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Mezze: A Short Story Collection-in-Progress

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Mezze

A Collection of Short Stories

By

Leata Thomas

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in
Professional Writing in the Department of English

In the College of Humanities and Social Sciences of Kennesaw State University

Kennesaw, Georgia

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Mezze

In America we say, “Come for cocktails” or “Drop by for drinks” or “Come over for a glass of wine.” The British say, “Come for tea.” In the Mediterranean, middle-easterners say, “Come for mezze.”

Mezze is a variety of food bits, little snacks, from the simplest hummus to more complicated pastries stuffed with meats, spinach, cheese, or fruit. My capstone offers a mezze of stories from the simplest to the not so much. Each story was inspired by a specific incident, *Boogie Woogie Blues*, or a person, *A Vietnam Story*. All four stories are fiction.

What I like about writing fiction is the guilt free, guileless freedom to tell a little lie and then grow it into a really big one! Who would have thought that all the trouble I got into as a little girl for embroidering reality would serve me so well as an adult?

I want to thank Andrew Plattner, Ph.D., undergraduate professor of fiction writing at Kennesaw State University, who first encouraged me, then inspired me, then talked me into applying to the MAPW program. Without him, I surely would not be here today.

My original goal was to write with the grace of Anton Chekov and the humor of David Sedaris. My “voice” would blend with the spirit of the perpetual, universal human condition with its expression in modern times with a bit of laughter thrown in for levity. My sole purpose as a fiction writer is to entertain. Read my stories. You may smile. You may chuckle. I certainly hope that you will feel more comfortable in your own skin than you did only minutes ago. “Minutes” being the operant word here...ergo the short story.

This semester of Capstone has been one of personal revelation. A hardcore extrovert my entire life, I have become a happy recluse. Long hours of solitude and isolation have led me to an

internal resonance previously outside my frame of reference. I am happy all by myself. Writing entwines its fingers with my heart, my head, and my gut. I am now an integrated human being. I never was before and I didn't even know it. My children and my grandchildren fill my heart with song. Writing fills it with a symphony.

There is process to everything one does: from washing the glasses first, then the plates, then the pots and pans when you clean up after dinner and the dishwasher is broken to writing a story.

Some people stack the dishes by category first and wash down the countertops before they wash the dishes. Some, like me, collect the glasses one at a time, put them, one at a time into the soapy water, then scrape each plate, one at a time, and wash them in the soapy water, etc., etc., etc. You get my drift.

I write like that too. I start with one idea for a story, or one lie, which ever seems more fitting, and just start writing. I don't outline. Nor do I write down the names of the characters and develop them before they appear in the story. I learned from my Capstone advisor, Tony Grooms, that my way of writing is known as "intuitive writing".

At any rate, I just begin the story and it stumbles along as characters present themselves. They develop as people as events occur. Sometimes they turn out to be totally different from the way they started. The story, too, takes twists and turns into its own personality, its own definition of life as the characters know it. To develop any character, I pretend to be that person. I dress as they dress, speak as they speak, and behave as they behave. Mind you, all of this is in my imagination.

Accolades, please, to my Capstone Committee, Professor Tony Grooms and Dr. Bill Rice. They told me the truth about my work, always kind, always supportive, and always

encouraging. Sometimes I had to tell them to sock-it-to-me. Be mean, even. I can take it and I won't learn if I don't know the hard truth. They would just get that Mona Lisa smile on their faces and continue to be honest, supportive, and kind, encouraging me all the way, all the time.

How am I going to live my writely life without them? I take their voices and the books they have written with me. When my "Voice" fails me, I read Bill Rice. His stories sound like he is right here with me, sitting around a campfire, telling me how that nephew hunted, shot and killed that majestic, giant gobbler. ("Stalking Glory," The Lost Woods).

When my story runs dry – no laughter, no sorrow, no suspense – I read Tony Grooms. His stories pull me into all of those: I laugh when sixth grader Gerald says, to defend Uncle Beasley and his new girlfriend, "Poontang! Right? That her name? Poontang!" ("Uncle Beasley's Courtship," Trouble No More) and there is sorrow and suspense when Red Eye asks Parthenia if she wants him to kill the college boy. ("The Bottoms," Trouble No More)

Thank you, Tony.

Thank you, Bill.

Thank you, MAPW program. Without you I could never be a master of the art of professional writing.

Lucky Number

He was ruggedly handsome and athletic. She moved with the graceful current of a mountain stream, her gossamer skirt sliding through the air.

Taking a table near a window they were enveloped with the patina of the wide planked floors and walls, rich with whispered secrets, shared laughter, and declarations of love. They ordered coffee- French pressed- and cheese cake, New York style with caramel sauce.

“Look,” he said. “I’m your agent. The publisher is waiting for this last story. Don’t make me look bad. Where is it?”

“Yes, the thirteenth story. It’s the number ‘13’,” she answered. “There’s something ominous about it. Elevators don’t even have a floor numbered ‘13’. I’m scared.”

“We all get scared sometimes,” he said. “Remember last year when you finished *Ghostly Affairs*? I had to beg you to come out for book signings at night. You said you were tired, but I had a suspicion some of your own storytelling had rubbed off on you!” She laughed with him, knowing it was true.

She wanted to spend the rest of her life laughing with him, but he was strictly business, all business, all the time.

“I’m afraid when I finish this last story of the book, other things will finish in my life too. What will go away? What will I lose? How empty will I be?”

Something flashed in his eyes. He stopped laughing and looked intently at her, “The end of the book and the beginning of you and me? The beginning of us?”

End

A Vietnam Story

Boots on the ground. Duffle bag slung over his shoulder and across his back. “Civilian air”, a fragrance he had actually forgotten...the smell of Freedom. The military transport dropped him at LAX, the Los Angeles Airport. From there my brother, Ron, would catch his flight home to Atlanta. Home...the land of sweet iced tea, Coca-Cola, Moon Pies, water melon, fried chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy, and cornbread. And, if he knew our mother at all, she'd have two pies waiting for him – one apple and one cherry. Lattice work crust on top sprinkled with sugar and cinnamon. Just thinking about that sweet, rich warmth excited his taste buds and his stomach. The next six hours can't pass soon enough, he thought.

Entering the terminal, he felt the coolness of the white marble floors and walls. He felt the anxiety of people rushing here and there, trying to connect flights, getting on planes, and looking for their luggage. He stood for a moment by a seat in a waiting area, getting his bearings and wondering what to do first, what to do next.

“Are you a soldier?” a little boy asked.

“Come away from him!” the mother said. “I've told you to not talk to strangers,” she said, dragging her son away and giving Ron a scared, but defiant look.

As he looked around he noticed people looking askance at him. Those looks felt like disdain. He said good morning to a few as he made his way to the center of the airport, but no one answered. No one made eye contact. No one smiled.

After fighting a war for the past three years this is what he got from the people he fought it for?! From the country he fought for?! He was a goddamn Marine, damn it! He felt hurt, bewildered, a bit sad, and a bit pissed off. He knew the war wasn't popular, but it never once occurred to him that he would, individually, feel the disgust of the civilians back home.

Even so, LAX was a haven of forgotten smells and an array of people and things to look at. He wasn't going to let the bad apples spoil his barrel of joy at being back home. There were restaurants serving food he had only dreamed of for the past three years, the fragrance of which filled his senses. He was like a starving dog sniffing out meat on a backyard grill: hamburgers, hotdogs, steaks, and loaded baked potatoes.

Wearing spit-shined boots and dressed in utilities with full ribbons, stripes, and stars on his chest and biceps he took a deep breath and stood tall, six feet, six inches. He'd been on the skinny side when he joined the Marines, but training and tough times had filled him out. He had muscles over bones now. He looked like someone to be reckoned with. Cropped brown hair and blue eyes that could go soft or hard, warm or cold. He knew that anyone could see his soul if they looked into his eyes. He was a terrible liar. The truth was always right there to be seen.

Glancing about he took in the fashions of the day. There were men in polyester suits, wide silk ties, sports shirts with exaggerated collars and the top three buttons open. What's with the chest hair and gold chains? He wondered.

Women wore skirts way above their knees, barely covering their asses and white patent leather high-heeled boots. Some had big puffy hair styles, while others wore their hair long and stringy. Regardless of all that, they all wore too much jewelry and too much perfume. He could smell it everywhere and too much is not better. It's worse.

Men and women wore bell-bottom slacks and jeans; jeans embroidered with peace symbols and other things he didn't understand. Some wore bandannas around their heads, beads around their necks, fringe on their shirtsleeves, and sandals. Men had long hair. Women had long hair. If not for the beards, he thought, you couldn't tell them apart. These must be the hippies. These people did not smell of too much perfume. They smelled of not enough soap and water.

With six full hours before his connecting flight to Atlanta, he strolled around the airport watching “America”. He was glad to be home. He was proud of being a Marine and it felt good to know that all he had been through was for this. This “America” where no one had to worry about living their own life. No one was going to burn their house down or eat their dog.

Taking another deep breath, he headed for the nearest bar with a television and a baseball game. Actually, there were several televisions. All them with a baseball game on. As he ordered a cold beer on draft he noticed a group of five hippies walking toward the bar from a nearby waiting area: three guys (men?) and two girls (women?). All five were substantially shorter than he and a bit on the thin side. Too much grass and not enough meat and potatoes, he thought. “Men” wear suits, he thought. “Women” wear, well, not this! These people look like they have dressed up for Halloween. He took one long, amazing pull on his liquid gold.

The hippies entered and stopped at the end of the bar nearest my brother and the walkway. They didn’t order anything, just leaned on the brass rail and began shelling the complimentary peanuts from a bowl in front of them, popping the nuts into their mouths and throwing them into each other’s mouths like so many guppies gulping for air. They stole glances at him or outright stared then turned back to each other talking, smirking, laughing, and eating peanuts. With the laughter my brother’s lower spine straightened and tightened like a steel rod. As if on cue, all five hippies turned from the bar and began inching their way towards him as if they were Viet Cong, the enemy, in the bush, on patrol. To Ron, they were moving stealthily closer and closer.

“Hey, soldier, how’s the war?” said the hippie with matted red hair and a scruffy red beard.

I am a Marine, he thought. Not a soldier!

“Yeah man, how many people did you kill?”

They continued inching closer.

“Did you watch ‘em die? What color was their blood? Red? Same as yours?”

“Whoa,” my brother said and set his mug on the bar.

They continued toward him bit-by-bit.. He stepped back, putting his hands up as if to stop them.

“Wha’s a matter, soldier? Don’t you wanna’ talk to us?” asked the guy with the longest hair. It flowed over his shoulders. His beard lay on his chest.

