to play with her paper dolls as she was to preserve them in an album. Some things, though, had remained fairly well preserved—perhaps because she kept them in the dining room cabinet, in the one room of her house where we weren't given free rein to play. Among those protected items were scrapbooks, the collections from her days at Vanderbilt and from her summer abroad in Europe. I had asked her about them once and she promised to tell me about them, but somehow we never found time to do so. They were the first things I asked about when she died, and no one objected to my request. After the fire only fragments of them were left—shards of paper, really, with haunting glimpses of words. *Queen Mary. Cotillion Ball. Beauty. Mother and Daddy. Dancing.*

Even though nearly fourteen years separated the oldest from the youngest, Poppy King always referred to the girls as “DorothyMarjiMaryAnn,” no matter which daughter he wanted to see. Equally beautiful but vastly different, the girls had adapted well to their rather unconventional childhood home, the stately 85 room hotel their father owned and operated. Almost every story from their childhoods featured the Hotel in some form or fashion; Marji and her best friend Searcy played poker with the clerks during off

hours, and both recanted with a gleam of past delight the stories of dances held in the spacious dining room. Dorothy, the oldest, wrote home often during her time at Vanderbilt, sharing tales of classes, boys, and balls with her curious younger sisters. Mary Ann, only five when Dorothy first left, would sweetly convince the clerks to write letters on her behalf, filling “Dot” in on the latest happenings.

When Dot returned home, having been crowned Miss Vanderbilt of 1936, she had no shortage of suitors. Ever the precocious younger sister, Mary Ann capitalized on her sister’s looks; the starting pay for leaving Dot and her date in peace was twenty-five

cents, and the rate would be raised according to the length of time the couple wished to enjoy their privacy in the Hotel parlor.

It's fortunate that so many pictures survived the fire; some are singed, and all still harbor the lingering stench of smoke. I took a few moments' respite from conjuring memories from the ashes of my old room to look through the soot covered albums laid out in rows on the concrete front porch, their covers unrecognizable but their contents mostly intact. In one, a cloth-covered album that had been a gift to me from Aunt Dot, I found pictures of my grandma as a young woman, full of dreams and vivacity. She couldn't have known in May 1952, as she gleefully hoisted her first born, that he would be joined by five brothers and a sister over the following twelve years. She couldn't have known that her first marriage to the father of her two eldest sons and her daughter would fall to shambles, and that she'd call on Poppy King and the ever-supportive Dot to bring her and her children home to Tullahoma. She couldn't have known she'd lose her oldest and youngest sons in car accidents, the oldest at age twenty and the youngest at age sixteen. She couldn't have known how poignant this candid moment, forever captured by the camera, would become.

The next picture I found in the album is one of the few featuring all three sisters at once, and still I can't help but think they don't really look like themselves, at least not as I knew them. Aunt Marji is the only one openly smiling, but that really doesn't surprise me. Having married a soldier during the war, she left her native Tennessee for Idaho and returned only twice that I can remember. When we were smaller, my sister and I received crocheted handbags with our initials, and each bag had a handmade doll tucked inside. We named the one with pigtails "Marji." On her second visit, she told my younger cousin, when he was discovered jumping on his bed, that he'd best be careful or he'd break his riffidinkdum. The thought of breaking this unknown body part was enough to stop him mid-jump, and we older, wiser cousins smiled to ourselves over Aunt Marji's creative intervention. Years later, once my grandma and Aunt Dot had passed away, I phoned Aunt Marji to ask what she could tell me about the Hotel. "Oh, I can't remember anything," she'd said. Two hours later, I had a notebook full of stories.

Aunt Dot's stiff but dignified posture, unlike Aunt Marji's easy smile, doesn't really represent her. She was dignified, certainly; up until about a month before she passed, I'd never seen her in pants. Even then, clad in perfectly pressed pale blue silk pajamas and matching robe, she'd managed to look as thoroughly graceful and ladylike as ever when she'd greeted us from the support of her walker. She'd been matter of fact about her impending death, informing us with her characteristic soft-spoken drawl that the doctors could do nothing to treat the cancer. When she caught me looking over her bookshelf, she told me to pick one I'd like to have. I selected the now-treasured William Hazlitt's *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, and when she flipped open the cover she laughed to see it marked with her sorority letters. "I guess I never was much of a student," she explained, but I knew better. I quoted Hazlitt in every Shakespeare course I took, and I remain forever thankful I'd taken the book with me when I moved out of my parents' home.

Aunt Dot was a student of legacy, I think. Her thoroughness in preserving memories rivaled that of any professionally trained archivist, but I don't think we fully appreciated her skills until after she was gone. After she passed, we discovered she'd preserved each and every school picture we'd ever sent, and all our thank you notes, in

their childish scrawls, had been carefully placed behind cellophane covers in one of her albums.

I think it's my grandma's expression that I find the most foreign from the woman I knew and loved. The photo was taken on her wedding day, her second marriage to the only man I'd known as Grandpa. Her beauty is unquestionable, and she, like her beloved sister Dot, had no shortage of beaus. Though her childhood as the youngest, slightly spoiled daughter of one of the town's most successful entrepreneurs had certainly prepared her for life as a lawyer's wife, she performed her country club appearances with only hollow enthusiasm. She was most happy out of doors or in the company of a never-ending parade of family pets. It was that joy in simple things that I most remember, and that I most miss.

"Pusillanimous," she used to say, when anyone would discuss the trapping of upper class social life. Having graduated from Vanderbilt with a degree in Psychology in an age when those women fortunate enough to attend university were groomed as teachers or nurses, she knew a thing or two about bucking the system – and about playing by the rules when need be. She preferred to flout the rules of society entirely once she found a Divine set of ordinances to follow; she became a Christian in the 1970s (she had been radically saved, in her words), and she never hesitated to share her faith. This boldness distanced her from Grandpa, as did his affair with his secretary. They kept up appearances for the sake of their position, but the charade ended when their youngest son,

Tom, was killed in 1981 at the age of sixteen. After they divorced, Grandma retreated to a farm on the outskirts of town, and the hats and furs and other trappings of her society life became delightful playthings for imaginative grandchildren. More often than not, she'd dress up with us, hosting tea parties for bears and dolls, and her honored guests—my sister, my brother, and me. When she'd take us into town she'd put on her red lipstick (always perfectly chilled,

for she swore it kept longer kept next to the butter) and her diamond rings, but she donned them with deliberate subversion: most women did not wear diamonds with overalls.

I closed the albums, knowing I couldn't delay the inevitable task of sifting through my room's remains much longer. I set the albums in the protective plastic bins my sister and I had purchased, mentally preparing myself for a later time when we would extract all the pictures carefully, transferring them to permanent new homes. I placed the pages from *The Girls* on the porch when I went back to rummaging through the rubble; I knew it was silly, but I couldn't quite

bring myself to throw those tattered fragments into the rented dumpster with the rest of the debris. Even my often burdensome sentimentality has its limits, though, as the smell of those pages was strong even on a windy day. I stacked them together as neatly as I could, took a few pictures of what I had lost, and continued with my task.

A Peculiar Disposition

“The genetic roots of depression seem now to be beyond controversy.”¹²⁷

“It’s all in your head. There’s nothing wrong with you.”

“Would you like some more mashed potatoes or another roll?”

“Antidepressants are from the devil; they make people suicidal.”

“I made this strawberry cake because I know it’s your favorite.”

They won’t understand if you try to talk to them. Why not have another helping and let everyone else talk?

As a child I’d always been overly sensitive and prone to having my feelings easily hurt (“Baby Boo,” Grandma used to call me, and the name stuck), and the dinner table was always a safe harbor, an almost guaranteed balm to salve all inner wounds. As I reached my teenage years the tenderness and sensitivity turned bitter, dark, and all-consuming. The temporary stings of harsh words or unpleasant events now festered longer than they should have, and always with the same result: it was somehow my fault, and the world was a darker place for my being in it. I would thumb through photo albums from my childhood and convince myself my brother and sister looked far happier before I was born, and I would tell myself the difficult circumstances of my birth had ruined my parents’ dream of having four children. I was unneeded, bothersome, unworthy, defective—and to talk about it would be a further imposition, and yet further evidence of my own inadequacies.

The comforts of food became the only acceptable form of self-medication (along with notebooks full of mediocre poetry). At the Southern table, I was never discouraged

from a second helping of anything; asking, “Would you like another helping?” is a standard component of every meal-time conversation, and the acceptance of the offer indicates your approval of the cook’s contribution. My affinity for sweets deepened since dinners—at my grandparents’ house, at least—were almost always followed by dessert. With the comforting food came an uncomfortable layer of fat, though my mother tried to reassure me until I was at least fifteen that my body simply hadn’t shed its baby fat yet. This seemed somewhat plausible at first, especially since my older brother had shot up six inches and lost about fifty pounds in between sixth and seventh grades. I kept waiting for such a miraculous growth spurt, but it never happened. Instead, I overcompensated with friendliness and academic pursuits. If I could just be smart enough, friendly enough, likeable enough, it would make up for being not good enough in so many other ways.

My strategy seemed effective; I had a variety of friends, I was incredibly popular before exams and essays were due, and my teachers adored me. I was not, however, asked out on dates, asked to prom, or nominated for homecoming court. I had one boyfriend my freshman year, one of my brother’s football teammates. After two months, my mother convinced me I shouldn’t be dating an unbeliever (and he put his hand in my bra once; my purity thus sullied, I was pretty sure the sin doomed me to a life of loneliness), and I settled into my label as “Mike’s little sister” until my brother graduated two years later. Thus on my own to forge some sort of identity, I found my niche with the theater kids, but being cast as “Old Lady Number Two” and “Auntie Em,” together with my newly popular nickname of “Grandma,” meant the back floorboard of my car was covered in candy bar wrappers and empty chocolate milk bottles. At the start of my senior year of high school, I exclusively wore tee shirts and sweatpants, and I carried the

largest coffee mug I could find. I slept poorly, wrote awful poetry, and excelled in all my classes. I tried to take up smoking but threw the pack out of my car window in desperation when I couldn't get the first one lit (another addition to my list of shortcomings, I figured).

With relatives outside my immediate family I remained cheerful and pleasant to be around, and no one ever mentioned my portion sizes or my sweet tooth (at least not in front of me, that is). In fact, for most family gatherings we were expected to fill and clean our plates—how better to compliment the various contributions to the family potluck than to try some of everything? I learned the Southern standards of female behavior by closely observing my grandmothers, aunts, and other female relatives (my own mother's performance was strained at best), and I realized early on that women who complained about their own lot in life, whether in terms of physical circumstances or otherwise, were considered unpleasant to be around. Further, even the most unattractive woman would be kindly regarded if she proved herself a charming conversationalist and a cheerful companion. As my body type has always been closer to the Venus of Willendorf than Scarlet O'Hara, I felt sure I had to be extra pleasing to compensate. The mask of Southern femininity joined the other costumes of normalcy in my repertoire, and I wrote dozens of poems, hidden in the safety of my notebooks, about hiding behind a smile.

My depression (not that I had an official diagnosis, of course, for to talk to a medical doctor about such an issue would be giving the devil power over my mind) abated somewhat the second half of my senior year. I'd started running laps in the hallways after school with a fellow Drama Club member, and I lost twenty pounds—

enough to wear blue jeans again, and to clean the trash out of my car's floorboard. I started dating a boy in my circle of friends, and I was stunned to find he too wrote awful poetry, and he too fought the foreboding sense of not being good enough. We went to prom together, we made out a lot, and we kept a notebook of jointly written awful poetry. Unfortunately for us both, our mutual respite from the darkness in our minds ended at about the same time my mother and I had a screaming fight about my body and my choices.

“But he understands me!” I wailed.

“Then he should be in church with you.”

And so he came, but we both fell prey to the self-doubts we'd managed to keep at bay. By graduation we were drifting apart, and neither of us seemed to take part in the elation our classmates expressed. The son of former hippies (but, unlike my mother, his parents had remained unaffected by the Jesus Movement of the 70s), he found comfort in Pink Floyd albums and burning the poetry he'd written. The daughter of charismatics, I found comfort in ice cream and various flavor combinations of Jello pudding—and I could justify my dietary choices since I'd had my wisdom teeth removed and two root canals in a single summer. In spite of being number seven in my class, I had applied to only two universities, the one closest to my parents and the one where my older brother attended. I chose the former, convinced I'd never be able to manage on my own or that someone would finally discover I wasn't good enough after all. I decided college would be different: I determined to close myself off, to stop being so friendly, to stop asking every question from every instructor. I would make good grades, of course, but I would no longer be so obvious about it.

My strategy served me fairly well my first semester, but my grandma's death that November thrust a new role on me: confidante and therapist. My mother, the only daughter of seven children, retreated within herself after the loss—a pattern that, had I known the signs, she had repeated throughout my childhood. She oscillated between being completely withdrawn to overcompensating. A popular commercial for antidepressants had reduced the individual suffering from depression to a disembodied bouncing sad face, and my mother adopted the image as her own personal warning. “No Zoloft for me!” she'd declare. An exaggerated “Zooooo-loftttt” became synonymous for “snap out of it” in our house, and, when such a sensitive expression proved ineffective, my parents began confiding in me individually about their concerns for each other. At no time were phrases like “mental health” or “maybe you should talk to the doctor” mentioned. Prayer, and only prayer, held the cure.

We muddled through, wearing our masks of relative normalcy, and I continued earning academic accolades: impressive grades were the one area of my life in which I even remotely felt “good enough.” I even stumbled into another relationship—but this time with an emotionally abusive, pathological liar I was convinced I could “fix” if I just remained patient enough. When that disaster came to an end, I was thankful for my parents' assurance that he had been at fault, as he'd come close to convincing me any problems in our relationship were all in my head. True to form, though, we didn't talk about my emotional or mental well-being: the avoidance was primarily religious, of course (the heart, being inherently deceitful,¹²⁸ could only be understood by God), but I soon became aware of a protocol my family has been following for generations.

I had learned the guidelines for social interactions, both at family get-togethers and in the broader public, but I had never considered why the guidelines existed. I had also never let myself acknowledge a conspicuous absence from the multitude of subjects suitable for pleasant conversation. We spoke of physical ailments in great detail, particularly as family members aged, but we never, ever spoke of anything remotely resembling mental illness. Terms like “depression,” “anxiety,” or even “mental health,” if mentioned at all, were never uttered except behind closed doors. For the Dements in particular, we were implicitly expected to uphold our earned reputation as upstanding members of our respective communities—upstanding members who remained as such without the aid of crutches like alcohol or tobacco products. A Dement could fall prey to a physical weakness or disease, of course (but preferably one that couldn’t have been prevented, for it simply wouldn’t do to succumb to something preventable), but any admission or diagnosis of mental infirmity would indicate a lack of moral fortitude.

Even on the sides of the family less prone to proudly displaying the strength of their bootstraps, I found an avoidance, if not an outright refusal, to discuss such matters. I could have easily gone to several different family members and said, “I have diabetes” or “I have a mitral valve prolapse.” I could not, however, say, “I have depression” or “I think I might be cracking under the pressure of expectation.” Instead, I must keep my suffering imperceptible and learn to cope in acceptable ways. With Dements and Bennetts, I could eat (obesity shows a lack of fortitude, but it is far more forgivable than other conditions); with McCords and McDowells, I could drink (though not, even as an adult, in front of my mother); with my trusted Aunt Kristian I could both drink and

smoke (once I learned how). With none could I completely feel at ease, in all my contradictions and complexities, self-invented and otherwise.

The discovery of alcohol's therapeutic effects was both a blessing and a curse; the first time I got drunk, I crawled under a coffee table and begged my friends, "Please don't tell my mother!" This struggle between its numbing effects and the guilt I felt from enjoying them lessened somewhat when I moved out of my parents' house my junior year of college. I bought cigarettes by the carton, smoked half a pack a day, and substituted a blog for my awful poetry. I drank at least four or five nights a week, often to excess, and I was certain I had to be drunk for men to find me attractive. I slept around but had few meaningful relationships (and the most meaningful was probably with a married man)—but the refrain remained the same. It was my fault for not being good enough. I could forget for a few blessed hours, yes, and most Fridays my coworkers (often my drinking partners) regaled me with where I'd puked or who I'd made out with (or sometimes both) the night before. The hollowness, the loneliness, and the inadequacy always crept back in when the buzz faded. Only one thing remained within my control: my grades. I went to conferences, I earned an undergraduate research fellowship, I became the editor of the undergraduate literary journal, and professors I'd never taken classes from knew my name and my work. At family functions I displayed my mastery of Southern female pleasantries with expert precision.

By my senior year I reached a sort of truce with myself; I would limit my drinking to Thursday nights and special occasions, and I would remain conscious. I would accept my failures in romantic relationships, and I would remind myself of my close circle of friends. I would accept my differences of opinion with my parents, and I would embrace

the many positive examples they provided. I was still convinced I wasn't good enough in a great many ways, but I finally understood being cruel to myself only made matters worse. This internal cease fire carried me through the start of a new relationship, my graduation, my first year of graduate school, and my marriage (that new relationship turned out to be a pretty good one). The pressures of expectation I felt, both from myself and from others, intensified, and I soon felt the familiar clouds of doubt seeping back into my brain. I smoked more, sitting up long into the night after my new husband went to work (and his transfer to night shift two weeks before we were married hadn't helped my mental state) and contemplating my newly emerging shortcomings as a wife and stepmother. When my husband suggested I talk to my doctor, I made him swear he wouldn't love me any less if something were wrong with me.

"I fantasize about dying," I blurted to the doctor. My trusted doctor from my teenage years had moved, and I couldn't believe I'd admitted such a cowardly impulse to a total stranger. "I mean, I don't want to hurt anyone and I don't want to let anyone down—I just don't want to be here sometimes. I think I might be depressed."

I can't say the prescription she gave me that day solved all my problems—because it didn't. Instead, it kept them from engulfing my mind to the point of stagnancy. In a graduate literature course I learned of the act of scriptotherapy, of writing as a means of self-healing. This knowledge ultimately inspired my thesis, suggesting Rebecca West had used her fiction as a means of working through the trauma of childhood abandonment. In another graduate class, a seminar called "Creativity and Madness," the professor assigned an autopathography, a type of writing focusing on an

individual's struggle with illness, mental or otherwise. Several of my classmates opted to examine the lives of famous authors and artists, but I chose to write about myself. I voiced my doubts halfway through the project ("Am I being too conceited? What if everything really was just in my head?") to a classmate with an exceptionally kind and beautiful soul (a doctoral student, she would later become my mentor after I was accepted to the same program), and she encouraged me to keep going. She pointed out my mental state hadn't been dependent on any particular circumstance: in other words, I hadn't felt sad just because life was sad, or because I wasn't in a relationship. Instead, my brain's misfires were largely a matter of biology rather than environment—and none of it had been my fault. With her encouragement, I talked about my writing through depression—my awful poetry, my blog, a secret journal I kept—in a semi-public environment for the first time. Remarkably, my classmates treated me no differently after my admission, and several even applauded what they deemed bravery.

Since then, it's taken an adjustment of medications and dosages to strike the proper balance. Most days my brain no longer assaults me with my inadequacies. When my old doctor returned to her practice, she didn't seem a bit surprised to find I'd been on antidepressants. Together we've found an effective dosage of Prozac—or, more specifically, its generic equivalent, fluoxetine. With the exception of my husband and a very few close friends, most people aren't aware of my struggle. My rational brain knows I shouldn't be ashamed, that depression and anxiety are common assailants. The inner voice telling me to keep my struggles to myself and act the parts I was born to play is undoubtedly that ingrained Southern invective to be pleasing. The inner voice telling

me to cast all my cares on Him instead of Prozac is my mother, and I must contend with both voices on an almost daily basis.

I still haven't worked up the nerve to tell many in my family about my journey, and I'm still prone to reaching for something sweet and baked for solace. I have managed, though, to bring up the subject of depression in conversation on more than one occasion, and in each instance I have learned of other family members, both living and departed, who have coped with what has been referred to by some as a melancholy disposition. I learned, for instance, that my mother's grandfather, a prominent Baptist minister and activist in the Civil Rights Movement, had received shock treatments for depression. "He was such a kind man," my mother has commented as she remembers him. Normally she would dismiss such a case as a spirit of depression, meaning the sufferer hadn't been spiritually vigilant enough to resist that particular devil and make it flee. I've heard her say this about her grandfather before, but lately her attitude has begun to shift ever so slightly. When the topic came up recently, she reiterated again her theory of spiritual causes—but she quickly followed it with a caveat:

"But you know," she said, "Sometimes I think it's a chemical issue, and maybe those are the cases where antidepressants might actually do some good."

Service, Revisited

Two slim young women pose by the sign of the family farm, their expressions reserved but proud. The youngest, an athletic blonde, has had to save her family's rubber ration stamps in order to purchase the shoes she needed to play basketball. When her only brother enlisted in the army to eventually serve extensively in Europe during World War II, she and her sister had taken over the farm chores, putting their lean, athletic muscles to new uses. In spite of this diligent service to their farm's daily operations—and without it, their father surely couldn't have managed alone since most of his hired hands were serving overseas as well—the farm sign says, “S.W. Holman & Son.”

Temporarily repainting the sign to acknowledge his daughters' efforts would've been inconvenient for Mr. Holman, admittedly, but it's quite possible such an idea never would have occurred to any of the Holmans, male or female. Instead, a woman's duty was to quietly submit her energies to the man in her life, whether that be her father, her

brother, or her husband. Most within my family seem to have done so without complaint or extensive contemplation: women have performed such roles for generations.

The white Southern woman, with the possible exception of the last generation or two, should by nature direct the majority of her energies exclusively to the maintenance of the domestic sphere. The Southern woman of color was expected to be no less domestically devoted (and perhaps even more so), but, as the perpetually unseen force fueling so much of Southern life, her efforts were assumed but rarely publicly recognized. For the white Southern woman, though, domestic devotion and identity were synonymous and equally as subject to public scrutiny, with service to the home all but supplanting any individual aspirations. Such service is markedly altered in its execution during times of war, but the ultimate goal must remain the same: the woman must do whatever she can to preserve the integrity of her home, including rearing children, instructing her subordinates (paid or purchased, depending on the time period), and performing the myriad unseen tasks to keep the appearance of domestic stability intact. With the exception of a single letter from 1863, I have no direct evidence of how the women in my family coped with the challenges of wartime service prior to the twentieth century. The letter, written by Mary Ann McMillan to her stepdaughter, Jane McMillan Dement, describes the emotional burden shouldered by a woman living in a relatively urban area whose children were mostly grown. What it must've been like for Jane to be managing a farm, coordinating the efforts of at least two slaves, and caring for small children (all while her husband and brother-in-law, both in the Confederate infantry, fought against two of her brothers), I can only imagine.

The concerns of a married woman with children are almost certainly pragmatic, focusing on the daily routines and necessities. A single woman, though pragmatic in how she contributed to her family's well-being, could afford the luxury of being a bit more philosophical about her involvement. Writing to Miller Dement in early 1917, Ruby McSpadden frequently commented on the growing tensions in Europe. When US involvement became a certainty, she contemplated joining the Red Cross but, as The Great War had yet to directly impact her studies at the University of Tennessee in any significant way, she could delay the decision for quite some time—but not without assuring Miller of her willingness to serve, of course. In February, she rationalized her decision to postpone joining the Red Cross:

“After all my saying I was going to be a Red Cross nurse, when the chance is here just now for me to join I’m not going to. It isn’t because I don’t want to or think that I’m not needed for I know so many girls are needed, but the real reason is I haven’t the time or money to devote to it just now. The course in first aid work given is real expensive and if I should join the Red Cross I would want to take that course. Also I would want to give practically all my time to it and I think finishing my University work is far more important just now for I’m terribly optimistic about the war.”¹²⁹

After all my saying I was going to be
a Red Cross nurse, when the chance is here
just now for me to join I'm not going to.
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that I'm not needed for I know so many
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A photograph of a handwritten letter on aged, yellowed paper. The handwriting is in cursive, written in dark ink. The text is a snippet from a larger letter, with a horizontal fold visible across the middle. The paper has some creases and a slightly textured appearance.

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and if I should join the Red Cross
I would want to take that course.
Also I would want to give practically
all my time to it and I think
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more important just now for I'm
terribly optimistic about the war.

As months passed, Ruby's letters primarily relay the details of her studies and other immediate concerns. Gradually, though, the war becomes increasingly personal. She continues her periodic commentary on global events, but her observations are now balanced by more intimate connections. Her June 5, 1917, letter to Miller shows the growing overlap between her immediate world and the ongoing military conflict across the ocean:

This is registration day--just think how many girls' brothers are signing up to give up their lives. I sincerely hope my brother won't have to go and I believe every girl feels the same way, altho I am glad my brother wouldn't hesitate a minute if he was called. I really don't think any Southern farmers will be taken on the first call.

Sometimes I get to thinking just what this war might mean to us if the Germans were to win, it is awful the cruel things the Germans are reported to have done and are doing now. Had you read the report of how they take the bodies of their dead men and by means of chemicals make nitroglycerin from them to make more explosives to kill more men? And what is left of the bodies they use for fertilizer. That is the most horrible thing I have ever heard of. Rev. Vale of the Second Presbyterian Church in

Knoxville says the report has never been denied by German authorities.