“Yeah. Don’t you have something to say about how sorry you are for killing all those people over there?”

“Yeah, all those women, children, and babies?”

“Yeah, and I bet he killed their pets too! Their dogs and hogs and buffaloes!”

People in the bar began to notice. He stepped back again, knocking over a bar stool. Now the couples at the tables were watching. A group of folks from the waiting area walked toward the bar, watching. The hippies were pinning him in.

“Look,” he said. “I just want to drink my beer.”

“Drowning your sorrows? Or celebrating being alive after you killed so many?” this from a long and too skinny girl, a blonde with stringy hair tamed by a dirty red bandanna.

She walked the rest of the way and right up to him. A white blouse worn off the shoulders hugged her waist above a floor length floral skirt with a ribbon tie belt. Large hoop earrings, multi strands of beads around her neck, and half-a-dozen bracelets on each arm reminded him of a gypsy who told him his fortune at a county fair just before he went to war.

“Look,” he said to her. “I just want to finish my beer and catch my flight.”

“Baby killer!” she yelled.

Ron put his hands up as if to stop her and took another step back.

He struggled with himself. This was like the Cong on patrol. They were coming too close. He blinked and shook his head.

“Look, I just want to finish my beer.”

She spat at his face.

He wiped it off.

Ron’s shoulders went back, down, and taught. His hips tucked under. His guts vibrated. His hands and fingers tightened, making claws. He was a specially trained Marine: a member of Force Recon, the toughest and most highly skilled warriors in the Corps. He could, and had, killed more than once with one hand on a man’s neck, gripping, twisting, and snapping the spinal cord in two.

The top half of Ron’s body turned toward her and captured her eyes with the stealth of a cobra before it strikes. His left hand shot out for the clothes at her waist, while his right arm swept the three guys away and his right foot struck the other girl in her gut. The blonde who spat on him went flying into the air, landing and sliding on her butt across the marble floor with all the air knocked out of her lungs. His right foot shot out and found the other girl. She clutched her belly, crumpled over, and went down.

He saw the three guys as incoming. They were storming him. He blocked one with his left forearm, hand as stiff as a cleaver. That hand connected to a neck. The head which sat upon it rolled like a toy on a stick and that hippie stumbled in a circle before landing “splat!” on the floor. Three enemies down, two to go.

The long hair in pants on the other end was next. Ron felt the man's throat crush under the force of his booted foot as his right leg again struck up and out. The hippie gurgled on his way to the floor. With his left hand my brother grabbed the fifth and final hippie at his wrist and flipped him into the air like he was throwing fish off a boat. Hippies lay everywhere. All were breathing. All semi-conscious. Ron took another long draw off his beer.

Just arriving at the edge of this array were two LA cops. Glancing at each other with a knowing look they approached my brother.

In a calm, quieted voice, the stocky one said, "We saw the whole thing."

"Yeah," said the tall one who looked like he'd been a prize fighter. "Come walk with us away from this debris. Someone else will clean that up."

Ron picked up his duffle bag, threw it over his shoulder, and walked away with them. He just wanted to make his flight home.

"You just getting' in from Nam?" the short one said. "Spent a year there myself."

"Me too," said the other. "Worst year of my life."

Their cruiser was parked by the curb just outside the Delta door. This was a friendly cruiser. There was no wire mesh separating Ron in the back seat from the cops in the front. The stocky one driving. The big one riding shotgun. No one talked until they were out of sight of the airport crowds. Shit, thought Ron. They are probably taking me to the hoosegow. Damn! I'm going to miss my flight!

Leaving the airport behind, they passed a group of hippies carrying placards:

'GET THE HELL OUT OF VIET NAM'

'HELL, NO! WE WON'T GO!'

'MAKE LOVE! NOT WAR!'

‘HEY, HEY, HEY, LBJ! HOW MANY KIDS DID YOU KILL TODAY?!

And chanting against the war:

“Hell, No! We Won’t Go!”

“Hey, Hey, Hey, LBJ! How Many Kids Did You Kill Today?!”

A dozen or so on the front line stepped off the curb into the street, but kept their distance from the cruiser.

“Keep on driving,” the big guy said. “Don’t speed up. Keep it slow and keep on moving.”

The group kept their distance from the car, but kept on chanting, pumping their placards. Some shook their fists at Ron and spat at the car.

“Fuck you! Fuck the War!” they yelled as the cruiser rolled by assertively.

The repugnance and disdain he felt in those that moments and in the airport itself were familiar. He had felt it before. He hoped this was not how returning home was going to be.

At age seventeen my bother hated school, but he wanted to graduate and he made decent grades. Not great ones, but decent ones. He never failed anything until his junior year. Ron didn’t like his English teacher and she didn’t like him. He failed English, but enrolled in summer school so he could graduate with his friends and his class.

It was already hot in Atlanta that first day of summer school, 1962. Temperatures were in the low nineties. Ron was still burning with anger because he had to go to summer school, the Braves baseball team was on fire, and the Viet Nam War was heating up.

He got off the city bus a few blocks from the school thinking that a walk would cool him down. The very green neighborhood grass, the blooming azaleas, and the magnolia trees about to bloom did cool off his temper. As he approached the historic red brick school, he wondered about the kids who had attended years before when it was a school for boys only. He was surely glad it wasn't that way now.

Majestic concrete lions guarded the quadruple doors which led into the building. Students were milling about and beginning a slow ascent up the stairs toward those doors. It was cool inside. The dark pine floors were worn from years of hundreds of feet passing over them. The beige walls lent their own brand of coolness and through the window to the principal's office he could see the school secretary bent over something in a ledger which seemed very important to her.

This is all going to be worth it, he thought. I will graduate on time and with my friends.

The classroom was just down the hall on the left. He saw her before she saw him. His stomach dropped and nausea swept up his throat. The carotids on his neck swelled with pulsing blood as they pumped red into his face. He walked toward the classroom anyway. What the hell, he thought. This won't be easy, but maybe we can work it out.

"Mr. Thomas, what are you doing coming into my classroom?"

Ron hesitated and almost pulled his foot back across the threshold. Thinking better of that he crossed into the room locking eyes with her and took a desk on the front row by the door. The classroom was traditional with student desks in front of the teacher's desk and chair which, in turn, were in front of the green chalk board. A pencil sharpener was screwed to the left side of the blackboard and the tray below the board held a couple of erasers of some chalk.

There were five rows of a desk/seat combination with six desks in each row; all of these were bolted to the floor. Facing the side yard which gave way to the football stadium was a wall full of windows which extended from four feet above the floor to three feet below the ceiling. The windows themselves were a good eight feet tall.

The room was dark with the ancient pine floors and mahogany molding, but bright with the morning sun. It was all familiar and Ron felt good about being there until he saw her.

He held her gaze knowing that whoever looked away first had lost this initial battle.

“Good morning, Miss Walters. I’m surprised to see you too. I hope to do good in your class this summer.”

She glanced at the other students filing in, finding desks, and settling down.

“Do well in my class? You can’t tell a noun from a verb or sentence from a paragraph.”

“Yes ma’am. I know I’m bad with the technical part but I do write good stories. Some of them are even funny. I really want to pass your class so I can graduate. I’m going to work real hard.” He was still sitting in his seat at this point. His carotids stopped pulsing.

“I don’t care if you write like Mark Twain. You will never pass any class I teach.”

His carotids picked up their beat again. He felt a sting in his eyes as he choked down the lump in his throat. Like a missile it hit the rubber band holding his chest together. In his lap one hand became a fist, the other held it down and still. His lower jaw grated back-and-forth over his top teeth. He blinked, but continued to hold her gaze.

The rustling and buzzing of the other students stopped. Silence fell like a winter fog over the class. Ron stood up and walked toward her desk. He was twice her size, one-quarter her age, and brimmed with adolescent hormonal strength.

“Then you are one fucking son-of-a-bitch teacher.”

His body and heart turned to stone. He pivoted and walked toward the door. The hand that had been a fist opened it. His right foot crossed the threshold then his left He closed the door as quietly as the moment before a bomb explodes. The sting in his eyes turned to tears and ran down his cheeks, but the dry heat of his anger quickly absorbed them as he walked down the hall and out of school.

He walked the one mile to the Marine Recruiting Station. By the time he got there he could wring the fury out of his shirt as the sweat continued to pour off him. He wanted the Marines and they wanted him. It was a perfect marriage.

The big guy was riding shotgun. He and the stocky guy kept glancing at each other with secretive smiles on their faces.

Turning to face my brother he said, "So, Marine, what do you like to drink?"

"Drink? Drink?" Ron felt his lungs fill a little deeper as that back seat became a little softer. "Hmmm....rum and Coke."

"Then rum and Coke it is!" he said. "They call me Little John. They call my partner here Billy. Nobody messes with us. I'm sure you can guess why."

"Yep. I think so. It's a pleasure, Little John. Billy. I'm Ron Thomas."

"Well, Ron Thomas. How much time you got?"

"Six hours."

"OK. That's good. We are going to take you on a tour of Los Angeles like you have never seen before."

Ron had heard something like that one other time when he went on his first night mission in Nam.

“You’ll be on a tour of the jungle like you have never seen it before,” the Lieutenant told his platoon. “Our informant brought evidence of a nest of VC right about here, with these coordinates,” he said as he pinned the spot on a wall map. “Somewhere around there is trap door access to a series of tunnels. Find it.”

“Corporal Willard,” he continued, “Your team is up next. You’ll take this one. Who you got?”

“I’ve got Mc Pharr, Boyles, and Thomas,” he answered.

Team of three, squad of nine, platoon of twenty-seven, thought Scott Boyles. With just us and the Corporal this outing must be either a sure thing or they expect casualties. Meaning us four as the casualties.

“So, Ron, you ready for this?” Scott asked.

“Ready as I’ll ever be, I reckon,” Ron answered. “If I’m not trained now, I’ll never get trained.”

There was a flurry of men as they all retreated to their hooch’s. The team to gear up. The rest of the platoon on standby for whatever might happen.

Reconnaissance missions were just that; reconnaissance. Find the enemy. Gather intelligence. Report back to the officer in charge. Do not make contact with the enemy.

The team of four camouflaged their faces, necks, hands, and every inch of visible skin with stripes of grease paint in black, grey, and gun metal green. Now the men were just shadows

among all the other shadows in the jungle. They went sterile n into the jungle that night as Force Recon did on every recon mission. Absolutely no identification whatsoever. No one wore dog tags, ID bracelets, or carried photos. There was nothing that would identify them by name, or as Marines, or as Americans. If anyone got killed or captured, he just disappeared off the face of the earth. With no identity it was as if he had never existed. His absence was never reported or acknowledged. His name was never uttered by anyone, not even a best friend. His belongings were collected and burned. That Marine simply never existed.