Frank McFee will soon leave for France with a Hospital Corps. Every day or two some U.T. boy goes to training camp--but I'm going to hush now and not think about the war so pessimistically.¹³⁰

Though she may have resolved to stop thinking about the war so pessimistically, her observations become significantly more somber than her initial declaration of being “terribly optimistic” about the war. Less than six months after her decision not to become a Red Cross nurse, the potential personal connections—including Miller being drafted—move her to reconsider and perhaps even regret her choice. On August 12, 1917, she wrote:

And you've been drafted. Somehow I just felt that you would be. Won't you please let me know just as soon as you can, whether you go or stay. I've just begun to realize how terrible it would be to have so many of my friends go. Dock has been home today, he has been drafted. Hal McNutt will probably have to go and there are so many around home who will have to leave. O: I wish I could be a Red Cross nurse. I might not get to help any of the boys I know but I could help some girl's brother and someone would be relieving my brother's suffering perhaps. But I would have to have at least four year's training before I could be a regular Red Cross nurse. We can be what is called nurse's aids with less training than that. I haven't settled the question of whether I shall teach school or go into the Red Cross work.¹³¹

Ruby apparently opted for the first choice of teaching school, though she doesn't explain why she decided against the Red Cross. Instead, she devotes her letters to thoughts of how the war will affect the boys she knows—and how her efforts might be of some comfort to the friends and community members in various stages of training and deployment. As a member of a farming family, Miller seems to have applied or been recommended for an exemption to military service, and Ruby contemplates how the war will change him and the other boys she knows. Interestingly (though likely not

uncommon for a woman of her time and social standing), she views bravery as an exclusively masculine trait, and the thought of military service seems to her to be the ultimate expression of noble patriotism. As she wrote to Miller on September 9, 1917:

Have you heard from your exemption yet? I've been thinking every day I would hear whether you were exempted or not.

I'm realizing more every day what this war is going to cost us. When no one was having to go that I knew or cared anything about I didn't think any at all about the war, but now with six Concord boys' names published in one accepted list the war is getting pretty close home.

One of the boys who graduated in the same class at High school that I did has taken the training at Fort Oglethorpe and is now in Columbia S.C. as a second Lieutenant. This war is going to make a man out of many a boy who wouldn't have been so strong without the training. I mean a man both mentally and physically and morally. It certainly has already done as much for this boy, I never saw such an improvement.

Hal McNutt got his orders Saturday to be ready any time at twenty four hours' notice.

Saturday I saw C.E. Peters of U.T. He sails the twenty ninth for Russia to enter Y.M.C.A. work.

I noticed an article in the daily, there is only three of last year's football team who are not in training camp.

It means a lot for a boy to give his life for his country. I think I know now just how it would be. The other day I had been thinking how I wished I could do more toward the war and all of a sudden it came to me that would I have the moral and spiritual courage to give my life as a soldier if I were a boy. I hope I would, for slackers aren't wanted now days. . .

How about Joe Huffman—was he drafted? I think Dock has been exempted. I saw him about a week ago but didn't get to talk to him. Have you heard from Uncle Jack lately? I had a letter from him before I started teaching and I've never even sent him a post card. I don't know whether Ellen hears from him now or not.

This is a real wide awake community here. There is a Farmers Union, a strong Parent Teachers Asso., a big Red Cross Society, and I'm learning to knit and am going to make a set, scarf, wristlets, sweater, and helmet for my second Lieutenant friend in S.C. Wouldn't you enjoy the same in France next winter? I'm hoping the war will end before then. . .

Please do let me know about your exemption for I keep wondering about it. And if you do have to go I say for you what I do for all, God bless our brave American boys, and may they always remember that the honor of the nation in the future depends very largely on them.¹³²

I can't know whether Miller was motivated by Ruby's implicit call to action or by his own sense of duty (perhaps it was a combination of the two), but poor eyesight cut short his military career: he reported for basic training and was sent home after a day. Ruby, just as she had offered knitted items as a means of providing comfort to her friend the lieutenant, offered words of comfort to Miller to assure him of his value—and of his contributions to the war effort. On October 17, 1917, she wrote:

I too am very sorry you could not pass the physical examination, but I believe it is for the best for you would never have enjoyed camp life, like you do the farm, and conscientious farmers are needed as much as loyal soldiers, the war must be fought at home as much as on the battlefield.¹³³

A photograph of a handwritten letter snippet on aged, yellowed paper. The text is written in a cursive script and matches the text of the previous block, starting with "I too am very sorry you could not pass the physical examination..." and ending with "...as much as on the battlefield."

As the war continued, its effects continued to extend beyond the battlefield. As Ruby noted in a February 1918 letter to Miller, citizens were asked to contribute to the war effort through conservation and rationing; though she makes no mention of being

“terribly optimistic,” Ruby expresses a tentative hopefulness about the war’s resolution—and about the duty of the citizens to support the war effort through daily acts of service:

“I wonder what will be the next thing we will be called to do—heatless Mondays, meatless Tuesdays, wheatless Wednesdays, porkless Saturdays, and no sugar for any day of the week. But we shouldn’t complain. I’ve just been reading an article in the Sentinel which says the German people are existing—not living—on stock beets and straw bread, that the dirt is causing many diseases, and the children haven’t energy enough to play active games. How can a people so needy for food as that keep on fighting much longer. Of course the army is well provided for but surely under such conditions the young boys can’t grow into strong soldiers to take the place of those lost in fighting. Anyway sooner or later the right side will win, we can be sure of that much.”¹³⁴

These daily acts of service, though honorable, seemed to Ruby to be inadequate as her only brother prepared for deployment. Many of the young men in her life were already serving, and she sought a form of active service suitable for her status and gender. Her gender may have limited her options for serving her country, but she nonetheless, as indicated in a September 1918 letter to Miller, felt compelled to “do something more” beyond knitting and practicing conservation:

My brother is at Camp Shelby now but expects to be sent somewhere else soon, and I’m begging, persuading, and wanting to join the student nurse reserve. I think you’ll understand just how I feel. I want to do my part just the same as any boy wants to do his. My brother will soon be “over there,” Roy Vance is in France now, Hal Mc is there, all of my neighbor boy friends are gone or going. Someone will have to care for them if they are wounded. Couldn’t I take the place of a nurse here, so she could go immediately to France? It is a very serious question and some of these days if the war continues I may don a striped gingham dress and white apron and cap. You nor anyone else could censor me for doing it. It isn’t enough for me to stay at home and knit sox and sweaters when I could do something more.¹³⁵

It isn't enough for me to stay
at home and knit socks and
sweaters when I could do
something more.

The war ended before she had the opportunity to don a striped gingham dress, but Ruby's letters to Miller include numerous mentions of participating in war bond drives, attending lectures, and performing other tasks of civil service. Whether her displays of patriotism accelerated her courtship with Miller is a matter of conjecture, but their nearly six year exchange of letters culminated in their marriage on August 18, 1920. With the birth of their first son on June 19, 1921, Ruby embarked on a new form of service: motherhood.

Three more sons joined their family by the end of 1928, and, though I have only limited records from those early years, I can reasonably conclude how her days were spent. A fastidious housekeeper and a stickler for routine, she enjoyed farm life and appreciated the worth of livestock, but she didn't allow animals in her home—and, with four small

boys, this rule may have been difficult to enforce. The rule stemmed from a sense of the underlying order of her sphere of influence: animals, like the other occupants of their farm, were to be in service of the family's general well-being. As such, she made one important exception to the no animals rule: if a mouse were to be discovered in their home, she'd fetch the gray tabby cat from the barn. "Old Mouser was really something," Granddaddy often told me, and he delighted in recounting how the cat would perform its duty, present Great-Grandmother with a dead mouse as evidence of the finished job, and then be ceremoniously escorted back outdoors.

Though I never knew my great-grandmother, the letters her sons saved have given me a glimpse of the woman she was. In her early letters to Miller, she shares vulnerable details of her own self-doubts and perceived shortcomings. In October, 1917, for instance, she wrote:

My nature is a rather peculiar one; I am not unreserved as some are, even with my own self for I won't even allow myself to own up to many of my likes and dislikes. I suppose it is because I've had and am still having such a hard fight for self-confidence and must fight continually against timidity, and your friendship has helped me so much along this line.¹³⁶

She makes no such remarks in the letters to her sons. In fact, I have rarely found an instance where she elaborates on her own condition, physical or otherwise, at all. Instead, she gives detailed reports of their father, their brothers, their farm, and their community. Admittedly, a mother would be unlikely to share such vulnerability with her teenage sons, but her consistent focus on the lives of others might well explain why no one knew she was dying of cancer until the last few months of her life. If she felt unwell while Mac and Joe Jack were serving during World War II, she makes no mention of it. Instead, her life—and her letters—seem to have been entirely in the service of those

around her. One such letter to Mac relates details of life at home and offers motherly advice, but it's oddly absent of details about Ruby herself:

Dear Mac,

This morning I just had a thought that you might like some “coconut things” for Easter—even if you do get plenty of good things to eat I’ll bet they don’t make “coconut things”, so here they are. Hope they taste good. I had to divide up with the rest of the family, guess I’ll have to make some more. I’m going to carry a notebook around with me so I can write down the things I want to tell you—this is one—Hadn’t you better let me or your girl keep your Scabbard Blade key. [Scabbard & Blade is a ROTC-based military honor society.] I’m afraid you’ll lose it—or someone swipe it from you—and it is too pretty to lose.

The bed finally came in, and Ralph and I have been painting today. I painted the bed too, it looks so much better.

Joe Jack wants to wear all your clothes—but I tell him no. He can have your worn out shirts and the things not fit for school, but I’ve put your best clothes in the big suitcase. When you get your commission your good underwear will be ready for use. I took your tan pants to the cleaners, so they will be ready when you need them too, and if we can get the planes to Africa and Australia this thing may be settled in spite of politics in Washington. Roosevelt and Churchill aren’t the bosses even yet. ...

Every bridge and crossing along the railroad was being guarded Saturday. The report got out that the President was coming through- and he really did. I wonder if the road was guarded everywhere. I doubt it. The soldiers wouldn’t let anyone on the railroad, and a guard stopped every car that came across the overpass.

Must go to bed now. Be good, read your testament and go to church.

Love, Mother

Have been feeding soldiers milk today. They are still guarding the train bridge.¹³⁷

The soldiers of whom she writes were some of the many thousands stationed in Middle Tennessee for training maneuvers. The Duck River running through the valley they farmed provided multiple opportunities, and the Dement farm had many visits from off-duty soldiers, some homesick for farm life and others simply curious about their new

surroundings. According to my granddaddy and great uncles, Ruby made cookies by the bushel basket for the boys who visited, and she even fed the German prisoners-of-war who were hired out from nearby Camp Forrest as farm laborers. One man in particular, Granddaddy recalled, was amazed by cornbread as he'd never eaten such a thing before. A few of the prisoners even kept in touch with the family after the war, and at least one, according to Granddaddy, relocated to Middle Tennessee.

Ruby's naturally reserved nature, to use her own words, could explain the absence of personal details in her letters, but so too could a transformation all too common for women: her roles of wife and mother had all but replaced her identity as an individual.

Bedford County Public Schools	
W. M. SHAW, County Superintendent	
TEACHER'S REPORT TO PARENTS	
of <u>Joe Jack Dement</u>	
School Year Ending <u>March 27</u> , 193 <u>6</u>	
<u>Mrs. Milburn H. Hiles</u> , Teacher	
Parent or Guardian is requested to examine this report carefully, each page, and to acknowledge its receipt by signing below. Kindly return at once.	
SIGNATURE OF PARENT OR GUARDIAN:	
1st Mo.	<u>Mrs. E. M. Dement</u>
2nd Mo.	<u>Mrs. E. M. Dement</u>
3rd Mo.	<u>Mrs. E. M. Dement</u>
4th Mo.	<u>Mrs. E. M. Dement</u>
5th Mo.	<u>Mrs. E. M. Dement</u>
6th Mo.	<u>Mrs. E. M. Dement</u>
7th Mo.	<u>Mrs. E. M. Dement</u>
8th Mo.	

In short, her service to her family in her role as Mrs. E. M. Dement superseded all other aspects of her identity. She certainly wasn't alone in this form of service; married women have been taking their husbands' names—and often supplanting their own individual identities in the process—for generations. What Great-Grandmother might've said to my being a childless academic who detests being reduced to "Mrs. Farmer" I cannot know, but, as long as I remained attentive to the needs of the men in my life, perhaps she would've overlooked my incomplete change of name.

Ruby did value self-sufficiency in men and women alike and suggests a degree of maturity is necessary before devoting one's life to the service of family. In a letter to Mac, she commented on a recent marriage in the community:

Well, there's been another wedding. Eleanor Wright married a Lt—a Jew so the report goes and 31 years old. Poor little girl—she's barely eighteen. Of course it may work out fine—and again it may not. Some girls are grown up at eighteen, but she isn't. I hope some day to have four daughters-in-law, but I don't want to have to finish raising any of them.¹³⁸

She would only live to see two of her sons married (Mac married Louise Roberts in 1948, and Joe Jack had brought his bride-to-be, Geraldine Bennett, to meet the family a few months before Ruby's death in September 1949). The letters she exchanged with Louise while Mac was overseas and her famous quip after meeting Geraldine ("You could look a whole lot longer and do a whole lot worse," she had told her son) suggest she found both of them sufficiently raised.

Just as her brother's and friends' involvement in World War I had heightened her awareness of its implications, so too did her sons' service prompt a deeper reflection of World War II's impact. As indicated in a 1945 letter to Louise, she worried for the wellbeing of other mothers' sons: "Regardless of what the military authorities say,

eighteen year old boys are not mature enough to stand the hardships of war. We will have hundreds of cases of shattered nerves among the eighteen and nineteen year olds after this is over, and then the army bigwigs will realize they were all wrong.”¹³⁹ Dement men were generally too stalwart to openly suffer from shattered nerves (Granddaddy told me Uncle Mac simply announced, “Well, I’m home,” upon his return and said little else), and I’m not sure whether the army bigwigs realized their folly to Ruby’s satisfaction. Though she seems not to have expressed such concerns to her sons directly (not in her letters, at least), in that same letter to Louise wondering about cases of shattered nerves, Ruby worried about the lasting effects on her oldest son and his fellow soldiers:

We can hardly realize yet that the boys aren’t being shot at any more. It is too good to be true ...Thanks so much for sending us a copy of Mac’s citation, even if he had mailed us one. I too had a “feeling” about that “continued combat operations”. Those days must have been horrible. Many letters from Mac during that time said “We all pray hundreds of times a day. Lord stop this foolish war”. It is a miracle how anyone of them could get through alive, to say nothing of coming out without a scratch as Mac has. I’m so glad he has seen many interesting things since, so he may more quickly forget the horrors of combat.¹⁴⁰

The tone of her letters to her sons is decidedly more cheerful, for she writes to Mac of clean underwear, reading his testament, and of always doing his best. Specifically, she tells him, “Be a good boy—That is all I ask you to do for me.”¹⁴¹ This invective could have been partly self-serving: good behavior, after all, would be a reflection of parentage. To Joe Jack as well she directed the same simple instruction, made potent by repetition. Both her sons would later reflect on how her letters had made their time overseas bearable, that her words had kept them moving through difficult circumstances. I think it safe to assume she

considered the adequate performance of such a role to be her foremost act of service.

Be a good boy -
Love Mother

INTERLUDE: A TRANSITION FROM PERFORMANCE TO POSITION

Seasons, Revisited

It's the drizzle of rain pattering on your bedroom window in the quiet moments before the sun rises. If it were a Sunday morning you might use the sound as an excuse to steal a few moments of extra sleep, but today you cannot. There is breakfast to be made, your children's lunches to be prepared, your evening meal to plan, and your employers' expectations to be met. You work for several different households in the community in addition to your part-time job at a local department store. Many of your friends and neighbors juggle similar responsibilities; domestic work pays poorly but is generally reliable, and the department store will keep you on the payroll as long as your work ethic is twice that of the other employees and your subservience to customers never wavers. You will visit two households with the same last name on this particular day of the week, and the patriarch of that family considers himself your primary employer, thus entitled to ask you to rearrange your other commitments should an urgent need arise. Your father worked for his father, your mother still works for his wife, and your children will most likely work for his children. These designations as subordinates and superiors have more to do with your skin than your skill; your grandfather performed most of the same tasks as his employer with the same level of ability, but the two could never be

equals—and must remain separate, certainly—as long as the South remains stubbornly conscious of color.

You live in the same part of the county as most of your employers, but you could never make your home in their neighborhoods. In the old days, your grandparents lived in a shack on the corner of your grandfather's employer's farm (though the employer would have called it a "cabin" or "Mr. Jim's little house"), but as families grew and more space was needed, your grandparents and their household moved away from the fertile ground of the river bottom to the neighboring scrub land. You barely remember the time before the move, but you remember distinctly when you first heard the shouts from the older boys on the back of the school bus, taunting you as you walked along the road bank, jeering at you to return to Nigger Ridge. Being the oldest, you couldn't let your younger siblings see the hot, angry tears as you brushed them away. You learned to avoid the bus, and to keep your head down if you couldn't.

Most children in your small farming community, regardless of color, were accustomed to labor from an early age. You, too, had to help tend your family's small garden plot in the hours before and after the sun appeared, but the majority of your labors were made on land your family did not and could never own. You remember your excitement when you first did small jobs on your main employer's farm (it belonged to his father then); at six, bringing home shiny nickels and quarters seemed wonderfully important. You had eagerly assured your mother you would keep up with your lessons, but you wouldn't understand the sadness in her smile until a year or two later when you teacher—when you were able to attend school—shook your desk and jolted you awake.

Some days you would have forfeited the nickel or quarter to remain in your bed until after the sun rose, for a change.

On this rainy morning, you practice your daily habit of checking off a mental list of tasks to be completed as you cajole your rusting, patched-together car into starting once again. You had a little set aside in hopes of making a down payment on a replacement, but your meager savings dwindled away far too rapidly when your mother fell ill last winter. Immediate needs always trump long-term goals, and you should be able to keep the car running for another year or so. It shudders on the climb up to your first house of the day, a house perched on a hillside. The plate glass windows offer sweeping views of the valley below, but you're glad they're not on the agenda for today's cleaning—and you rarely have time to acknowledge, let alone appreciate, the view. You shut off the engine and listen to the rain for the briefest of moments before heading inside. The house's occupant, your employer's widowed sister-in-law, is a stickler for order and routine. You learned this long ago, for you would often accompany your mother to this house in the years before you became its sole caretaker. “We mustn't keep her waiting,” your mother would explain, “and we must always tend to things in the order she wants.”

Your tasks here are lighter than your mother's were then thanks to the mechanization of many household chores, yes, but certain actions remain the same. You wring the dish rag just as she showed you, an action so frequently repeated it's become almost involuntary. The clock resting on the mantelpiece above the living room fireplace has been here longer than you've been alive, and the widow reminds you of this with growing frequency the longer she lives alone with her memories. “That belonged to my

husband's grandparents, you know," she instructs as you dust it, and you are expected to respond with the same measure of reverence as the first time you were made aware of its significance.

The widow has a few extra tasks for you on this day, partly to stave off the cool dampness of winter's lingering traces and partly to ward off her loneliness. Her husband's funeral was a few months ago, and she wavers between wanting tangible reminders of him within arm's reach to wanting them out of sight. You suspect the request for a certain quilt from the back of the linen closet stems from the former impulse, so you exchange it with a cheerful "Why that's no problem!" even though this and the other added chores have combined to delay your schedule. She needs to know the neighborhood news before you can leave, and she asks about your mother's health.

"She's still cleaning the farm house on Tuesdays," you explain.

"Well, bless her heart, I guess she just can't stand not to be active."

While this isn't too far from the truth, you know better than to say your mother is only active in this way so that she can pay her rent each month. To do so might imply your mother had not been careful with her money over the years—or, worse, that your employer hadn't paid fair wages. He and his family, after all, prided themselves on being fair and just with their employees. In generations past, they had proudly embraced the label of "good masters," but, now that terms like "master" and "servant" were no longer appropriate in public conversation, the family had to be content with labels like "fair" and "respectable." You and your family, in turn, could earn labels like "reliable" or "agreeable," provided you followed the behaviors modeled by your parents and your grandparents. You keep these thoughts to yourself, smile broadly, and assure the widow

you'll be back the same time next week (but you know she'll call on you at least twice before then).

It's the low stone wall parallel to the road at your next stop of the day. "Your grandfather hauled rock from the river for that wall," your grandmother had often told you. She is gone, but you can hear her voice just as plainly as when she'd knelt before you to soothe your anxious gestures one spring morning when you were small. "But Gramma, why did she say *her* Grampa built the wall?" You had gestured toward your fair-skinned playmate, a girl whose toddling younger brother would become your employer. "That's just the way things are," your grandmother had explained. "You'll understand when you're older." The local paper had published a story on the farm—featuring a picture of the stately stone wall—when you were a teenager, and your grandmother had saved the article even though your grandfather's name wasn't mentioned. "We know what he did," she had assured you.

You push the memories aside as you settle into the day's routine. This is your employer's house, and you must tend to some of the more taxing chores before your mother comes for the lighter cleaning tomorrow. You are busy rolling up the heavy mat in the back hallway when a peal of laughter halts your progress.

"Betcha can't find meeee!" The laughter is coming, as usual, from the linen closet—a game your employer's youngest child delights in playing each week, only the location will vary according to the season. On a rainy, cool day like today, the linen closet is the hiding place of choice. When it's nicer outside, he'll be hiding beneath the porch or in the bushes as you approach the house, and this is a game he and his older siblings always delight in playing, despite their mother's insistence they leave you to

your work. This little one isn't far in age from your own youngest child, and he's been known to crawl into your lap in those instances when you might be sitting to complete a task. Just like his older siblings have done, though, you know he'll soon reach an age when your lap is no longer invaded and your attention is no longer required. You'll become, as you have to others, a part of the house, always in the background and acknowledged only as needed.

CHAPTER FIVE
OUR EXPECTATIONS: ON BEING JUST LIKE FAMILY

Moses

A certain protocol exists for those engaged in analyzing the past. We are expressly told not to project our modern sensibilities onto former generations, and we are implicitly warned not to become emotionally affected by our work. Until one dreary December afternoon in 2010, I'd managed to heed both these guidelines fairly well in spite of conducting research about my own family. I'd successfully navigated (or so I thought) the discovery that my direct ancestor, Cader Dement, was a wealthy slave owner, convincing myself that I shouldn't be appalled to know that he and several of my ancestors had bought and sold human beings. I had, after all, known this fact for quite some time through family legends, and I also understood owning slaves was the primary indicator of social status in the world in which they lived.

As I further investigated Cader's path from new immigrant to established planter, I found several records of his purchases of land, tools, and slaves. In 1817, for instance, he purchased "one negro man slave by the name of Moses about 17 years of age."

Book K, page 469, doc 479

James Porter & Alexr. Dobbins, Senior, to Cader Dement for Bill of Sale. I, James Porter of Butler County, Kentucky and Alexander Dobbins, Senior, of Sumner County, Tennessee have sold unto Cader Dement of Rutherford County one negro man slave by the name of Moses about 17 years of age. This 21 February 1817.

Witness: Jacob Mkleroy, Robt. Thomspson and Abraham S. Dement.

Signed: James Porter & Alexr. Dobbins

Registered 13 March 1817

This, at least, was less worrisome than the entry above it detailing the sale of a slave woman and her three small children, ranging in age from six months to six years. After finding Cader's will, written over thirty years after he purchased Moses, I could even claim my ancestor had been among the more benevolent slaveholders. Before he began divvying up his holdings among his thirteen children, Cader made explicitly clear that he wished to free his "faithful servant" Moses, and he even stipulated that \$100 from his estate be set aside to care for the freed slave, "if he should live."

Dement leader do Will
 In the name of God Amen Whereas all men are born and once
 to die; I leader Dement of the County of Rutherford and State of
 Tennessee, considering the uncertainty of this mortal life, and of
 sound mind and memory, doth make and publish this my last
 will and testament, in manner and form as follows to wit, 1st
 I will my soul to the Almighty God through the merits of his
 dear Son Jesus Christ. 2d That my body be decently buried
 3rd That all my just debts be paid It is my will that my
 estate be equally divided into fourteen equal Shares, lands
 and negroes, with the exception of one by the name of Moses
 who has been a faithful servant, said Moses I leave under the
 care of James A. Tarpley, and not to be sold nor divided
 with the other negroes, one share for the maintenance of
 d. 0 0

This, I reasoned, redeemed my lineage—surely Cader had been motivated by altruism, genuinely wishing to reward his “servant” for a life of hard work? As Moses would have been nearly fifty (if the original sale record correctly guessed his age, that is) at the time

of Cader's death, he would have been far past his prime as his field hand. His age made him less valuable, but what of the other slaves? What had Moses done to earn the distinction "not to be sold nor divided with the other negroes," I wondered? Elsewhere in the will, other slaves had been bequeathed to various children and grandchildren, and I would later find some of them, post-emancipation, with their newly minted surname of "Dement." Some fared better than others by aligning themselves with Dement offspring (and thus appearing with them in Census records), and others wound up in the county poor house. Most, though, remain lost in time, their fates unknown. I forced myself not to dwell too long on these unknowns, and instead to consider their names and numbers (for some of Cader's slaves had fetched considerable sums at his estate auction) merely as representatives of their respective time periods. *Keep it academic*, I told myself.

I managed to maintain my relatively objective evaluation of these sources until I discovered a faded document from 1856. I'd known that antebellum Tennessee was particularly hostile to free blacks, but I'd assumed exceptions would be made for the elderly or for those deliberately freed by former masters. Again, my naiveté outweighed my critical reasoning.

Moses Dement

State of Tennessee
 Rutherford County We Moses Dement, James A Tarpley
 & Matthew Pitts acknowledge ourselves indebted to the State
 of Tennessee, in the Sum of Five hundred dollars, to be
 void on condition that if Moses Dement a Free Man
 of Color, who was permitted to reside in said County
 by a decree of a former term of the Rutherford County
 Court, and whereas by an act of open Reg. of said
 State Free persons of Color in certain cases are required
 to renew their bonds every three years.
 Now if the said Moses Dement be of good behavior
 shall keep the peace & shall be of good behavior towards all
 free white Citizens of said State and shall not become
 chargeable to the County of Rutherford otherwise to
 remain in full force & effect. Witness our hand
 & seal this 3rd day of June 1856
 Recorded June 4th 1856

Moses Dement
 James A Tarpley
 Matthew Pitts

Book 18, page 114

Dement Moses

State of Tennessee, Rutherford County.