“Shit,” Pete said. “I’m glad we’ve got a moon, but not too much light. It’s a waning moon tonight.”

“Sure glad you know your astronomy, Pete,” Scott said. “If it weren’t for you we’d have to call it just the right amount of night light. But with you we can call it a waning moon.” Scott jostled him playfully, like he was going to box him.

Scott had been a middle weight amateur champion before he was drafted. He was a light hearted, good natured soul, but you didn’t want to cross him. He got a kick out of messing with Pete. Poor Pete, who took everything to heart and then wore it on his sleeve. How he ever got to be Force Recon was a puzzle to Ron.

“Leave me alone, man. Waning moon. Full moon. Sliver moon. Just as long as we can see our hands in front of our faces and not trip over a sleeping cobra or a hungry tiger or something worse is all I care about.”

“You mean something worse like a VC or a land mine?” Ron asked.

“Yeah, that’s what I mean.”

“Like moonlight is going to make a difference with either one of those! Either one and you’re ass is dead.”

“Ok, let’s get a move-on,” the Corporal said. “We’re burning daylight. Let’s go.”

Every man carried an automatic rifle, a pistol, and a machete. As the team approached the area of the nest they fanned out, silently working their way toward the coordinates and, hopefully, the prize. The coordinates turned out to be a clearing with clumps of foliage growing helter-skelter. Three banyan trees on the periphery of the clearing provided coverage for a host of plants and flowers intertwined with one another. Some of them had leaves like lace with tubular red flowers, giant begonia’s sported ruffled leaves twenty-four inches wide covered in bristle like hairs, roots of a shrub with bronzed leaves were growing into a tree . Moonlight fell on the men’s faces, but they faded into the shadows of the jungle around them.

Regardless of their camouflage, the men were wary of being seen. If any VC were about, they would not be easily fooled. The VC knew the difference in sound made by a human and an animal. And very few animals moved about in the night, unless they were predators looking for a meal. A breeze fluttered the tops of the trees, some of them ten feet high with waterfall vines falling from their branches to the jungle floor. The fifty feet high, vase shaped Witch Hazel, responded noisily to the breeze, which was almost a wind by the time it reached the top. The rustling gave a sense of safety, for their movements would be not be heard. Fear of discovery ran high, as it always did on night reconnaissance.

One clump of foliage had an unusual rigidity to it. Everything around it was moving with the breeze, but this group was still, like its base was permanently secured. The Corporal noticed and lifted it. Pay Dirt! The tunnels. He nodded and threw his head to the right. Ron and Scott followed him down the ladder into the nest. Pete stayed topside keeping watch.

A pot of rice was still warm on top of a burned out fire. The Cong had left in a hurry. There was one central room with three others and the tunnels branching off of it. Besides the pot

on the fire, this main circular room had baskets of rice, dried fish, berries, mangoes and tea. Clearly the VC planned to return. The three other rooms, also circular, held tables, scissors, beds, syringes, and other medical supplies. Rustic as it was, this was clearly a field hospital. Pete, Ron, and Scott each took a tunnel and went into it as far as their height would allow. Nothing in any of them. They inched their way back out. Smudging their footprints, the men climbed out and returned to the Platoon. Corporal Willard reported to the Lieutenant. Early light brought the sounds of grenades. Things blowing up.

“Let’s stop by Charlie’s,” Little John said. “He’s got plenty of everything we need and he’ll be glad to see us.”

“Good idea, but first let’s take him by Randy’s on the way. Hope you’ve got some money I your pocket!”

“Always do!”

Ron was expecting a bar, but as they rounded a curve he saw it...a giant doughnut twice the size of the building under it! “Randy’s Donuts” piped in dark brown (chocolate?) on top of a golden beige (sugar coated?) background.

“Wow!” he said. “Biggest damn doughnut I have ever seen. And if it was real, I could eat the whole thing right now! Can’t believe how long it’s been since I had one of those, of any size!”

They were all still grinning as they got out of the car and went into the doughnut shop.

“Yep,” said Billy. “The best there is. Order anything you want. It’s all on us.”

With their bags of doughnuts - glazed, sugar coated, and chocolate frosted with sprinkles- they returned to the cruiser and continued their tour.

Billy brought Ron up-to-date, “Charlie’s is next. We’re in Inglewood. A little town within the city of Los Angeles. Nice neighborhood. Good people. You’ll enjoy them.”

He turned on the blinker for a left hand turn and headed down a street toward an intersection of small shops, a restaurant, a barber shop, and Charlie’s Liquor Store. Ron marveled at the homes. Trim little houses with arched doors, porches, and windows. Made of stucco, they sported a variety of shades in terracotta, grey, white, and vanilla. Window boxes dripped flowers of reds, yellows, whites, pinks, blues, purples, and greens. Trim bushes of every size caressed each house. Sidewalks to front doors and porches beckoned passersby to come visit.

“This is Inglewood,” said Little John. “We both live here. Nice. No?”

“Nice, yes,” Ron said. “Very nice.”

Billy braked at the four-way stop. The intersection warmed Ron’s heart. He grew up near a corner like this. All the cars would stop so you could ride your bike across the street without looking. You could even skate across the street without worrying about cars. And the four-way was on his route to school which he walked to and from every day with his best friend.

At this four-way, one corner boasted a little grocery store with bins of oranges, apples, tomatoes, potatoes, and onions. Absolute necessities for any kitchen. Signs hung in the window...GROUND BEEF \$1.29 LBCHICKEN \$.49 LBWONDER BREAD \$.89.

On another corner he watched a barber snipping and combing black hair on top of a head sticking out from a large white bib. Ron was mesmerized by the barber pole as its candy stripes went round and round. Black curls fell to the floor as the barber combed and snipped the man’s

almost shoulder length hair. Ron wondered, reformed hippie? The barber's shears were so precise you could almost hear the snip-snip-snip, click-click-click. A rotund, older man with a grey moustache, the barber himself, had no hair at all. A Marine haircut in Viet Nam meant you shaved your head clean with your own knife. The same knife that shaved your face. The same knife you used anytime you needed a knife. That blade was kept sharp.

On the third corner a restaurant posted the day's specials written in chalk on a sandwich board ...Soup \$.29 ...Reuben \$1.49 ...Hamburger w/fries \$.99 ...Chicken Salad Sandwich \$1.25 ... Pie \$1.35 ...A-la-mode \$1.60 ...Cake \$.90 ...Bottomless coffee and tea \$.25. Too early for lunch, folks sat outside with each other drinking coffee at Parisian style bistro tables and inside at booths.

Catty-corner from the restaurant was Charlie's Liquor Store. This place had been around a while. The two outside walls met a cracked concrete sidewalk which sprouted a couple of weeds and some tiny yellow flowers. Buttercups, Ron guessed. In faded red cursive letters on a battered pine board over the door 'CHARLIE'S' announced the place. Large plate glass windows sported neon words like 'Pabst Blue Ribbon', 'San Miguel', and 'Jamison'. In the upper corner right beside the door 'OPEN' glowed in red, like the 'CHARLIE'S'.

Too early for lunch, Ron thought. But not too early for booze. Two guys came out the door as Billy paralleled at the curb right in front.

"Come on, Ron," said Little John. "Let's go show you off to Charlie. He loves it when you guys come home. His own son disappeared in Nam and he's real happy to know one more Marine who made it. We bring guys by here every chance we get. It really helps him."

"Yeah," said Billy. "Don't be surprised if he gives you a big ol' bear hug!"

Ron smiled. “My kind of man. Been a long time since I got a bear hug from anybody. Last bear anything I got was a claw to the face by a mama-san in Okinawa when I hit on her daughter!”

The wood frame door into “Charlie’s Liquor Store” stuck and creaked as Little John pushed it open. The “OPEN” sign swung on a chain and clanged as the three of them entered and shoved the door shut. Stale cigar and cigarette smoke had sunk so deeply into the dark wooden floors and walls that all the ceiling fan could do was mix them together. Taking up a good portion of the wall behind the cash register was a battered American flag with its white stripes slightly stained from that same stale smoke.

“Hey, Little John! Billy! Been a while! How you doin’? Whatcha’ got here? Another one trying to make re-entry? You know they really ought to debrief these guys before they send ‘em back to us! I’m an old galoot, Marine. But come on over here for a hug!”

Charlie’s warm reception was a sight better than the hostility he had experienced at the airport, but he was still glad the cops had forewarned him. This is nice, he thought. Still, close personal contact was reserved for girls and guys. Soft for the girls and brutal for the guys.

Charlie was about the size of Ron’s grandfather who had died long ago. Besides farming, Gramps had owned a pool hall in a small Kansas town. It was open only on Saturdays and served the only beer and whiskey in a fifty mile radius. Charlie’s bear hug felt all too familiar and Ron choked up a bit.

“Lost my own son in Nam and I’m mighty proud to make you boys welcome when you come home!” Charlie said.

“Mornin’ Charlie,” Billie greeted him. “Yeah, we got us another one. This one exercised some class. Laid ‘em all low, but left them breathing. And no blood.”

“Reminds me of that story you tell about you and your buddy stealing that jeep from the motor pool when you were in Nam. Remember that one? The two of you went joy riding for a hoochie night at that village bar and woke up the next day on top of a bunker outside the compound. Head pounding, barfing your guts out. No guns. No ammunition. And no jeep!”

“Yeah, but we had our lives. We never did find that jeep or figure out what happened, but we were lucky. Didn’t get caught, didn’t get killed, and the Colonel put the word out that if anybody ever heard anything about it to let him know – anonymously. No questions asked. That jeep never did show up.”

After the laughter Charlie asked, “What’s your pleasure today?”

“Our buddy here likes rum and Coke.”

“Then rum and Coke it is. Here you go. Bacardi and a carton of Coke. On the house.”

“Thanks, Charley,” Little John said. “Scotty would be proud.”

“Damn Viet Nam. I miss him every day. Damn Viet Nam!”

It had been real quiet all day. Too quiet. The word was that a large company of Cong was just on the other side of the rice paddies, but no one had seen or heard any activity all day. Ron and Scott were sent to find out why. As a recon team, they were among the best. Ron went up the path first and would be the last out when they returned. Scott was right behind him. Thirty yards into it, nothing. No sign of Cong anywhere. Fifty yards into it, nothing. No sign of Cong anywhere.

Paddies were on one side of the trail; the edge of the jungle on the other.

Bamboo trees, banana trees, banyan trees, and vines grew together like a pot of spaghetti. Dressed in black “pajamas” with black bandannas on their heads the Viet Cong climbed into the tops of this canopy. Which was shadow? Which was enemy? Ron had already learned that he wouldn’t know until he heard the pop of a gun.

Rice grew waist high in square paddies of mud. You could squat in the rice or burrow into the mud. Again, not to be seen. Burrowed into the mud, breathing through a straw made it possible to breathe and stay hidden for long periods of time.

Another fifty yards and rifles were popping, bullets were whistling. Not many. More like a few snipers in the trees. Shadows in the trees.

“Run!” Ron shouted to Scott. “Run!”

Both men took off. Ron, at six feet, six inches, most of it legs, could cover a lot more territory a lot faster than Scott who was running slower than usual. He knew Ron could get back to the rest of the guys much faster than he could.

“Get the hell on!” Scott shouted to Ron and fell behind him. “Don’t wait on me! Get on! Warn them!”

Scott was close behind as Ron stretched his legs and covered as much ground as he could as quickly as he could. Recon is recon. Never engage with the enemy. Run reconnaissance and report findings.

Walking into an ambush was not on their agenda that day. Their assignment was to scope out the lay of the land and the edge of the jungle. Being the target of enemy fire was not part of their plan. The two of them ran. .

The bullets stopped. It was quiet again. Ron reached the rest of the guys as they were scrambling for the fight. But there was no fight. And there was no Scott.

“Shit! No!” Ron hollered. “Where’s Scott?!”

Ron found him tangled in vines at the base of a goolah tree. The bullet had hit him at the base of his skull, gone through his neck and come out his throat. He lay face down in blood and the mud made by his blood mixing with dirt. Ron carried him to the edge of the field where a helicopter would come to take Scott away. Scott, an anonymous casualty. A man with a name no one would ever know.

Scott’s death was not acceptable to my brother. He struggled to make sense of it. Of course nothing made any sense in Viet Nam, but his friend’s death was not an “of course”. If he had run ahead of Ron, Ron would have taken that bullet, maybe. It was the “maybe” that got him. My brother couldn’t escape the thought that his friend died instead of him. Even knowing that things are what they are in war, he couldn’t elude the guilt. And he blamed God for Scott’s death. When a reconnaissance man is killed or missing it’s as if he never he existed. Every trace of everything that could be traced to him disappears. Ron couldn’t even write a letter to Scott’s family to let them know what happened, to tell them what a great guy Scott was, to tell them what a brave Marine and good friend he had been.

Weeks later Ron stood on top of a bunker when he was supposed to be inside with the two other men on his team. Lightning and thunder were having a frolic in the sky above him. Rain was pouring down and he was raging,, flailing his arms and yelling into the sky.

“Why?! Who do you think you are?! Why don’t you take the bad ones?! You think you are so damn powerful? Oh Yeah?! Show me just how powerful you are! Get us all the Hell out of here! You think you’re so damn powerful?! Go ahead! Show me how powerful you are! Strike me dead! You’re so fucking powerful?! Strike me dead!”

Something hit the bunker, but it wasn't lightning, and it wasn't God. It was a VC mortar shell. It blew up the bunker and the guys in it. It threw my brother into the rows of barbed wire around the bunker. His body was enveloped in a spider web of minute spears and tiny daggers which ripped his flesh in thousands of places and hundreds of pieces. He was bleeding everywhere. His whole body was one big bloody blob.

The field surgeon inhaled and exhaled deeply as the medevac guys brought Ron in on a stretcher. The doctor had been operating and repairing combat casualties for nine hours straight. He took one look at Ron and told the guys to just put my brother on the table, stretcher and all.

"Let's get him hooked up," he said. One drip held blood to refill his body, another, saline to rehydrate him, and a third, morphine to kill the pain.

Ron barely came back to consciousness as the morphine began dripping and an edge of pain lifted. The anesthesia drip began. His eyes fluttered shut as he was losing consciousness, but he heard the surgeon say, "Christ, this one looks like a damn jigsaw puzzle. Let's see if we can put the pieces back together."

Weeks later, Ron woke up in the Okinawa military hospital in a full body cast from his chin to his feet. He could see his toes and his fingers and he could wiggle them. But his head was held rigid. He couldn't turn it or nod it. Six months later after his bones grew back together and physical therapy taught his muscles how to work again he was good as new. The Marines sent him back to Vietnam.

“Thanks, Charlie,” Little John said. “We’ll be seein’ ya’. Gonna take this fella on the star-studded tour of L.A.!”

“Don’t miss the beach,” Charlie said. “He’s seen plenty of ocean, but not enough pretty girls in bikinis!”

Beverly Hills was more hills than Beverly. Yes, the rolling terrain was beautiful, but the houses and the people who lived in them were hidden behind tall fences and stucco walls. One beautiful fortress after another. Pricey real estate, but you couldn’t see it without an appointment with a realtor. Beverly Gardens Park, historic and very well attended, displayed the gardeners’ talents and commitment to growing a plethora of exquisite flowers, shrubs and tree. Roses, peonies, bougainvillea, and cactus were visible from the street.

Another group of protestors walked slowly along Santa Monica Blvd in front of the Gardens carrying placards and chanting against the war:

‘BRING THE TROOPS HOME NOW!’

‘STOP THE WAR! FEED THE POOR!’

‘NOT MY SON, NOT YOUR SON, NOT THEIR SONS!’

‘MY SON WAS KILLED IN VIET NAM! WHAT FOR?!’

‘CRUSH THE DRAFT!’

Rodeo Drive, the heart of fashion and wealth in Los Angeles, didn’t do much for Ron or his two friends. Billy and Little John had seen it a thousand times before and Ron just wasn’t interested in the lavish haute couture in either the fashion salon windows or the wanton displays of diamonds in the jewelry shops.

Leaving Rodeo Drive they were slowed by another group of hippies and flower children.

‘ONE, TWO, THREE, FOUR, WE DON’T WANT YOUR FUCKING WAR’

‘FUCK, FUCK, FUCK IT ALL! WE DON’T WANT THIS ANYMORE!’

‘USE YOUR HEAD! NOT YOUR DRAFT CARD!’

“This is bad. We’re not damn war criminals,” Ron said.

“No,” replied Little John. “They consider Johnson the war criminal. Everyone hates the war.”

“Yeah,” said Billy. “Even if the guys got drafted, they blame them. Even if they signed up to serve our country, like Little John and I did, they blame them. Us.”

“On with our tour! On to the beaches!” Billy said. “Maybe we’ll get lucky today and be leaving all this behind. Hopefully the beaches are free of this. They usually are.”

The drive to the beach took the sting out of the protests. On the way Ron saw the Forum with its huge Greek columns and seating capacity for thousands,

”Good place for a chariot race,” Ron quipped.

They passed a J.C. Penny’s that took up two square city blocks. McDonald’s hamburgers, fifteen cents, seemed to be everywhere, but Burger King and Krystal were giving them a run for their money. Even Brolly’s Cafe, with its giant, comical yellow umbrella on the roof looked like there just weren’t enough hamburgers to go around in LA. They were all packed.

Los Angeles gave Ron the feeling of really being home again. People going in and out of stores, restaurant parking lots full of cars, buses bellowing diesel smoke, every color, make and model of car on the roads. And, oh, these roads, thought Ron. A crowded raceway.

Turning onto the Pacific Coast Highway, the ocean and its beaches stretched in front of them. Tanned bodies and bodies getting tanned were everywhere. Gorgeous girls in bikinis. Strong, muscular men. Bodies on skate boards. Bodies on surf boards. Bodies on sandy volleyball courts. All alive, he thought. Everybody is so alive.

“Our favorite beach and beach bar are coming up next,” Billy said. “The Mug and Moose at Barefoot Beach. We’ll make a pit stop and soak up some atmosphere. When was the last time you saw a stacked blonde in a bikini? Barefoot Beach is full of them.”

“The Mug and Moose?” Ron said. “ Funny name.”

“Yeah. It is. They don’t use mugs and a moose is probably the last thing you’d ever see in LA! My brother-in-law, Jack, owns the place. He’s from Montana. Samantha, my sister, Sam, actually, met him on vacation about ten years ago. One summer he was working on the dude ranch she and a friend of hers went to every year up there. Love at first sight. He followed her home and never left. The food is good and the beer is cold. My sister runs the bar and he runs the restaurant.”

“What about the blondes in bikinis?”

“Dozens of them. We’ll show you.”

NO SHIRT.

NO SHOES.

NO SERVICE.

The sign hung squarely on the weathered clapboard door beat-up by the wind throwing sand and salty ocean at it. Oh good, thought Ron. My kind of place!

Inside was both swank and cozy. The mirrored wall behind the bar supported glass shelving full of the best of scotches, bourbons, rums, whiskeys, tequilas, vodkas, etc. A porch behind the bar opened to the beach as the caressing breezes lolled around the tables, chairs and the people who filled them. Inside tables for four offered a place to get away from the breeze, the sun, and the sometimes sand.

Helicopters from the near-by Air Force base battered overhead as Ron noticed the cigarette smoke, like Agent Orange, hovering from the ceiling. His eyes glazed as he seemed to look off into nothing.

Vines came out of the ground wrapping around trees, reaching out and growing into a neighboring tree. The vines on the ground were the ones to watch out for. They would trip you before you knew it and they hid the snakes. The ones that could kill you - the vipers, the kraits, the corals, and the cobras.

Chinooks were whirring overhead, releasing their potent cargo: orange smoke, Agent Orange, falling on the jungle, filtering into even the thickest undergrowth, coating everything green in the trees and on the ground. Meant for the jungle only, this pass over caught and encased the platoon. In full fighting gear, they weren't running a recon. They were looking for VC to kill. The men put on their gas masks. Ron scoffed and thought, tomorrow, you sons-of-bitches, you will all be dead, along with your goddamn forest! Agent Orange killed everything- foliage, flowers, shrubs, and Viet Cong. Only the tree trunks would still be standing when Ron and the men returned in a couple of days. The Cong had no place to hide. Their shadow-like black pajamas and head bandannas had no place to be a shadow.

A cacophony of voices from bartenders and wait staff greeted them as they walked into the Mug and Moose.

“Look who’s here!” Samantha shouted as she ran throwing her arms around her big brother’s neck.

“Hey Billy! Hey Little John! How about a cold one?” the bartender asked “We’ve missed you, man! Where you been?”

“Hey, what have you got with you?” a man said, coming out of the kitchen. “How about a cold one?” he said directly to Ron. “You look like you could use one.”

“Hey! Good to see you!” Billy and Little John said almost in unison.

“Nothing for us,” Billy said. “But our friend here could use a rum and Coke.”

“Rum and Coke or a cold beer?” Sam asked.

“I think I’ll go for that cold beer. The colder, the better, if you don’t mind me asking.”