We Moses Dement, James A Tarpley & Matthew Pitts acknowledge ourselves indebted to the State of Tennessee, in the Sum of Five hundred dollars to be void on condition that if Moses Dement a Free Man of Color, who was permitted to reside in Said County by a decree of a former term of the Rutherford County Court, and whereas by an act of open Reg. of Said State Free persons of Color in certain cases are required to renew their bonds every three years. Now if the said Moses Dement be of good behavior Shall keep the peace & shall be of good behavior towards all free white citizens of said State and shall not become chargeable to the County of Rutherford otherwise to remain in full force & effect. Witness our hand & seal this 3rd day of June 1856.

Moses (x – his mark) Dement, James A Tarpley, Matthew Pitts.

Recorded June 4 1856

The true meaning of this document struck me in waves, but I kept returning to the shakily written X, his mark. I imagined a gnarled hand, calloused from years of skillfully wielding tools and farm implements. I imagined his weathered face, dutifully donning the deferential smile that convinced the white men to act as his security. I imagined him, trembling slightly as he made his mark, knowing the gravity of the document he was forced to submit in order to be allowed to remain in the home where he'd spent the

entirety of his adult life. I imagined him thinking of his wife and children, fearful he'd be forced to leave them if he didn't defer to the white man's rules. I imagined the white men explaining the document, telling him he must remain obedient and faithful to all whites, because surely he wouldn't want Master Tarpley and Master Pitts to lose their hard-earned money? I imagined him nodding gratefully, thanking them for their generosity.

I imagined countless hundreds of nameless, faceless individuals whose identities are lost to us—or whose identities were never truly known beyond their monetary value and their ascribed names. What of their lives, their thoughts, their relationships, their struggles? An addendum to Cader's will had freed a second slave, Pressa, but her name was never spelled the same way twice. What had she called herself? Could she and Moses, being of similar age, have been considered husband and wife? Were any of the other Dement slaves their children?

I had been told numerous times that not all slaveholders were cruel, that many slave owners—Dements especially—had treated their slaves “just like family,” and that the slaves had to be forcibly separated from their masters after those Northern aggressors had interfered with the harmonious Southern way of life. If they were “just like family,” why couldn't we be bothered to spell their names consistently? If they were “just like family,” why had few, if any, Dements before me bothered to wonder what had become of them? Much of my scholarly reading has addressed the concept of the white man's “burden,”¹⁴² the responsibility under the contractual bonds of paternalism to provide for a slave's moral and physical needs. Historians like Eugene Genovese have explored the implications of this burden as it pertains to white behavior: the slave owner, for instance,

should avail himself to be mindful of each individual slave's particular skills and peculiarities—a task that, though intended to secure the loyalty and dutiful labor of the enslaved while keeping them in bondage, paradoxically served to underscore their humanity. What Moses's skills might have been I cannot say, but I'm certain his earned designation as a “faithful servant” wasn't a simple matter of passive obedience. Instead, his manumission represented the mutual burdens of paternalism: Moses had endeavored to make himself indispensable, thus safeguarding his relative security (and possibly that of at least some of his progeny as well) in his old age. Cader's seemingly generous hundred dollars set aside for the care of Moses, then, represented little more than the fulfillment of a contract: to maintain his status as a respectable Southern man, Cader had to uphold the unwritten contracts of the master-slave relationship.

Though I suspect my granddaddy would claim otherwise, it seems the burdens of paternalism, both real and exaggerated, were quickly tossed aside—perhaps out of spite, perhaps out of economic necessity—after emancipation. Not until the early twentieth century would I find evidence (from my family, at least) of the return of this sort of rhetoric, the idea that the white man had a special responsibility to care for those of the allegedly lesser race in his employ. One artifact in particular suggests an almost immediate dissipation of responsibility; written on November 8, 1865, the letter insinuates a sense of annoyance with the displaced former slaves. This annoyance is a bit disconcerting to me because of its source: it's written by the wife of a Presbyterian minister who moved his family North before the War and served as a Union chaplain. The late minister (he died in 1864) had penned eloquent condemnations of the South's great sin, and his son had echoed the sentiment in more secular terms, saying, “I do not

approve of the course of South Carolina, or any other state, which has stolen a free negro, and sold him into slavery. A free black is just as free as I am.” I could not cheer for the apparent progressiveness of this thought, for the young man quickly qualified the assertion by adding, “but he is not my equal until God removes the curse pronounced upon him.”¹⁴³ I had hoped to cheer for the McMillan women, but Mary Ann seems to have embraced her son’s mindset in this letter to her daughter Jane:

In your last [letter] you seemed much tried with the negroes. How is it? I thought they were free. Can’t you get rid of them and do without as we do, or will they just stay round whether or no and claim your protection? None of our friends write anything satisfactory about them. Is aunt Prissie yet living? What a change there has been there since I lived in that country. Society must be revolutionized indeed. The labor system cannot be perfected for some time to come. In the meantime both the whites, and blacks will have trouble I presume. Many of the whites never did nor ever will work and many of the blacks will do no more than they are obliged to, yet both must live on somebodies [sic] labor.¹⁴⁴

I cannot, of course, condemn Mary Ann McMillan according to modern standards, but I can fairly acknowledge the attitude her letter suggests. The bonds of paternalism had conditioned the enslaved to expect a measure of protection from their masters in exchange for their labor. Once the chains of bondage were lifted, the bonds of paternalism were all but forgotten—on a systematic level, at least. For Mary Ann to have enquired about “Aunt Prissie,” likely the same “Pressa” mentioned in Cader’s will, underscores yet again the central paradox of Southern race relations: one could enquire about an individual with seeming genuine concern while simultaneously dismissing the needs and fears of the many as the tiresome source of future troubles. To earn such concern, however, the individual must follow an unwritten, generations old script—a

guideline of good behavior not so very different from the one to which Moses had affixed his mark.

Five Generations

I wasn't invited to the wedding, and Grandmother told me she went mostly out of curiosity, and partly to spend time with her siblings. True to form, Grandmother had saved a wedding program for each of her four children (none of whom attended the wedding, either). As the temporary caretaker of the one set aside for my dad, I flipped through it with mild interest. After all, I had only seen the bride once a year when we were children, and the only names I recognized in the bridal party were my other cousins'. A section called "History of the Venue" caught my eye, so I lowered my fork (an avid reader, Grandmother doesn't mind if you read at the breakfast table—especially when it is only the two of us) to give it a closer examination.

"Read that out loud," Grandmother instructed once she saw the section I was looking at.

"Five generations of Dements have worked on this land," I began, "and it has recently been named a Century Farm by the Tennessee Department of Agriculture." For wedding guests unfamiliar with Dement lineage, the names were designated by bullet points and bold font:

- **Albert M. Dement** purchased the farm in 1895. The family grew corn, hay, and other grains while raising hogs, cattle and sheep. Albert was a successful Tennessee Walking Horse breeder and a founding member of the Tennessee Walking Horse Breeders' Association.
- **Ephraim Miller Dement** acquired the farm from his stepmother and siblings in 1919. Miller and Anna Ruble "Ruby" McSpadden married in 1920 and had four sons, Albert Mac, Ralph Ruble, Joe Jack, and John Miller. The Dements were leaders in the community's agricultural economy, and their farm engaged in many progressive techniques in the 1920s and 30s. The Dements operated a Grade A Dairy with a state-of-the-art milking barn

equipped with running water and electricity. Polly has many fond memories of helping on her grandfather's farm.

- **John Miller Dement**, the bride's grandfather, acquired a portion of the original farm in 1976. Over the years, he has purchased additional tracts from his siblings, and he and his wife, Maurine Bennett Dement, currently own most of the original farm.

I paused my reading to share a smirk with Grandmother. "Has purchased," I repeated.

While this is technically true, Uncle John's greed is well-known—behind closed doors, of course, for we mustn't sully the Dement reputation in the broader community. When Great-Granddaddy Dement died, the farm was divided between the four boys. Not content with his fourth, Uncle John set about to reclaim the entire thing. Granddaddy, with his own farm in Rutherford County, didn't have the time or the resources to care for his portion of the Bedford County farm. My father and mother had lived on the land briefly early in their marriage until my father's change of employment necessitated a move. With no one else interested, Granddaddy sold to Uncle John. When Uncle Mac died in 1992, Uncle John cajoled Aunt Louise, Mac's widow, into selling their portion for far less than its worth—even though she had another offer waiting. Three-fourths thus acquired, he had only to wait for Ralph to succumb to his nearly relentless suggestions, both direct ("You don't have any children, so you should leave the farm to my children in your will") and indirect ("I've been farming those acres for years now, so..."). Uncle Ralph had passed away just a few weeks before this wedding, causing Uncle John to temporarily strut about in the confidence that Uncle Ralph's land would soon be his. While Aunt Martha still had the strength to speak, though, the ultimate fate of his final projected acquisition remained in limbo, for she refused to succumb to his almost daily demands. We had cheered when she changed the locks (he'd gotten in the habit of letting himself in to come remind her what ought to be done with the land), and we fully

supported her decision to instruct her home healthcare aides to refuse Uncle John admittance to her home. As such, Uncle John had to be content with the other portions he had “purchased,” at least until he could connive a way to get past the locks and the healthcare aides. I continued my reading:

- **Polly Dement Ricks**, mother of the bride, was born July 4, 1959. Her family lived on the farm until 1963 when John’s work with Hutchinson Farms forced the family to move to Nashville. They continued to visit and help on weekends, and Polly fondly remembers the hard work and the fun she and her siblings had on the farm.
- **Leah Ivy Ricks** spent many wonderful summers and weekends helping her mother and grandfather on the farm. She could think of no better place to hold her special day and hopes her guests will enjoy the peaceful countryside as much as she always has.

Grandmother chuckled and shook her head. “It was a beautiful wedding, and I saw some items belonging to your great grandparents that I hadn’t seen in years.” When Great-Granddaddy died, Uncle John and Aunt Maurine absconded (for I can think of no better word to describe their actions) with whatever household items struck their fancy—before the will was read. Various items have resurfaced over the years, and, being the good, non-confrontational Dements that we are, no one will say anything to them directly. Instead, we let them furnish their Century Farm with family heirlooms, ill-gotten and otherwise.

“Ivy’s wedding was definitely fancier than mine,” I concluded as I cleared our breakfast dishes away. Grandmother patted my arm on my way to the sink.

“Now honey,” she advised, “An expensive wedding doesn’t make you any more married than an inexpensive one—and it doesn’t mean you’ll be any happier.”

We shared a final chuckle before departing for the day, she to the hospital to sit with Granddaddy and me to Bedford County, where I would be visiting Aunt Martha and

having my dad's cousin Mary Roma (technically she is my second cousin, once removed, but in the South we often use the term "cousin" quite loosely) show me some of the key features of my geographical heritage. I can't bring myself to ask Uncle John, lest I break protocol and inquire about some of his unscrupulous acts, but fortunately Mary Roma is glad to take a break from caring for her father, a kind man I've always called Uncle Kenneth. Uncle Kenneth is Granddaddy's first cousin (their fathers were brothers); a month apart in age, they're both suffering the effects of having worn out their bodies. Granddaddy is in a hospital in Murfreesboro, and Uncle Kenneth is in a nursing home in Tullahoma. They'd both rather be outdoors, but their bodies no longer submit to their demands.

Mary Roma, like me, carries the label of "she never had any children," but she doesn't appear to mind. Her long, graying hair is always in a braid reaching down her back, and she seems almost ageless in her energy and warmth. Her husband was in the military, so she only attended our yearly family reunion when I was very small, and I don't remember her very well. As Uncle Joe and Aunt Jerry's granddaughter, though, I am greeted with a warm hug and treated like she's known me forever. Our first stop that day was to see Janie Rippy, a woman I'd only met in passing a time or two but had heard much about.

Janie's parents, Herbert and Samora, were tenant farmers on Great-Granddaddy's farm, and their small home still stands, tilting and besieged by overgrown weeds, directly across from where Mary Roma lives now. Janie has been working for the Dement family in some capacity since she was a child, and she's cleaned Aunt Martha and Uncle Ralph's house once a week for the past sixty years. Her home, a modest A-frame on the highway between Normandy and Shelbyville, is one I've never visited even though I've driven by it countless times. When Mary Roma and I arrive, we're greeted by the barking of Janie's poodle, Tiger.

"You hush that," we hear her order as the dog's barking grew fainter. She locked him in the bathroom before coming to the door. "Y'all come on in and sit down," she beckoned, a smile lighting her face. Her cane and white hair are the only definitive indicators of her age, and her glasses are a different style and thickness than in the last picture I saw of her. The effortless confidence she projects makes her seem taller than she is, for when I stepped through the door I found she barely comes to my shoulder. I

started to introduce myself when she interrupted, “Child, I know who you are. Your Aunt Martha talks about you all the time.” Out of all their nieces, nephews, great-nieces, and great-nephews, my brother Michael and I are the only ones to have our pictures on Aunt Martha’s refrigerator. Such an honor—a visual complement to apparently being regularly mentioned in conversation—has likely been bestowed because of Michael and I’s adherence to family tradition. Michael has proudly served in the military, and I have taken the time to document (and even publish stories from) the world of Aunt Martha and Uncle Ralph’s youth. This quest to understand the past is why I’m here, only now I hope to understand it from a perspective I haven’t yet heard.