Ron was beginning to feel better about being home. The hippies at the airport and the protestors on the tour had left him feeling skittish about fitting back into America. Was he, as well as all his comrades and buddies, going to be a scourge?

“Nothing for us,” Billy said.

“One cold one. Coming right up. German dark or a Belgian white?” the guy behind the bar said.

“German dark. Thanks!”

Ron put his elbow on the bar, picked up the pint, turned it left and right then took one polite swig then drained it. “That was mighty good! Thank you.”

“This is Ron Thomas,” Billy said. “Ron, my sister, Sam, my brother-in-law, Jack, Herbie, head bartender and Larry, his co-hort.”

Ron shook hands all around.

“Thanks again for the beer, man. I’d forgotten how good the real stuff is!”

“Ron’s on tour with us till it’s time for his plane home to Atlanta in a couple more hours. Little John and I are off duty now. Ron, here, doesn’t know, but we’ve been off since just before the hippies gave him a hard time at LAX. We happened to be in the area and decided to rescue him.”

“Like how? What happened?” came a voice from around the corner near the outside tables. “Protestors? What happened?”

“This here’s Diego, our resident son-child,” Jack said.

“Hey, wait a minute! I may be a student, but I’m no child!” Diego said. “I’ve got my draft card right here in my wallet.”

“If you’re a student,” Ron said, “you don’t need to worry about being drafted.”

“Yeah, I do. I go to college part-time and work here full time. There’s not a day goes by I don’t feel antsy about getting called up.”

“Pray the hell you don’t,” Ron said. “I’ll be praying with you!”

“Ditto that!” Billy and Little John quipped.

“Herbie,” Billy said to the guy pulling the draught, “We want Ron to go home knowing how good we are in LA!”

Herbie filled Ron’s pint. Ron drained it.

Herbie filled it again.

Everybody laughed, slapping Ron on the back.

Sam’s laughter was like birdsong to Ron. Happy. Melodic. Joyful.

The men’s guffaws were warm and friendly.

“Hey Joe, fix up a special!” Sam hollered to the kitchen. “Twenty ounce T-bone with all the trimmings!”

“Coming right up!” Joe answered.

“So, how’s it been, Ron?” Jack asked, leaning on the bar. “Billy, here, had a bumpy road when he came home.”

“He ain’t kidding,” Billy said. “Skinny as a rail, but fitter than ever. Look at me now,” he said, patting his round belly. “I do love Randy’s! Couldn’t sleep a wink though. Nightmares every night. I stayed home with the family the first six months or so. Used to scare the hell out of them waking up, screaming in the night every night.”

“We didn’t mind!” exclaimed Sam. “We were just so glad to have you back with us and not dead or worse. At least we knew what happened to you. “

“Yeah,” said Larry. “My baby brother is MIA. Been about three months now. Army. Artillery. We just keep looking for him. Hoping to hear something.”

“Sorry, man,” Ron said. I’m in polite company now, he thought. Gotta’ watch my mouth. “Really sorry. He could turn up any day. I truly hope he does.”

“We all hate this damn war,” Sam said. “Everybody we know either’s lost somebody or still got somebody over there.”

“So, what about the hippies at the airport?” Diego went back to that subject.

Billy related the story. “It was beautiful. Ron here performed like a well-oiled ninja machine.”

Samantha looked squarely into Ron’s eyes. Her own moistened. “We hate the war, but we don’t hate you.”

Ron looked just as squarely into hers. “Thank you.”

Joe came out of the kitchen carrying a tray full of steaming food. “Here ya’ go! One Mug and Moose special!”

The T-bone was just the way Ron liked it! Thick. Tender. Juicy. Medium rare.

End

The Poem

“Don’t you owe me a poem?” he said in that telling way. Not the asking way.

I’d rather owe you a kiss, I thought, but said, “Yes, I do. How about next week?”

“Sounds good.”

If you only knew. I smiled and said, “See you then,” as I walked out of the classroom.

No doubt about it, I definitely had a crush on my French professor. Needing another class in a foreign language toward my MFA in Intercultural Literature, I decided to put my two years of undergraduate French to good use and take this class in French poetry. There’s nothing more beautiful than French literature...poetry, short stories, whatever. Who knew I’d be watching poetry in motion two days a week sitting front row, center?

It was rugged poetry perhaps, but poetry just the same. There was a sensuality about him that defied handsomeness. Clearly he was a tennis player. Only tennis players and dancers moved with that fluidity. I saw pain in the depth of his eyes, but he had a quick smile that could make anyone feel good about being alive. Grey scurried about his still thick, wavy black hair. He was taller than me, wider than me, thicker than me, and his hands were bigger than mine. At five feet, nine inches myself, I felt petite and fragile beside him. Yoga kept me slender and my longish, tawny red hair still glistened with highlights, none of them gray yet.

After a weekend of rehearsing my chosen poem at home, I still wanted some help on a word or two. Besides, an appointment with him meant we would be alone in his office.

So, this is the sanctuary? I mused to myself as I walked in for our appointment. His office was typical of most professors in the foreign language department...shelves hemorrhaging books and a potpourri of treasures from around the globe. *Did he hold my hand a little longer than necessary?* I hoped as he greeted me. I sat across from him, locked into the warmth of his eyes. *There's no pain. They are sparkling!*

"Let me see your mouth again. I need to know how the lips move," I instructed him.

"Sure," he replied from the other side of his desk, the other side of his protective shield.

"Say it again," said I.

"*Il pleur*" his lips pursed as if to form a kiss. "*dan mon*" completing the kiss. "*coeur*" the lips parted, awaiting another. "*Il pleur dan mon coeur*" kiss completed. "It is raining in my heart."

Chocolate rich, his eyes beckoned me. Then, standing, from the other side of his desk, he dismissed me. "Jeannie, I am an academic."

Damn, I thought. *There goes that. Flirtation over.* But I smiled and said, "Of course. Thank you for helping me with this. I will be ready to recite."

Coming back to college after a shattering divorce, I felt like an old woman at 33, surrounded by virginal 18, 19 and 20 year olds. I had no idea what I wanted to do with the rest of my life, but I knew I wanted adventure and true love. I wanted to know someone intimately and be known by them. I wanted "forever".

I'd been on a few dates, but said "goodnight" with the crater in my gut deeper than before. School satisfied some of the longing and my fantasy life helped, but there was still a rasping loneliness walking with me.

Two days a week, sitting in his class, I lived with this bold, invisible line. This line that wouldn't be crossed. Not by him. Not by me. Two days a week I sat in his class soaking him in. The broad shoulders. The big biting teeth. The flex of his hips. The breadth of his hands. I was falling in love with my professor.

This man is smart. He knows who he is. He is comfortable in his own skin. There's nothing sexier. I want him.

Near the end of the semester I requested another appointment on the pretext of a homework assignment. My hope was that he would open the conversation for other possibilities. I knew my eyes would betray my ulterior motive, but I was ready to risk rejection.

After getting through my smoke screen, he congratulated me on my decision to return to school, "It's an act of courage, facing the mirror every day, wondering if you will ever find out what it is you '...want to be when you grow up.' Long hours of solitude, which studying forces on us, confronts our demons...and our angels."

Then the bomb, "I like you. I like you a lot. I've been single a long time, it's hard to meet people, but I don't date students. College transforms us. Students, regardless of age or degree, are vulnerable caterpillars in a chrysalis. I'm waiting for a butterfly."

Ouch! "Maybe I'll be one one day." I couldn't believe I said that!

"I know you will." *Did he really say that?* I left his office, our eyes meeting in a silent kiss.

Final exams were coming up. That meant late night hours in the library.

"Jeannie....wake up!" my friend, Lynn, whispered as she jostled my shoulder. "You're asleep with your eyes open. It's him, again, isn't it?"

“Yes,” I sighed with one last glance out the library window. Class with him was more exciting than ever. I caught him staring at me...my stomach fluttered. He touched my shoulder as I walked into class...my thighs melted. He asked me a question...my throat constricted.

“Look, girl,” she advised, “you’re lonely and you’re losing focus. You have two more semesters. Why don’t you write a book? A book won’t keep you warm at night, but it will keep your brain working, your hands busy, and your ass out of trouble.”

I chuckled. Lynn knew me all too well.

So, I started the book. It did keep my brain working (as if school wasn’t enough!), and my hands busy, but out of trouble? Not so much. I sometimes think I got myself into trouble just for the adventure of getting myself out.

After that last meeting with him, I’d begun dating a myriad of men. I met them everywhere...the grocery store, church, the tennis court. They seemed to be coming out of the woodwork. Serial monogamy was beginning to look like promiscuity. I got caught making out in a janitor’s closet, the top floor stairwell of a ten story law building, an elevator and a car in the basement of an art museum parking garage. All this passion and adventure was just a diversion from the emptiness I couldn’t escape. I wanted more. I still wanted him.

As the next semester began, I focused on classes and the book. My classes and classmates were more fun than any of those men had been and the book was filling up those screaming hollow spaces.

Alone, I found refuge at my desk. Internet radio kept me company with Mozart and Harry Connick, Jr. *Word* talked to me as fast as I could type. Those words stumbled out, marched out or poured out. With those words I could see me, hear me, touch me. Sometimes I laughed out loud, the words were so silly. Sometimes I cried. Memories were on stage with the curtains open,

no longer closed. Sometimes I just gave myself an “atta’ girl” for some brilliant metaphor or for finally completing a chapter. The old boyfriends were lost to the ether land and even “he” appeared mostly in haze. *A haze through a chrysalis?*

Facing my final semester as I completed the book, I decided to take another class with him. I wanted to know if the chemistry had been real or had I just been so lonely that my fantasy life was my only life?

“Jeannie! How good to see you!” He beamed at me as I walked through the door. *The door to his class. The door to his heart?* We shook hands while exchanging the French left cheek/right cheek kiss. “I’m very happy to see you too,” I said as I took a familiar seat, front row, center.

He still looks good. I thought as I drank him in. Those hands! They were not just hands today, but instruments of pleasure and I wanted to sing. I watched him pace. I watched his mouth move, his eyebrows lift, and his lips curve ear to ear. For 90 minutes he lectured, but I heard nothing. Nothing but my own breathing, and those gossamer wings beating inside my belly. Wings of expectation for flight to pleasures unknown.

“Come,” he said. “Walk with me to my next class. Let’s catch up.”

“Thanks, I’d like that.” *Beakers were vibrating. Test tubes were boiling over.*

“I’ve missed seeing you,” he said. “How are your classes coming along?”

Atoms were splitting. “Good,” I said. “I’m almost finished with my MFA. Just this semester and then thesis. Soon I won’t be a student anymore. I won’t know what to do with myself.”

“I have some ideas. Shall we have coffee in the morning?”

End

Boogie Woogie Blues

It was 1924 and they had too much money. That was the problem. Not that it was 1924, but that they had too much money. Even worse, neither one of them had ever had to work for it.

The debutante season in Raleigh ensured that Josey would marry well and never need to make her own way in the world. Petite and shapely with sapphire blue eyes and a smile that lit up a room, her dance card was always full and thus, by default, recorded the names of all the young men pursuing her. Besides being charming and beautiful, she was rich. Her family was rich, that is. Her mother was in Junior League, the Hospital Auxiliary, and was a Daughter of the American Revolution. Josey would be the same by legacy. Her father sat on the boards of banks and hospitals. Josey did not have any money of her own yet, but she would when she came of age or married, whichever came first.

All of the young men at the debutante balls bored her. Vanity and putting on airs consumed them. They were much too concerned with impressing everyone and took themselves much too seriously.

“Coming out” was more trouble than it was worth. Party after party. Dress after dress. Constant attention to one’s manners. Saying the right thing to the right person. Not to mention the thank you notes that had to be written after each one of them sounding original, individual, and fresh. Josey barely had time to rest up from one gathering before it was time for the next. Not that she minded social events. She did not. She loved them. What she minded was having to be nice to people who did not interest her and who could see life’s future no further than the nose on their face. The whole purpose of debutante balls and coming out was to find a promising young man to marry.

She was not looking for a promising young man. She was not looking for a Prince. She wanted a King. While she waited for him to appear in her life she attended the Beaumont School for Young Ladies followed by earning a teaching certificate from the University of North Carolina. A King would not want a giddy girl to train into womanhood. He would want a woman who understood the business of the world, the importance of holding her own in a contentious conversation, and, at the same time, charm anyone into joining her side of a debate. She wanted a man of means. Not someone yet to come into his own.

Home with her family after graduation, she welcomed the frequent dinner parties given by her parents. Eloquent in every detail, these dinners brought important people and assured her place of dignity and esteem in the social circle she shared with her parents, Marjorie and Fred Sapp. Politics, finance, and fashion lit up every conversation and Josey had knowledge, savvy, and sparkle to add just the right amount of brightness. Wherever she was engaged laughter punched the conversation.

The dining table was set for as many as sixteen for formal dinners. Hand embroidered linens from Paris, sparkling crystal from Austria, gleaming silver from England, and deliciously fragrant roses mixed with peonies, lavender, jasmine, and bougainvillea dressed the dining table. Dinner itself was simple and incredibly delicious. Clear soup followed by oysters or smoked trout, followed by a meat of some sort with pilaf or an au gratin and some sort of vegetable with hollandaise or butter sauce. Desert, however, was outrageous. A flaming chocolate something, or lemon something, or something else flaming in liqueur was usual. Cigars and brandy for the men, cream sherry for the ladies, and a string quartet with dancing were enjoyed by all in the music room. As the evening wore on someone would play a Charleston on the piano.

Josey met her king at one of these dinner parties. She had been waiting for a man of means. A man of stature. Jeremiah Sapp was just such a man. Three time her age and a tobacco baron, he had traveled the world, spoke fluent French, and had quadrupled the wealth he inherited as a young man. That inheritance was all in cotton, but he saw the promising future of tobacco. He earned the acknowledgement “tobacco baron” by switching out thousands of acres of cotton for the tobacco leaf and then curing it in the best barns in three states.

Best of all for Josey, Jeremiah recognized grace, poise, and deportment. He wasn't fooled by batting eyelashes and coy posture. Josey was lively, lovely, intelligent, and lived life with intention. Granted her intent was to make even the dullest task fun, but she did it with purpose. He was charmed.

A widower without children, Jeremiah set about courting Josey with gifts, flowers, and horseback rides in the country. With her parents' blessing, they married three months after they met. The wedding was the social event of the year. Everybody who was anybody was invited. There must have been eight-hundred guests. There was music, champagne, bourbon, whiskey, scotch, gin, and every kind of Southern food.

Jeremiah died just after their first anniversary, leaving her childless, but very, very rich. Jeremiah's money plus her own left Josey very, very, very rich.

The plantation house, she knew, would be her home for the rest of her life. The tobacco business, she knew, would be handled by the trustees and managers. She need only spend the money. Dinner parties, cocktail parties, bridge parties, tea parties...these need never stop. Shopping trips with her mother would now include New York, France and Italy. Josey was no longer tethered to the obligations of marriage and her father was more than happy to let his wife travel with their daughter.

Emerson Stuart was in medical school and his wealth was all in trust: stocks, bonds, and several thousand acres of Carolina cotton. The cotton fields were leased to sharecroppers. His father and the trustees were interested only in the cash coming in from the cotton sales. Owning the land, then leasing it out was an effortless way of making a living.

Emerson's father had known Josey's husband. When Jeremiah died Emerson homed in on Josey like an English Spaniel pointing at a covey of quail.

The wake gave Emerson a chance to look over her estate and tangible assets. The plantation house was as impressive as his. Both had long dirt driveways lined with live oak trees. Milling about the expansive parlor, dining room, music room, and library, he waited his turn to express his condolences. Emerson saw that with her money and his he actually could leave medical school and never have to work.

Medical school was his father's idea anyway. He never wanted to be a doctor, but his father seemed to think he needed an occupation. Emerson remembered that last and final argument with his father. The one he lost.

It was the summer of 1920. Prohibition had just come into law and everybody was not happy about it. How it was going to affect Emerson's social life was anyone's guess, but surely the constant supply of bourbon, rye, whiskey, and gin would not be a problem for his social set. After all, he thought, money can fix anything.

Emerson, Sr., doted on his son. His wife had died in the typhoid crisis that swept the country in 1900, leaving him with little else but an empty home, empty heart, extreme wealth, and a son in grade school. He quickly arranged the plantation's affairs to run without constant attention from him. He wanted to play with and raise his son himself. Emerson, Jr. grew up rescued from every scrape and misfortune he got himself into.

“Son, I want you to go to medical school. I am nowhere near dying and you need an occupation.”

“Why, Father, why? I am perfectly happy spending my days with my friends and you. Surely there is value in training the dogs, showing the horses, and leading the hunt. I am also your best excuse for avoiding the money mongering widows, not to mention the young vipers. All of them rustling in the bushes to get their claws into you. Why can’t we keep things the way they have been? The way they are? I like my life the way it is.”

“I know Emerson. You need to start getting serious about life. You need an occupation. A medical degree will give you something useful to do and install a level of respect and dignity you can get nowhere else. You are going to medical school. You will be a doctor. You will do this or you will find yourself severely without funds for the rest of your life. Don’t worry. I won’t disinherit you or cut you off completely. But I am going to see to it that you have no way to continue your carefree, worry-free life style.”

Emerson went to medical school.

Finally it was Emerson’s turn to express his condolences to Josey. To the widow.

“I am so very sorry for your loss,” Emerson said taking Josey’s right hand. She noticed how he pressed it softly between both of his. But not too softly. She appreciated the feel of his strength.

“Thank you,” she said. She liked the tenor of his voice, his black, wavy hair, and warm, moist eyes. She inhaled deeply, exhaling as they gazed at one another.

They married one year and one week after Josey’s prescribed one year of mourning. Town gossips and polite society forgave them this slight affront to propriety. Yes, they had waited one year and one week to marry, but the courtship began barely a month after Jeremiah was buried.

“Really,” she said. She was Dorothy Duvall, president of Junior League. “I know neither of them is getting any younger and they both want to get a family started. Courting while in mourning is barely forgivable. What do they expect from us?”

“I know. It is a bit too much. Courting during mourning. But they are both at prime age right now and you know her parents and Emerson, Sr., are dying to have grandchildren. They need someone to leave their fortunes to,” Ione bargained.

“Their millions, you mean, don’t you, Ione?” said Estelle.

Estelle was in the Tuesday afternoon bridge cub. She was talking to Ione Smithe, treasurer of the Hospital Auxiliary. “Give them a break. Some understanding. After all, Josey has to be disappointed that she and Jeremiah didn’t conceive and then he up and died on her!” she continued.

“I suppose you’re right,” Dorothy said. “They did wait to marry. I supposed it didn’t do any harm for them to court like they did.”

“Bravo,” said Estelle. “Let’s be happy for them. Maybe Josey will be just what Emerson needs. Calm him down a bit. Make him take life a little more seriously.”

“Yes,” said Ione. “The only things he’s ever been serious about are when is the next hunt and will they run out of bourbon!”

They all laughed in agreement.

One year after the wedding Josey and Emerson had their first baby. Emerson Daniel Stuart III. Danny. Following two more boys, Calvin and Drew, Lady was born. Named Josephine after her mother, Josey gave her baby daughter the nickname to remind her three older brothers that their sister was a girl.

Josey was as good a mother as she could be given her frivolous, playful approach to life. The maids (there were three of them plus a cook) saw to it that the house stayed spotless, the clothes stayed cleaned, mended, and pressed and the things needed for any spontaneous gathering were always ready: silver polished, china sparking, linens starched, and fresh flowers in every room. The cook turned out scrumptious meals and kept the pie-safe filled with pies, cakes, cookies, and biscuits. All four of them stayed on duty with the children and looked after the serious side of child rearing.

Parthenia looked after the serious side of Josey. Josey loved, adored, and worshipped her children. She had wanted them so badly and knew she was lucky to have such easy pregnancies and births. Morning sickness lasted only a few weeks and labor was quick with no complications. Parthenia had been her mother's maid who, for all intents and purposes, had raised Josey. She dressed her, bathed her, potty trained her, taught her to say please and thank you even before Josey's mother started teaching her manners. Arithmetic and reading were a priority for Parthenia. She taught Josey to count to ten by the time she was three.

Josey was as good a mother as she could be given her light hearted, playful approach to life. She didn't spank, yell, scold, or otherwise rein her children in. There were others to do that: the maids and their father.

Josey did rush to her children when there was a boo-boo needing a kiss to heal.

Confusing: the sentence seems to say that “someone” gave the kisses to heal the boo-boo. She fretted when they got colds or had a fever. Or, like Calvin did one spring, jump into a pond before learning to swim. Josey had taken them on a picnic to collect tadpoles from the big pond not too far from the house. Parthenia had packed a fabulous lunch of ham sandwiches, raisins, and cookies. Josey and the children set off for the pond with her carrying the picnic basket and Danny carrying the jug of lemonade. Calvin carried a jar to put the tadpoles in and Drew carried a net to scoop them up. Lady was too young for such an adventure. Josey left her at home with the maids, asleep in her crib.