I pulled out my notebook and tape recorder, asking Janie if I could record our conversation. I told her I wanted to know about “how things were,” and I wanted as many perspectives as I could gather. She smiled and winked at Mary Roma, “So you want to know about the Dement Estate, I guess?” Her infectious laugh at my puzzled look was a sound I’d soon become accustomed to hearing; for a woman who’d seen and heard a great many troublesome things, Janie remained remarkably cheerful. Her laugh was not forced, as is often the case in so many social interactions in the South. Instead, it was a manifestation of her quiet but resolute self-assurance. She knew the rules of racial deference and could navigate them with ease, but one look convinced me Janie Rippy was inferior to no one. “No matter what we have on this Earth,” she often says, “We all get the same six feet by six feet when we’re gone.” She’s never married and has no children, so she’s already made arrangements for her own final six feet of earth (“I don’t want to be a burden on anybody,” she says). She horrified the funeral home director when she informed him, while prepaying her funeral, that she wanted an enormous

University of Tennessee logo in bright UT orange on the lid of her casket. “It’s my casket,” she had informed him flatly, “I should be able to put whatever I want on it.”

She settled into her chair and proceeded to tell us of a phone call she’d received a few weeks ago from a friend of hers who owned a limousine service. “Are you familiar with the Dement Estate?” the friend had asked, knowing Janie was a lifelong Bedford County resident and was likely to know most of the families in Normandy. Janie could hardly contain her laughter as she explained how my dad’s cousin Polly had called Janie’s friend’s company to enquire about her services, explaining she was planning a wedding “at the Dement Estate” and needed transportation for the bride and groom. The friend had called Janie before giving an answer as she wanted to know the kind of people making the request. Despite our best efforts, word of Uncle John’s greed and underhanded ways had drifted through the community, and he had a reputation—despite being a direct descendant of “leaders in the community’s agricultural economy”—of being something of a miser. Once Janie confirmed her friend’s suspicions about the “estate,” the friend’s schedule somehow became full for the date Polly requested.

“Did you go to the fancy wedding, Janie?” Mary Roma asked.

They both laughed, as neither had been invited. When Aunt Martha and Uncle Ralph’s health declined, Mary Roma had served as their driver, shuttling them back and forth to doctors’ appointments. After Uncle Ralph died, Mary Roma became staunchly protective of Aunt Martha, once actually ordering Uncle John out of the house when he came over to badger her about the fate of the farm. “My name is mud with them now,” she explained with a smile. I eagerly told them both about the “Five Generations” section

of the wedding program, as they were both well aware of the loaded meaning of “has purchased.”

“Did the program mention the five generations of Rippys who’ve worked that land right alongside the Dements?” Janie asked wryly, though she already knew the answer. The closest any Dement might come to such an acknowledgement is one short sentence on the Tennessee Century Farms website: “Throughout the Depression, [Miller] Dement employed about 15 local African-American men from Rippy Ridge to assist with the farm work.”¹⁴⁵ “Rippy Ridge,” also known as “Nigger Ridge,” was an area of poor farm land above the fertile valley the Dements and other white farmers occupied. The Rippys and Dements might’ve worked the same land side by side, but, with few exceptions, their homes were to remain in the areas designated to their respective races—and only one family reaped the bounties of their labors in the fertile ground.

When I returned to Grandmother’s house that evening, I shared Janie’s comment with her. Though she’s a Dement by marriage, Grandmother has spent most of her adult life being reminded of social protocols where race is concerned. “Hmmm,” was her only response to my revelation about the Rippys, and she promptly changed the subject. This, as I well knew, was her default response to subjects too controversial or inappropriate for conversation. I had heard her say “I love you too” on the phone to Janie on more than one occasion (she and Janie spoke on the phone at least once a week), so I was baffled by her refusal to acknowledge the Rippy family as contributors—let alone as equal participants—to the success of the self-aggrandized Dement Estate. What unspoken code prevented Grandmother from making such an acknowledgment? How much longer will

the central contradiction of Southern race relations—the simultaneous existence of often mutual affection on the individual level juxtaposed by the stern enforcement of white superiority on the systematic level—continue to dictate our interactions? How much longer will I allow the paradox to continue unchallenged in my own family's narrative?

Good to the Coloreds

According to the precepts of paternalism, white families of a certain social standing have an obligation to demonstrate benevolence toward those beneath them on the social ladder. They must donate to reputable charities, make regular contributions to local churches and organizations, and they must be willing to extend a helping hand to the deserving poor, usually in the form of providing employment. This behavior entitles the actor to a certain degree of respect in the community, and that degree is further elevated when the charitable behavior extends across racial lines. In short, Ellen O'Hara's care for the Slattery family wasn't simply an invention to advance Margaret Mitchell's plot in *Gone With the Wind*, and the presumed "loyalty" of the former slaves of Tara was more likely a sense of obligation.

Few of my ancestors actually accumulated enough wealth to justify the extent of the lingering self-imposed standards of behavior still practiced by many in our family today, but those accustomed to the trappings of paternalism are extremely reluctant to relinquish their perceived status as pillars of the community. Dements in particular are accustomed to having black "servants," for this is what they were called (in public, at least) both before and after emancipation. Those servants, if they behaved, would be rewarded with fair treatment, good working conditions, and the occasional token of gratitude. For Miller Dement's tenant farmers, such a token was given each Christmas in the form of a butchered hog, suitable for Christmas dinner. My granddaddy remembered this tradition quite fondly, saying he noticed, even as a boy, how the addition to the tenant families' diets "made their skin shiny," a sure sign of their good health. He went

on to describe his father's obligation to those tenant families, explaining how a good employer should look after those in his care "just like you would any other farm implement." It seemed of little consequence that some implements were made of flesh and blood, and I was too shocked—and still too afraid to break the chain of deference I'd been taught to follow since childhood—to challenge his statement. He had said it so calmly, so pleasantly, that I almost didn't let myself grasp the statement's implications. Could my beloved Granddaddy, a man I practically worshipped for his wisdom and kindness, have truly equated human beings to farm implements with such nonchalance?

I could rationalize, of course, that Granddaddy is merely a product of his time—a rationalization that becomes increasingly hollow each time it is deployed. According to the unspoken rules (in the twentieth century, at least; in previous generations the rules were proudly published) of Southern society, the darker shades of flesh denoted a life of servitude in some form or fashion. Within this subordinate class, a certain stratification was evident. Inferior implements, according to the employer, were unreliable, unwilling to work, and quick to forget their place. Good implements, some of them even worthy of the descriptor "just like family" (a phrase uttered with seeming sincerity despite its irony), worked diligently and without complaint, thereby earning the tokens of kindness bestowed by their superiors. Whether called "Master" or "Mister," the Southern white man of a certain standing could remain secure in his superiority over his darker-skinned neighbor.

In addition to these gestures of good will to those individuals in his employ, Great-Granddaddy donated land for a new school in Normandy—"the first school for colored children," Granddaddy told me proudly.

20	65	0	1000	74	Kimbro, George	Head	0	M	W	53	M	No	8	1	2
21				1	Elizabeth	wife	1	F	W	53	M	No	8	1	2
22				1	George Jr	son	2	M	W	24	S	No	4	3	1
23				1	Van	son	2	M	W	22	S	No	4	3	1
24	66	2		84	Rippuy, Hubert	Head	0	M	neg	32	M	No	5	5	2
25				1	Samora	wife	1	F	neg	29	M	No	2	2	2
26				1	Lucy	daughter	2	F	neg	12	S	No	2	2	2
27				1	Lilly	daughter	2	F	neg	10	S	No	1	1	2
28				1	Herbert Jr	son	2	M	neg	8	S	No	1	1	2
29				1	Willie	son	2	M	neg	6	S	No	0		2
30				1	Beacie	daughter	2	F	neg	4	S	No	0		2
31				1	Jane	daughter	2	F	neg	2	S	No	0		2
32				1	Jim	Father	2	M	neg	67	W	No	4	4	2
33				1	Jerry	nephew	5	M	neg	19	S	No	6	6	2
34				1	Joe Vay	nephew	5	M	neg	16	S	No	5	5	2
35				1	Nelson Joe L.	nephew in law	5	M	neg	17	S	No	2	2	2
36	67	0	2000	12	Dement, Miller	Head	0	M	W	47	M	No	C-4	7	2
37				1	Anna R O	wife	1	F	W	46	M	No	C-4	7	2
38				1	Mac	son	2	M	W	18	S	No	C-1	4	2
39				1	Ralph	son	2	M	W	16	S	No	H-1	10	2
40				1	Joe Jack	son	2	M	W	14	S	No	8	8	2

He didn't mention, however, that the colored children, should they fall victim to an illness or injury requiring treatment outside of the home, were only allowed access to the basement level of the local hospital. Because the basement frequently flooded, the likelihood of receiving even basic care was slim at best. Whether this was of direct concern to Great-Granddaddy I cannot say for sure, but my father remembered at least one member of the Dement family (but only by marriage) had been alarmed: Great-Grandmother, known to her stepsons and the community as "Miss Ruby," had been a public health nurse before marrying Great-Granddaddy in 1951. Though Granddaddy never mentioned it, Daddy remembers Miss Ruby having demanded hospital access for all, including the colored citizens. Given her history of ignoring other Dement standards of behavior (she once served lunch at 1:00PM instead of noon, and she was the only one to tell my mother to her face she was concerned about us not being vaccinated as children), this breach of protocol seems quite plausible. I don't know when the Bedford

County Hospital opened all its doors to all the county's citizens, but I can't help but wonder what Great-Granddaddy's response might have been when Colie Rippy, Janie's younger brother, was first employed by that hospital—not as a custodian, a position all white Bedford Countians would have easily accepted, but as a registered nurse. He had cared for Uncle Ralph when his health declined, an arrangement most in the family, including Uncle Ralph, had found comforting. I never met Colie, but I did meet his brother Mac Miller, a man named for my great-uncle Mac and my great-grandfather, at Uncle Ralph's funeral, where he'd been asked to sing but prefaced his selected hymn by tearfully explaining to those present how kind Mr. Ralph and all the Dements had always been to him. Aside from Janie, Mac Miller was the only person of color in attendance. I don't know if Grandmother had expected to be the only white person at Colie's visitation when he died from a heart attack a few months after Uncle Ralph's funeral, but she did seem rather surprised when she reported her experience to my dad. She'd met Colie's wife for the first time at the visitation, and my gracious grandmother was unable to mask the surprise in her voice when she relayed what she considered a crucial detail: "Colie's wife was just as white as I am."

On my mother's side of the family, the general well-being of the community's citizens of color was also a concern of its prominent white residents. Daily interactions between races were far less intimate in the town of Tullahoma than in the neighboring farming community of Normandy where the Dements lived, though only nine miles by railroad track separated the two. In Normandy, Granddaddy told me it was common for him and his brothers to spend an afternoon at Herbert and Samora's house while Miller and Ruby went town (he didn't have to tell me Herbert and Samora never asked the same

favor of Miller and Ruby). No such arrangements would have occurred in Tullahoma; white homes were visited by blacks as places of employment only, and black caretakers of white children would never dare take their wards across the invisible lines of geographical segregation. In a farming community, such boundaries exist but are more permeable by necessity—but the permeability is permissible only to the extent it is initiated by and for the benefit of the white individual breaching the boundary. My maternal great-grandmother, Maie Granberry King, is frequently mentioned in the Tullahoma and even neighboring Manchester papers for hosting teas, banquets, bridal showers, and other such social events common to women of her status as the wife of a prominent businessman and daughter of one of Tullahoma's oldest families. A phrase most frequently used to describe her, though, never appeared in the newspaper: Grandma told me countless times how Monner would go to Colored Town, the poor section of Tullahoma across the railroad tracks on the outskirts of town, to visit the black folks (but only those of upstanding reputation, generally limited to Hotel employees and their relatives) in need of care. She would deliver food to shut-ins, medicine to the infirm, and general charity to the deserving. Grandma would smile fondly at the memory, letting out a sigh of pride as she said, "Mother was so good to the coloreds."

I knew, rationally, that Grandma and Granddaddy both were genuinely proud of their parents' actions and viewed them as indicators of the inherent graciousness expected of whites of a certain social standing. I also knew I was too afraid to challenge the validity of their claims of altruism, despite how unsettling I found their remarks. I couldn't quite identify why I felt so disturbed by their pride until years later when I read Lillian Smith's *Killers of the Dream*. Her description of "the gentle back-door cruelties

of ‘nice people’ which scared [her] more than the cross burnings”¹⁴⁶ resonated deeply, but at first I couldn’t reconcile the image of my loved and loving grandparents behaving cruelly toward anyone. Eventually, though, I had to realize they were participants in the system Smith so vehemently abhorred, and my placid acceptance of their behavior was in dangerous proximity of implicitly condoning their sentiments. I also had to realize the “gentle” actions of my great-grandparents had been predicated by one crucial factor: the good behavior of the recipients of their charity. Only the most upstanding of their inferiors could be worthy of such magnanimity. Further, charity implied reciprocity: in exchange for their kindness, the benefactors should spread the word of Mr. Dement’s and Mrs. King’s generosity as a gesture of respect and gratitude. Failure to do so almost guaranteed the discontinuation of good favor, both material and social.

I had begun to doubt my assessment of this relationship after meeting Janie and hearing my father insist time and again his aunts and uncles considered her one of the family. During Uncle Ralph’s funeral procession, Daddy viewed Janie’s riding with Aunt Martha in her Cadillac as evidence of their virtually familial bond. I wanted to believe the seating arrangement signified they were “just like sisters,” but I couldn’t shake the mental image of a wealthy white woman being attended by her loyal maid. I certainly hoped Daddy’s interpretation, however naïve, had at least a degree of truth, and I used Janie’s self-assurance in the midst of hostility as proof. So, too, could I consider that, unlike her brother Mac Miller, Janie didn’t refer to Aunt Martha and Uncle Ralph as “Miz Martha and Mister Ralph.” They were simply “Martha and Ralph,” and this surely, I reasoned, signified a more egalitarian relationship.

I clung to this and other observations of their interactions as a desperate attempt to convince myself that the assumed airs of superiority had begun to fade. How could members of the same generation, having worked alongside each other for decades, still follow the worn patterns of master and subordinate? Did all whites of Janie's age believe themselves superior by virtue of their skin and position? Did all Dements expect all Rippys to gratefully acknowledge, whether through their labor or through verbal and nonverbal affirmation, the benevolence of the almighty Dement name? The families' lives had been so entwined that each remained intimately familiar with the general well-being and goings-on of the other. With such connections, did the white family still consider itself inherently superior to the black? One visit in particular suggested to me I had been as naïve as my father in believing the phrase "just like family" insinuated any sort of equality. Grandmother and I had gone together to tend to some errands in Bedford County, and we agreed to stop and see Janie while we were in the area. We had a warm visit, and I smiled to see the two of them catching each other up on various relatives' health and general well-being. When we began making preparations to leave, though (no entry or departure is a simple, quick matter in the South), I was rendered virtually speechless by a deliberate action—or deliberate inaction, more precisely—taken by my dear, never-met-a-stranger Grandmother. As we headed for the door, she waved goodbye to Janie—she did not hug her, and my grandmother hugs everyone. *Everyone*. I searched desperately for an explanation; Janie had, after all, just received a phone call when we were leaving. Perhaps Grandmother simply didn't wish to interrupt? This would have been plausible were it not for one key fact: Grandmother hadn't hugged Janie when we arrived, either.

I mulled over what I'd witnessed during our drive home, taking care to be mindful of my speed (I've inherited Daddy's designation as driver when I visit) and to participate in the usual light chatter we exchanged while travelling together. Shortly after we returned to Grandmother's house, the phone rang. She mouthed to me that it was Janie, then continued her conversation while I went about tending to some backlogged email. I heard her say her customary, "I love you too, Janie!" before hanging up the phone.

"Janie called to be sure that I told you no Dement ever called her the n-word," she explained. "She wanted to be sure you knew that."

Faces

On our first trip together to the Tennessee State Library and Archives, my cousin Kathryn (though she is technically not my cousin; her half-sister and my mother are first cousins, so we agreed “cousin” is the simplest way to describe our relationship) and I became so engrossed in our research we completely forgot to stop for lunch—an omission we only realized when the staff kindly reminded us the archives would soon be closing for the day. It seemed fitting, then, that Kathryn was with me another time at the archives when I finally solved a mystery that had been plaguing me for close to a decade. As soon as I’d indicated an interest in family history, Granddaddy had been quick to tell me about the success of two prominent antebellum Dements, Abner and Cader. They were the sons of Charles Dement, the first Dement in Tennessee, and both had signed the charter to form Rutherford County in 1803. According to family lore, Abner, while serving as sheriff, had been murdered by an “unruly slave,” but somehow the family legend failed to provide any details of the circumstances leading up to the murder. As punishment, the slave had been hung on the gates of the Dement plantation, his body left to rot as a grisly warning to other slaves. Granddaddy seemed rather proud of this story (Dements were, after all, good masters—thus this “unruly slave” needed to be duly punished for his heinous crime), but I couldn’t locate proof of it aside from finding Abner had been a slaveholder and had indeed died intestate sometime before 1825. I couldn’t disprove the story, either, as only a handful of Rutherford County newspapers survive from the time period. Still, the unanswered questions persisted: if Abner had merely died

prematurely, why invent such a story? If he had been killed by a slave, why couldn't I find a record of it?

My previous searches had remained fruitless until Kathryn and I happened to be in the archives researching something else entirely. As she's struck up friendships with several of the staff members, she is sometimes privy to new collections or methods of searching. On this day, one of her friends mentioned a new digitized newspaper collection—and they'd only recently finished the searchable index. We were nearing the end of our day, but we couldn't resist the opportunity, however short our time might be, and sat at adjacent computers to type in names of some of our ancestors. I'm certain I violated the facility's terms of use when I squealed, "I found it! Kathryn, I finally found it!"

The Nashville Tennessean, a paper that's been in publication for over two hundred years, contained this article: "MURFREESBORO: A Constable Fatally Shot by a Horse Thief—Prospect of Another Lynching Affair." The author, noted only as "Our Regular Correspondent," described the scene:

Our people are greatly excited over what is feared to be the mortal shooting of Abner Dement, an estimable citizen of the 22d district, while in the discharge of his duty.

On the 19th Inst. Pink Bell stole a horse from Zachary Haynes. Abner Dement, a constable, started yesterday in company with Haynes to arrest him. Last night at 8 P.M. they found him at the house of his uncle, George Bell. Upon entering the house Constable Dement said, "Pink, you are my prisoner." Bell said, "Who are you? Hold on," retreating to the wall. Here he shot Dement through the stomach. Turning to Haynes, Dement said, "I am shot," whereupon Haynes shot at Bell five times, one ball taking effect in his arm and one in the hand. Bell was arrested and is now in jail here. Dement stands very high in his neighborhood, and, in fact, in the entire county. Should his wounds prove, as his physicians say they will, fatal, Bell will undoubtedly be taken in hand by the people and swung from the nearest tree to the jail.

Your correspondent obtained the above statement from Dement's friends, and desiring to hear Bell's side of the story visited him at the jail. Bell said: "I am twenty years old and live with my uncle, Geo. Bell. Last night, Abner Dement and Zach Haynes came there and said: 'Pink, consider yourself under arrest.' I said, 'Hold on,' when they grabbed me, after which a pistol fired, striking Dement. I do not know who fired it. I changed my pants shortly before Dement and Haynes came. My pistol fell out of my pocket and Geo. Bells' children picked it up and were playing with it before Officers Dement and Haynes came to the house, and were told to put it, as I think they did, on the bureau. I never have had any trouble with Dement, and am truly sorry that he is hurt. If my neighbors have had any ill feeling for me I know it not. I fear no violence from my neighbors."

The above statements show both sides of the case. The physicians who have visited Dement from here say there is no hope of his recovery. Should their opinion prove correct you will doubtless have to chronicle another act of mob violence, as Dement's friends are greatly exasperated, and Bell's standing is considerably below par in this vicinity.¹⁴⁷

19 days later, this headline appeared in the same newspaper: "'Bell, the Murderer of Constable Dement, Lynched at Midnight Last Night.'"¹⁴⁸ These articles would have provided almost incontrovertible proof to the story were it not for one important detail: this Abner couldn't possibly have been the brother of my ancestor Cader, for these articles were published in 1878—some fifty years after the events were thought to have taken place. Was this simply a matter of stories, connected through the shared name, being conflated over time? Or was the willful destruction of one's property (for an unruly slave could've been sold further South to recoup at least a portion of the original purchase price) a more potent indicator of the enforcement of white supremacy?

Any answers to these questions, should I be able to find such things, would have to wait as the archives were closing and Kathryn and I had to leave for our next stop of the day. Upon hearing of my trip to Nashville, Uncle Bill, one of my mom's younger brothers, offered to show me the trunk of old papers and pictures he had in his attic. "I'm not sure exactly what's in there," he said, "but you're welcome to come look." As our

family trees overlap at the King Hotel, Kathryn was just as eager to stop as I was. We ordered a pizza and lost track of the hours as we dug through the trunk, finding emblems of the recent (“James McCord is a loser” had been written, most likely by his twin brother John, on the back of a framed family portrait taken when my mom was in her early teens) and distant past. Uncle Bill had some terrific tintypes of stern McCord ancestors (to call their faces “grim” would be something of an understatement, even within the context of nineteenth century photographs), a few legal records, and even a diary kept by a Civil War widow. With no real system of order to the trunk, I was a little surprised when he chuckled and said, “Now here’s a picture of Daddy that’s really not politically correct.”

His daddy, John McCord, had married Grandma when my mom was two and was thus the only grandfather I’d ever known on that side of the family. A prominent attorney, Grandpa was a gruff, balding man we visited a few times a year and dutifully wrote thank-you notes to each Christmas. I didn’t know much about his life before Grandma, so I had rather enjoyed seeing pictures of him during his military service in Korea or while attending law school at Cumberland University. I wasn’t quite prepared for what Uncle Bill handed me that evening, though.

“That’s Daddy on the left,” he pointed. “This was a minstrel show for the Lion’s Club, or maybe the Rotary Club.” I had of course read of minstrel shows and the allegedly comical use of black face, but to see someone I had known and loved participating in such an act proved difficult to reconcile. I glanced at Kathryn briefly, scanning her face and hoping desperately to find some indication of how I should respond. Her eyes widened slightly, but she offered no real alternative to Uncle Bill’s

quiet chuckle. I laughed nervously, scanned the image, and returned it to the trunk, telling myself I would digest the image at a later time. The worn refrain of “merely a product of his time and place” drifted through my mind, but it seemed woefully inadequate. How could an image I considered horrifying have been considered acceptable—and even comical—just a few short decades ago?

On the way back to Grandmother’s house that evening (“Why stay in a hotel when you can stay at Dement Bed and Breakfast?” we always joke when visiting overnight in Tennessee), I tried to make sense of what I’d seen and learned that day. I wish I could say my preoccupied thoughts caused me to direct Kathryn to the wrong exit off the interstate, but that might only partly be true as I’ve never been much of a navigator. The picture of Grandpa had forced me to remember an episode from my childhood with implications I hadn’t fully recognized until that very evening. Despite

being homeschooled until I started third grade, I made friends fairly quickly—especially because we were too young, as innocent third graders, to recognize how racial lines would later change our childhood relationships. Larry Jenkins and Delaunda Clemmons, both in my class, were my two very best friends that year. Larry and I would talk about the churches we attended, and Delaunda and I sat together on the long bus ride home every afternoon. I remember we once considered trading hairbrushes, but she, after consulting her mother, kindly informed me that she used things in her hair that probably wouldn't work in mine. None of us really seemed to notice at that point that some of the older children rolled their eyes when they saw us together, for to us skin color seemed a silly way to decide if someone should be your friend or not. Instead, we cared about who we could sit next to at lunch, and who liked the same games at recess.

In the classroom, Larry and I had both been excited by a project where we were asked to write reports and dress up like someone we admired. He wrote his report on Martin Luther King, Jr., and glued a cloud-shaped piece of poster board with the words “I have a dream” written on it to a ruler. He wore a coat and tie the day of the presentation, and he stood proudly next to his poster, waving his ruler for all to see. I chose someone I found equally inspirational, but I didn't understand why my teacher looked a little startled when I gave her the name of my intended individual. It makes me cringe now, but I didn't realize then why dressing up like Sojourner Truth—complete with the darkest (and cheapest) foundation makeup my mother could find at Kmart—might have been insensitive, to say the very least. I found her story (even the condensed, elementary-appropriate version I'd read) fascinating, and I figured if Larry could pretend to be Martin Luther King, Jr., for a day, then I could pretend to be Sojourner Truth. Delaunda

laughed at me and told me I looked like Mrs. Butterworth, a nickname that unfortunately stuck for the duration of elementary school. We earned our grades for those projects, we passed the third grade, and, though we'd never be in the same class again, we remained friends for the duration of our time at Gladeville Elementary School.

By junior high, however, our groups of friends had shifted, somewhat by chance (the junior high was much bigger than Gladeville, we had no classes together, and I only saw Delaunda on the bus) and somewhat by unseen forces of mostly unspoken codes of behavior. An acquaintance, having seen me talking to Delaunda while waiting for the bus to arrive at school one afternoon, had pulled me aside in the locker room before gym the next day. "You don't want people to think you're a wigger, do you?" I was puzzled by the term, and she read the confusion on my face. "You know," she continued, "a wigger—a white nigger, a white person who only hangs out with black people." I told her I didn't use words like that, she called me a fucking dork, my face turned beet red (I didn't use words like that, either), and we parted ways. Delaunda and Larry were never unkind to me (nor I to them, as far as I know), but I noticed some of Delaunda's older cousins would eye me warily if we talked. We remained cordial, but soon our interactions were limited to smiles and waves in the hallway. With rare exceptions, social cliques weren't integrated—especially among students whose families had been in the county for more than a generation or two. Outsiders, of course, weren't always aware of these codes. When Collette Cosby, not a Wilson County native like most of us, first came to our school, I waited a few weeks to see where her social allegiance would fall. For whatever reason, the students of Mt. Juliet Junior High had determined one quality would always trump race: nerds should be lumped together as pariahs (except before tests

and major projects, of course), regardless of race, class, or other distinguishing characteristics. As such, Collette became one of my closest friends, eagerly trading favorite novels (though my over-protectiveness regarding my personal books caused a rift in our friendship when I discovered she'd left my copy of Catherine Marshall's *Christy* untended on the bleachers during gym class) and collaborating on class projects. I can't help but feel guilty, though, about letting my friendships with Larry and Delaunda fade with so little resistance. Were the thoughts and looks of others really more powerful than the bonds of young friendship?