“Come on boys,” she said. “Let’s go wading! Take off your shoes and socks and roll up your pants, but stay at the edge to wade. Don’t go deeper than your ankles, you hear? Don’t go deeper than your ankles.”

Calvin gave his mother that mischievous ‘dare me’ grin common to five year old boys just before they do exactly what they have just been told not to do. Calvin flopped belly first into the pond.

“Calvin!” Josey screamed and fell into the water herself to drag him out.

Sputtering and grinning from ear to ear Calvin said, “That’s was fun Mama! Can I do it again?”

“Absolutely not!” his mother said. “It will soon be summer and I’ll teach you to swim when the weather gets hot.”

Living on hundreds of acres, with thousands more leased to cotton and tobacco growers, the four children and their mother often played on the expansive side yard of the house. The front

yard was dusty because of the drive and not near as cool as the shade from the two hundred year old magnolia trees in the side yard. Besides there were flower beds, a vegetable garden, and they could see Parthenia watching them from the kitchen window. Their mother dashed about the lawn playing hide-and-seek, swing-the-statue, and blind-man's-bluff. Josey refereed races, organized tea parties, and read stories lying in the shade of two hundred year old magnolia trees.

Josey leaned against the trunk of a dogwood tree, 'home base', and warned them, "Ya'll run and hide while I count to fifty. Then I'm coming to find you!"

Danny was usually the first to run for home, but if Josey caught him she cried, "Allee, allee in free! Danny's IT under the tree!"

The race from the flower bed to the tire swing was always a 'fall down and giggle' before anyone could win because the 'referee' would catch them all, one-by-one, and tickle them.

At supper time, they all came in, washed up, and sat at a table set properly with linens, china, silver, crystal, and fresh flowers. Emerson joined them most nights, though he was occasionally held up by a golf game or riding his horse with his father. Eating family style, meals were informal, but prepared by Parthenia.

Josey saw to it that her children learned proper deportment at the dinner table. They learned which fork to use and how to hold it, to not chew with their mouth open and to swallow their food before talking. They learned to keep their elbows off the table, their napkin in their lap, and to excuse themselves before blowing their nose.

Parthenia loved cooking in Josey's kitchen. Their electric ice box, made by Frigidaire, was one of the first in Raleigh. The pie safe was big enough to hold all the pastries she wanted to make. The water ran into the house without her having to pump it and the gas stove made controlling the heat a simple task, unlike the wood burning stove she cooked on at home.

Emerson also adored his children, but he could be thoughtless and seemingly uncaring when their lives interfered with his schedule for a hunt or equestrian show. When his calendar was free and he had not been drinking, he played boisterously with them. When the bourbon took over Josey was there to charm him, curb any bad judgment he may insist on, and deflect the surliness that sent her children hiding behind the maids' skirts.

The four maids alternated days off and one weekend each month they were all off. There was no help at all. Those two days found the family eating out, visiting grandparents, and going to parks.

Both Josey and Emerson left the serious day-to-day raising of the children to the maids, as they saw their role as being the fun part of the children's lives. This attitude was not without reproach from grandparents and friends, as well as church and town gossips.

"Really, Josey," her mother would say, "you mustn't leave all the spanking to the maids. They need to know their mother means business too."

At the bridge table her friends would tell her that all of her children exercised too much free will and she should rein them in.

"But," she would reply, "I love how spirited they are. I don't want them to be shy and oppressed. They are learning their manners and their school lessons. The rest of life should be fun for them."

At church she let them stand on the pew and sing as loudly as they wished. Church men raised their eyebrows. Church women shook their heads and gave Josey stern looks. The pastor, Reverend Clarkson, smiled. Emerson and Josey tithed large amounts of money to his church every year and never missed an appeal for funds for special situations. They were his most generous parishioners. "Generous of spirit and God's blessings," was how he described it.

Emerson's father would quip, "Now, son, I know you love the boys, but you need to set an example of serious business for them. Life isn't all play, you know."

Emerson's serious business was occasionally looking over the financial records of the plantation with his father or organizing some sort of hunt. Josey kept up with who was doing what in Raleigh, which parties were not to be missed, and who was hosting the newest, most exciting social events. The latest buzz was about the new speakeasy on the edge of town. Most of the women in her bridge clubs had already been.

It was a lazy summer Saturday. Josey and the children had just returned from lunch with her parents and were down for a nap. Emerson had come in from a horseback ride and was pouring himself a tall bourbon when his wife joined him in the library. His favorite room. He had occupied himself in this room while he waited to greet Josey, the widow, at her husband's wake. Apart from that sentimental twinge, he loved the luxury which encompassed everyone who entered the library. Dark mahogany, with a deep rich patina filled the room on three sides with floor-to-ceiling bookcases holding dozens of first editions. Jeremiah's massive desk, which was now his, looked into the room from a wall of windows and a portrait of Josey which her late husband had commissioned a prominent artist to paint. A thick, deep red Oriental rug filled the center of the room on which sat two brown leather wing back chairs in front of the desk. Behind them, near the far wall of books were two separate clusters of four captains' chairs, each with a sizeable round table in the middle of each cluster. Two separate bridge games could be played or extra chairs gathered round for poker.

Josey greeted her husband with a soft kiss. Emerson took another long sip of his bourbon.

“There is a new dance club on the edge of town,” she said. “Everyone’s talking about it. And I mean everyone! Most of my two bridge clubs have already been and Ginny and Robert were there last weekend and she said it was altogether too much fun! The band was terrific – they knew every possible kind of dance music and the food was good. Mostly just steaks, but good. They are going again tonight. They absolutely loved it and everybody was there! We could meet them.”

Sipping from his drink he mused, “Hmmm. We could have a few drinks, some dinner, and trip-the-light-fandango. Sounds good to me.” He took another long sip.

“I’ve got that new dress I bought with Mother last week. It shimmy shakes and does wonders for my eyes. You’ll just love it and won’t be able to resist me!” She never tired of flirting with Emerson.

“I couldn’t resist you in a flour sack, Josey.” He kissed her forehead. “Call Aunt Edith to come stay with the children and we’ll head out around six.”

Throwing her arms around his neck lifted her off the floor and almost spilled his drink. He twirled her around the room till they were both dizzy and she set off to the phone. He took another long sip, which almost emptied his glass. Better fill this up, he thought. And he did.

The phone and Josey’s writing desk were in her office between the parlor and the music room. Pink and pale yellow silk draperies hung on either side of the window facing the side yard where she always played with the children. It warmed her to look out and remember some funny or exacting moment she’d had with one or more of them. A floral chintz, which stood on its own but complimented the other colors in the room, covered her desk chair, while the two occasional chairs picked up the pinks and yellows in the draperies. An oriental silk rug predominantly

green, but reflecting the florals covered the floor, pulling the entire room together. She relaxed into her chair and dialed the phone.

Aunt Edith was her mother's sister. She never married and, of course, had no children. She was engaged once to a man from Little Rock. Long distance romances rarely work and he failed to show up for the wedding. After feeling humiliated and sad for a couple of years, she came out of her grief still a loving, kind person.

“Hello, Aunt Edith? Emerson and I want to go to that new dance club everyone is talking about. Could you be here around six to look after the children?” Josey's shoulders tightened then drooped. She struggled to keep her voice smooth, “No? Your pastor is coming to dinner? Oh, well, thank you anyway. Give Father Clarkson our regards. Do you know what Aunt Louise is doing tonight?”

Aunt Edith never said “no” to Josey. Hundreds of times she changed her plans to accommodate whatever Josey wanted. But not tonight. Father Clarkson had recently lost his wife and, as a prominent member of his congregation and the altar guild, she needed to reach out as a friend to comfort him.

Josey opened her phone book.

Aunt Louise was playing bridge.

Josey's mother was too tired after shopping all day.

Emerson's father's gout was acting up.

Aunt Beatrice had a splitting headache.

Aunt Deirdre had eaten something that was disagreeing with her.

“Emerson! What shall we do? I really want to go so very much. Ginny said the Johnsons are celebrating their anniversary there tonight and Bubba Lancaster is turning the big three-0

with a whole party of his rowdy friends. I'm glad we weren't invited to that party! Bubba always means trouble, but the place will be jumping and be so exciting!"

The blank stares on both their faces lit up at the same time. Josey could see the wheels turning in Emerson's head. When he had been drinking, his ideas were rarely sound, but they were always fun.

"Let's take them with us! Yes, let's!"

"How can we? No, we can't."

"Sure we can for just an hour or two!"

"Maybe. No, Emerson, we just can't."

"We could wait until they were really good and asleep. You know they never wake up. Come on. It'll be fine."

"OK," Josey finally agreed. She really did want to go. "Maybe for just a couple of hours. Just long enough to see what it's all about."

It was set. Josey called the children for a cold chicken picnic on the lawn. The cook always left plenty of food in the ice box for these weekends. Good thing, as Josey couldn't cook. Besides the chicken they had potato salad, deviled eggs, celery stuffed with pimiento cheese, pickles, and cold biscuits with honey. These weekends always meant that a chocolate cake, apple pie, and spice cookies were waiting for them in the pie safe.

Josey still wasn't sure about this. What if something happened? How safe would the children really be? In spite of that she was beside herself with anticipation.

Emerson watched her. When she was excitedly happy like this, he loved her all the more. Any qualms he had about leaving the children were pit aside. He wanted Josey to be happy.

Having surrendered to the idea of taking the children with them, Josey was thinking about how much fun the new speakeasy would be, how good she would feel in the new dress, and how much fun the children would have staying in a hotel and having room service at breakfast. Her surrender was complete.

“Children! Danny, Drew, Calvin, Lady,” he called the children to him. “Want to go on an adventure tonight? Sleep in a hotel?”

A chorus of excited young voices exploded, “Yes! What adventure? What is it? Sure! You bet! Yeah! When are we going?”

Packing for a quick overnight was easy, but Josey took time to think it through: pajamas, shirts, pants, socks. She hesitated. What if this is not the thing to do, she thought. A dress and socks for Lady. What if we really should not do this? Oh, it will be fine, she convinced herself once again. Hair brush. Comb. Tooth brushes.

With their bags packed, they all piled into the car and set off on their adventure. The “Floozy” side of town deserved its name. Save for one ice cream parlor and a couple of restaurants, this side of town was definitely a part of town for adults only. Emerson parked in front of the ice cream shop.

Drew: “I’m having chocolate!”

Calvin: “Uh-uh! I’m having chocolate!”

Danny: “I’m the oldest! I’m having the chocolate! It’s my birthright!”

Calvin: “Yeah? Well, I saw the ice cream shop first! So I get the chocolate!”

Drew: “You did not! I saw it first!”

Danny: “It doesn’t matter who saw it! I am the oldest! I get the chocolate!”

Emerson, collaring each one of them in turn, said “Whoa there, boys! There is plenty of chocolate ice cream for everyone! This is a big enough ice cream parlor with more than enough chocolate for everyone. We can all have chocolate!”

“No, Papa,” said Lady. “I want banilla,”

Wide-eyed, the children watched hungrily as the soda-jerk scooped big rounds of ice cream for them all. Walking with the children while they polished off their cones, Josey and Emerson noticed that this side of town was definitely not for families. There was nothing for families or children. No parks. No department stores. No drug stores. Not even a five-and-dime. Since prohibition honkytonks, burlesques, and speakeasies weren’t advertised, but you could tell by the lanterns over heavy doors where they were. Each of those doors had a sliding window. Arriving guests and patrons were approved before being admitted.

Checking into the hotel, Emerson got a two bedroom suite with a parlor in between, perfect for their room service breakfast the next morning.

“Be good, don’t fight, and go right to sleep at bed time, and you can have strawberries, and orange juice and pancakes with honey and maple syrup for breakfast in the morning,” their mother bribed, rattling off their favorites as they entered the suite.

For a first time in a hotel, the children were not disappointed. The adventure of the evening went on and on. There were soft rugs on the parlor floor for rolling around and wrestling, a table with a lamp and telephone on it, a sofa, two chairs, and best of all, a table with four chairs for drawing and coloring and eating. This is where they would have their room service breakfast when morning came and Josey had promised them strawberries and pancakes. Two bedrooms opened off the parlor. Each one had a brass bed with rugs, a reading chair and side table.

“Children,” Josey said as she corralled them into the bedroom, “it is very important to go right to sleep so we can have more fun tomorrow and strawberries for breakfast!”

“Don’t worry, Mama,” Danny said. “I’ll make everybody go right to sleep.”

With Lady in a crib and the boys all three in the big bed, their mother read The Little Engine That Could and The Little Red Hen. They said their prayers and Josey sang ‘hush-a-bye, don’t-you-cry....’ just as she did every night. The bedtime stories were stories of courage and cooperation. Josey hoped the four of them would go to sleep with pleasant thoughts in their heads rather than dreaming of bogie men lurking under the strange beds.

All of the children always slept through the night, Emerson remembered, as he poured himself a drink from the bottle of bourbon he brought with him and quickly drank it down. Anyway, in hotels like this one, you just didn’t have to worry about safety. If the children were asleep, they couldn’t possibly get into trouble, Emerson reasoned with himself.

Pouring himself another bourbon he waited impatiently for Josey. Pacing the floor he couldn’t help but notice the inordinate amount of time it was taking her to get the children to sleep. He was anxious and wanted to get on to the club. He wasn’t normally anxious about going out. He poured himself another.

Finally, she appeared from the children’s room, but now had to get herself dressed. Whatever is this about, he wondered, pouring a fourth. At home they had only to dress and leave for wherever they were going. Just exactly what is this waiting all about?

As much as Josey wanted to go to this new club, she felt tightness in her throat. We have never done anything like this before, she thought. The children have never in their lives been alone. They have always been with someone. One of the maids. Aunt Edith. Mother. But it is just for a couple of hours and they all always sleep through the night, she reasoned with herself.

Just as Josey came out of the bedroom in that smashing new dress, the one that made her irresistible, a child stirred. No one woke up.

Emerson was forming an idea through an alcoholic haze. He explained it to Josey as he walked toward the suite closet. Josey didn't like it, but he had agreed to this evening, something she wanted, so she agreed to his idea, something he wanted. He took a sheet from the suite closet shelf and began tearing it into strips. With strips in hand they slipped quietly into the children's room.

They tied each boy at the ankle with one end of a strip and the other end of that strip to a spindle at the bottom of the bed. They made double and triple knots tight enough the boys couldn't untie them. Lady was not climbing out of her own crib at home so they saw no need to tie her in.

Oh, how I hope they don't wake up, Josey thought. Would they be scared or think it was a game? Would they cry?

Emerson had quaffed his two bourbon ago, so he wasn't thinking at all. He just wanted to get gone.

Tiptoeing out and kissing briefly, they listened to the soft regular snuffling of their four beautiful children. Emerson held the door as his wife swished into the hall toward the elevator. He weaved behind her. Only the best people stay here, he thought. The children will be fine.

Lush green carpet was under foot. Flocked wall paper dressed the walls. Mirrors and tables adorned with wood inlay graced the hall tables. A life size statue in tasteful art nouveau nudity stood between the two elevators. In no time an elevator door opened and a boy in a red cap, red jacket, and black pants said, "Going down."

"Good evening," Emerson replied as he and Josey stepped inside.

The president of Junior League, Dorothy Duvall, and her husband, Bertram, several lending officers from their own bank and their wives, as well as the bank's president, Fred Smithe and his wife, Ione, were milling about the lobby, drinks in hand. Emerson's father's doctor, Jason Long, and some other pillars of Winston Salem were chatting near the bar. Josey and Emerson exchanged pleasantries all around and caught a cab to the new club where they joined their friends, Ginny and Robert.

They were excited to see what everyone was talking about. After being approved by the eyes in the door's window they entered a silent foyer where they were approved one more time before being admitted. The club was grand. More than they expected. White linen tablecloths covered intimate round tables with that kiss of elegance by barely brushing the floor. Candles, fresh roses, and royal blue velvet chairs completed the scene. The band was playing a Charleston, crystal chandeliers were everywhere and the place was alive with laughter, conversations, and people having fun.

"Wow! This club is everything you said, Josey! Let's get this party going!" exclaimed Emerson as he ordered champagne and swooped Josey onto the dance floor. This is going to be a great night, he thought.

Ginny and Robert had saved seats at their table and proposed a champagne toast to fun. Bubba invited them for birthday champagne. The Johnsons insisted that they sit with them long enough for a champagne toast to their anniversary.

Josey and Emerson danced, drank with their friends, and talked to all the important people in their social circle. No one asked about the children. Still feeling concern mixed with guilt, Josey was riding on the assumption that these people weren't even thinking about children.

She tried to not think about her own, but her stomach knotted when she did. Please, please, please be asleep and stay asleep for just an hour more, she pleaded to the Great Unknown.

The Charleston, a waltz, the tango. They danced to everything the band could play. In between dances a plate of crudités and boiled shrimp arrived at their table. They ate and followed that with filet mignon and finally crème brulee. She lost track of how many bottles of champagne they and their friends had drunk, but there was always a new one being opened.

Josey also lost track of time, but she knew they needed to get back to the hotel. Her throat was getting tight again and that spot at the bottom of her breast bone was beginning to feel sick.

“Not yet, Josey! One more dance! Come on!” Emerson coaxed as he pulled her onto the dance floor. He was in that drunken stupor of the here-and-now. There was no thought of time or what they had left at the hotel. This dance was the bunny-hop. Not an easy dance to break away from. They stayed longer. She stopped drinking champagne. A sense of foreboding was floating around Josey. She knew they had to get back to the hotel. Fun and a good time were taking a back seat to this unsettling feeling of concern for her children. She had always been able to go her own way. Tonight was different. Tonight she had tied her children up to their bed and gone out for her own good time. If they should wake up, she thought, would they be scared or think this was a game? And if they got scared, what would they do? Could anyone hear them if they started yelling and crying? A slow panic began settling in her. They simply had to leave. They simply had to leave.

“No, Josey. Don’t be a spoil sport. I’m not leaving. I’m having fun and you are too. I’m staying,” Emerson said.

Josey was adamant, “No, you are not. We are leaving. Now.”

She pulled him by his hand, grabbed her purse from the table, and headed toward the front door. Cabs were waiting by the curb. They grabbed the first one in line and headed for the hotel.

Arriving well after midnight, they looked befuddled by the gathering in the lobby. Police, the sheriff, women in gray suits, Dr. Long, Dorothy and Bertram Duvall, others they knew in evening dress, hotel guests and staff were all staring at them and whispering. Josey and Emerson stared blankly at each other, as a small crowd gathered in the lobby. Josey and Emerson headed for the elevator.

“Mr. and Mrs. Stuart?” a man with a star on his jacket said as he stepped in front of them. “I’m Sherriff Langston. Where have you been? Why did you leave these children alone?”

Suddenly Josey noticed her children for the first time. They were huddles around Aunt Edith and Father Clarkson. They were all crying.

“Mama! Papa!!” they said in virtual union. Breaking free they ran to their parents, letting out heart wrenching sobs as they ran. “Mama! Papa!”

A woman in a gray suit stepped forward. “Mrs. Stuart, I’m Rebecca McCoy from the Presbyterian Children’s Home. Sherriff Langston called me to come help with the children. They have been in an absolute panic. We were able to get enough information from the oldest boy, Dan, to figure out who Aunt Edith is. We called her. She brought Reverend Clarkson along. Really, Mrs. Stuart, how could you?”

“What is it? What is going on?” asked Emerson, too tipsy to process much of anything and long gone from connecting any of this to his children.

Josey, on the other hand, got wild-eyed and could barely get out, “What happened? What is going on?”

“Your children, ma’am. How could you?” she asked again. “How could you? Poor babies scared out of their minds, not understanding. Screaming and crying and hollering for their Mama and their Papa! Terrified they were!”

“Mr. and Mrs. Stuart, you will have to answer for this. You are under arrest for doing a mean and irresponsible thing to your children. Tying them to a bed so you could go out jukin’. Really?! I never!” the sheriff exclaimed. “A night in the jail just might be just what you need to think about this.” Sherriff Langston shook his head as he clucked his tongue. Nobody ties their children up to a bed so they can go out for a good time.” His head continued to shake and his tongue continued to cluck..

“What? Why? No! We just went out for a bit! They were fine! They couldn’t get hurt! They were safe!” Josey wept.

“We found a relative, Edith Wallace, and her pastor, Reverend Clarkson. They have just arrived to take the children home,” Miss McCoy said.

Emerson and Josey spent that night in jail. Ginny and Robert bailed them out the next morning. The ride home was mostly stony silence. Josey made no attempt to explain herself. She had done wrong and she knew it. The children were in danger even if they had slept all night. The hotel could have caught on fire. Then her babies would have burned to death. A burglar could have broken in and killed the boys so they couldn’t identify him. Their friends loved them, but they were astounded and Josey realized what her mother had been trying to tell her these past few years. Children need parents. A mother. A father. Two parents to take care of them. Keep them safe and help them grow up to be responsible adults one day. Lady to be a woman. Dan, Calvin, and Drew to be men. There is certainly more to raising children than just playing with them, she thought.

Emerson's head hurt too much for him to even think.

End