Before seeing that picture of Grandpa, I hadn't thought about Larry and Delaunda in years. I moved to Indiana before I began high school, and my new school, though still subject to the social cliques common to any large grouping of teenagers, was composed entirely of white students until my senior year. Thus alleviated of the responsibility to evaluate my own understanding of race—and my own culpability in perpetuating racial assumptions—I focused my attention on the other various sagas of adolescence and young adulthood. When confronted with a startling image of the not-so-distant, racist past, my past experiences came flooding back to me. I resolved to put these thoughts on a shelf for the time being, but such unsettling realizations have a way of resurfacing despite efforts to keep them buried. I tried to focus on sorting my mountain of scanned files and images, but my thoughts drifted elsewhere.

Prior to Aunt Martha's funeral a few months prior to this visit, as an adult I'd seldom given a second thought to the color of my skin—rather a startling self-realization considering I'd always prided myself on my academic empathy for the marginalized as a result of my familiarity with certain texts and ideas. It is one thing to have studied the

repulsiveness of white supremacy in the South on an academic level, but it is quite another to discover, abruptly and uncomfortably, that you've always taken your own whiteness for granted. During the social ritual of visitation hours before the funeral, I'd met some cousins and friends of Aunt Martha's; upon hearing I was Martha's great-niece, they'd greeted me warmly and without question. I had left other conversations and settled onto the front pew of the church next to Janie when a woman with an imposing beehive of gray hair came striding up to pay her respects to the family. Her smile to me was cut short when she saw I was sitting next to Janie. She snorted almost inaudibly, the smile now completely gone from her face.

"You worked for Ralph and Martha, didn't you?" she asked frostily, though she already knew the answer. This question was a reminder of social hierarchy, not a legitimate inquiry. I am ashamed to admit I said nothing. I sat, my face flushed, all but condoning the slight with my silence.

If the question bothered Janie (or if she expected me to come to her defense), she showed no sign. She just nodded and said, "That's right," before continuing her conversation with me. She also remained seated on the front row, hands draped casually on the head of her walking cane, for the duration of the funeral.

Had the situation been less formal, she might've showed more of the spunk I was to see a few weeks after. I'd returned to Tennessee with my dad to retrieve a few things he'd been left in Aunt Martha's will, and we stopped to see Janie on our way through Normandy. Knowing she was familiar with the house's contents, I asked if she knew what had become of Aunt Martha and Uncle Ralph's wedding album as I dearly wanted copies of some of the pictures.

“I expect Miz Holman took it,” she said, and at first I was puzzled as to who she meant.

“You mean Trudy?” I asked. Aunt Martha’s cousin, Robert, had introduced himself and his wife to me by first name—and they’d both hugged me fondly as though I’d been one of their own grandchildren. It seemed odd to me to hear someone closer to their own age refer to them by title and last name only.

Janie chuckled, “Yeah, Trudy. She went through most of the albums before they left and took what they wanted.” As Aunt Martha’s only living direct relatives, this seemed no great offense to me, with the possible exception that I and other family members might’ve liked copies of the pictures. “They took some of the pictures out, though,” Janie added.

“Oh?” I asked, uncertain why they would’ve altered the albums as Aunt Martha generally assembled each album carefully and labeled the individual pictures as part of whatever ongoing narrative might be represented.

“Miz Holman went through every album of Martha’s and took out all the pictures she had of me. She brought them to me and said she thought I might like to have them.”

Puzzled by this detail (perhaps evidence of my almost willful naiveté), I considered the effort of Trudy’s undertaking: Janie had been part of Aunt Martha’s many photo albums for decades now, so this had been no small task. Janie smiled at my confused expression and explained the matter quite simply: “She said she wanted me to have them, but really she just didn’t want my black face in her photo album.”

My Friend, Janie Rippy

Aunt Martha, being of sound and stubborn mind, forced her infirm body to sign all the necessary paperwork. She would restore her will to reflect the wishes she and Uncle Ralph had so carefully planned before greed and coercion had attempted to usurp their intentions. During one of their stays in the nursing home, Uncle John had managed to convince them to sign a document bequeathing the entirety of their estate to him and to Granddaddy—but Granddaddy had never seen the document and had no idea of Uncle John's intentions. When Uncle Ralph died, Uncle John had appeared on the scene, a binder of legal documents tucked under his arm, and announced he'd have his hands full dealing with Martha's estate but was ready for the job. A lifelong friend of Aunt Martha's found the situation suspicious as Aunt Martha and Uncle Ralph had set out years ago to put their final wishes in writing, even asking each niece and nephew's family what they wanted left to them. My sister and I had asked for the quilts on the beds where we slept when we spent the night, and I had asked for the refrigerator magnets. The owner of many valuable diamond rings, Aunt Martha had found our requests amusing but dutifully noted them anyway, and we'd thought no more of it. Uncle John's announcement that he was now half owner of their estate was quite a surprise, then, and one Aunt Martha wasn't willing to accept without a fight.

After consulting with trusted friends, Aunt Martha instructed one of her in-home healthcare providers to phone Mary Roma to ask to be taken to her attorney's office. When Uncle John tried to demand details of the visit, neither party would budge. "I just drove her where she wanted to go," Mary Roma responded calmly. Aunt Martha had the

locks changed on the house when things started disappearing, and she told my dad and his siblings to come get what they wanted “while it’s still here.” She gave us things each time we came to see her, but, after a final visit to her attorney’s office, she seemed ambivalent at best about her material possessions.

“I miss Ralph,” she told us flatly, “and I don’t want to spend our anniversary without him.” As she had for most of her life, Aunt Martha did exactly what she’d wanted, and they spent their anniversary together once again.

The morning after Aunt Martha’s funeral, I sat with Grandmother, Daddy, and his siblings around the breakfast table. They’d all been given a copy of the will by Mary Roma, who’d been made an executor of the estate. “I hope she left the Cadillac to Janie,” Uncle Joey quipped, and we all smiled as we knew which family member had intended to park the Cadillac in his own garage. Grandmother cleared her throat and began reading the list of specific items bequeathed; their gun collection went to a neighbor, their grandfather clock to Uncle Joey, and the quilts—with the exception of a special blue one designated for Janie—were left to “the two daughters of Eddie Dement.” She left her sewing machine to my sister Julia, Uncle Ralph’s wedding ring to my dad, and she left the Cadillac to Mary Roma.

Whether Uncle John’s insistence that Aunt Martha and Uncle Ralph leave their farm to him had been reflected in the original will I cannot know, but Aunt Martha divided it equally between Daddy and Granddaddy, leaving Uncle John the tractor as a consolation. Following the section on her property, the will listed fifteen individuals (mostly nieces, nephews, and neighbors) to whom Aunt Martha bequeathed five thousand dollars each. Though their children were each named in this section, Aunt Maurine and

Uncle John were conspicuously absent. Instead, their names were listed in the next section beneath six home healthcare aides, all of whom had been bequeathed the sum of twenty-five hundred dollars. To have slighted them completely would have been un-Southern, but to list them after the help—and receiving a considerably smaller portion of the estate than they had hoped to gain, to say the very least—was a parting gesture fitting of Aunt Martha’s biting wit.

The final section of the will indicated the remainder of the estate, including the proceeds of an estate auction, was to be divided evenly among twelve beneficiaries, including my grandparents, my father and his siblings, Mary Roma, one of Aunt Martha and Uncle Ralph’s oldest friends, and Janie. Included in this list, whose beneficiaries would eventually receive upwards of \$80,000, were the Normandy Presbyterian Church, the Normandy Methodist Church, and the Mt. Zion Church. The latter, lest it be confused with a church of similar name, had been described quite simply: “Where my friend, Janie Rippy, attends.”

EPILOGUE

REFLECTING UPON A PATCHWORK JOURNEY

Having always been the sort to talk to myself and to stare randomly into space, I've grown accustomed to people looking at me strangely. This night was no different, as I paused on the footbridge leading to the parking garage on campus. I had just left a meeting of my doctoral capstone course, and my thoughts were awirl with concepts and observations on my pending dissertation prospectus—and the sudden awareness I hadn't eaten since lunch, and my feet and head ached equally. The footbridge spans a railroad track, and on this night I closed my eyes as the train rushed past beneath me, its momentum vibrating the concrete under my feet. The steady clack, clack, clack of the wheels on the tracks helped to still my thoughts into a manageable pattern, but suddenly I was no longer standing on a concrete bridge in Louisville, Kentucky. Instead, I was seeing six year old Mary Ann King in Tullahoma, her nose pressed eagerly to the window of her father's hotel lobby as the train gradually settled to a stop at the station across from where she stood. The train meant guests for the hotel, and, if she played her charming role well, dimes and quarters for her to take to the candy shop down the street. Most of the time a simple smile and curtsy would be enough for the travelling salesmen to pat her head and drop a few coins into her hand, but, on the occasions when her candy stash was growing lean, she'd don a party dress and tap shoes and sing and dance to some of the era's most popular tunes.

That same train would also capture the attention of the Dement boys in nearby Normandy, but instead of lobbying for spare change from travelers (should there be any to stop, which seemed unlikely with the exception of visiting relatives), they negotiated who would receive a brief reprieve from chores to go enquire about incoming mail. For the young Janie Rippy and the other black residents of Normandy, the train served as a tangible reminder of their separation from the white members of the community: were they to travel to Nashville or one of the other frequent stops made by this rail line, they would sit in separate cars from their white neighbors.

This association served to jolt me from the trance of memory, and I knew I must recognize the often painful realities of the story I had decided to tell. I could not accurately or fairly describe the history of my white Southern family without also acknowledging the subjugation that allowed us to live the life we had. Mine was in many ways a privileged past, but many of the voices who had described that past to me believed that privilege to be their natural birthright, a simple matter of Southern social order. To challenge that belief would require uncomfortable scrutiny, and the process would take me nearly five years to complete.

At times, my exploration of my family's past—or rather, my critical dissection of the version of the past I had been told to accept—seemed like a betrayal of my loved ones. For months after Granddaddy's death, I would stare blankly at my computer screen. "He would be so ashamed of what I'm doing," I thought, and the fear of disappointing him threatened to permanently halt my work. I pressed on in fits and spurts, allowing distractions—some necessary, others invented—to delay my progress.

To be able to finish, I would have to work through the guilt, only I found it nearly impossible to do so.

I found respite from my inner conflict on my parents' farm. I may make my living in academia rather than agriculture, but I'll never deny the therapeutic qualities of the outdoors, and I'll never discount the uncanny ability of farm animals to still my troubled thoughts. One spring afternoon, I made my way through the cow pasture to take grain to a cow with a newly delivered calf. As one of the oldest in the herd, she'd surprised us by living through the winter, and, when she kept to herself for a few days, we expected she was sequestering herself for her last moments. Instead, she surprised us with a heifer calf—and a renewed, seemingly insatiable appetite. She seemed a bit startled to see a stranger in her pasture, but the grain bucket in my hand supplanted her fears. I set the bucket in front of her and absently petted her neck as she ate. I smiled at the new calf's timid glances at me from the protective circle of her mother's protection, and I gave the cow a final pat before heading for the barn with the now-empty bucket.

I looked up to see clouds skidding across the sky, inhaling deeply as I halted to absorb the newness emerging around me. To suddenly erupt in sobs in such a peaceful setting startled me, and I realized I'd been thinking of Granddaddy. He would surely enjoy this story of the old cow's unexpected new delivery, and, even three years after his death, I had momentarily forgotten I could no longer hear his voice or see his smile as I recounted my activities and observations. I let the bucket fall to the ground as my fists clenched. *He would be so ashamed* echoed through my head, and I feared my continued work would be a betrayal of my love for him. In most circumstances, a literary character in such a mental state might sink to her knees, but, thankfully, even the sentimental side

of my personality recognized the setting for this emotional moment was in fact a cow pasture and deemed it more pragmatic to remain standing. In spite of my tears, I smiled briefly at this reminder of my surroundings. I had to make peace with him, with myself.

I looked up, letting my tears go unchecked.

“I don’t want to hurt you, Granddaddy,” I explained to the sky, “but I have to do this.” Parts of the family portrait have been painted in ways he would not have condoned, but the patchwork would be incomplete without them. The sky did not answer me that day, but the patchwork portrait, with all its flaws, triumphs, and failures, has been presented to the best of my ability.

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