

## Here Today—Gone Tomorrow

The long drive from middle Tennessee to the northeastern Coastal Plain of North Carolina now comes with mixed feelings. What used to be my old stomping ground in my early twenties, and where a majority of my family later relocated, held some happier memories.

How is it that forty years have passed when I first set foot on the place? That little town of Williamston on the banks of the Roanoke River. I was a struggling young mother, earning barely more than minimum wage and no child support, with slim job pickings. It's what led me to move, four years later, to a place called home, six hundred miles away. I now have two grandchildren, one engaged to be married, where did the time go? When they say that kids grow up too fast, they only have it half right—we all do! But the term *life is too short* doesn't really hit home until we get to that place when our loved ones start to slip away and leave this world.

Getting old is relative; but also subjective, depending on how you look at it. When we look in the mirror, what do we see? Do we compare ourselves to that twenty-something that once was? Or do we concentrate on what we have to work with, do what we can with it, and be grateful for it? I think back to my last visit, several months ago, and the question I asked my mother. "Mom, if you could turn the clock back and be any age again, what age would you be?" It was clear she had never considered such a thought. And why would she, when it wasn't possible? This is how we are different, she and I. Perhaps it's

from all the reading I do, that these types of questions get me thinking. "I don't know . . ." Mom said thoughtfully, a good ten seconds later. "Maybe in my 50's, I guess." I won't lie, her answer had me puzzled. The age I would choose would be in my early to mid-'30s, at the start of my prime, where so many possibilities were still ahead. When I asked Mom why her 50's, she couldn't give me an answer. Maybe it had to do with all of her children being grown and on their own, or working in their hair salon, interacting daily with clients.

There is one positive thing, I tell myself, about traveling such a distance from the way things were back then. My GPS, for one, is a blessing. It keeps me on track, without hand-written directions or the need for a roadmap. There is also my cell phone, an ingenious tool to get out of a jam. There was one time I drove through a blizzard, a 900-mile commute, with my young son in the back. It was nighttime, with icy conditions that led to dozens of cars and tractor-trailers having slid off the road. I had no way of calling home to say how late I was running, no way to call AAA, should I need them. I don't think I ever prayed more than I did that night.

It is Sunday, the day I chose to travel, to avoid rush-hour traffic. I adjust myself in my seat, sit up taller, and spot my reflection in the rearview mirror, looking somewhat tired. I brush the hair off my forehead, glad to have gotten that haircut before leaving; it's going to be another unrelenting scorcher—with temps in the upper 90's. Ever since I went pixie short, there is no turning back. "Don't you think you're getting too old for long hair?" Dad's voice invades my thoughts. I was thirty-one at the time and failed to mention that some of my

friends would gladly donate a kidney to have my thick curly tresses. Instead, I told Dad, "no—I don't think so." Later, though, I wondered if maybe he was right. Not that I was too old for long hair, but maybe I was due a change.

The following summer, when I arrived with my new doo, after getting a good eight inches lopped off, Dad says: "Why'd you cut your hair? It looked good long."

If getting old is relative, feeling old is equivalent. My playlist switches to Proud Mary, so I turn up the volume. Love the part when Tina starts off *nice and easy . . . but at the finish of this song, we do it nice and rough*. For the next five minutes and twenty-seven seconds, I become Proud Mary. I mimic her vocals, attitude, and head thrusts, feeling more alive since getting on the road that morning. That's the great thing about music. I can pretend to be anyone I want—Reba, Cher, Whitney, even Michael Jackson. "Mom . . . do you have to?" Jeremy would say while we shopped at the Shoe Carnival, what must be thirty years ago. What's funny is that now he does the same to his kids.

When my song ends, I switch it off and scramble through the radio channels, searching for a talk show, something of interest. Politics is the same old rant. The Black Lives Matter riots—too sad and depressing. COVID-19—the unavoidable topic these days—also depressing. People feed off what the media wants them to know, and even then, it may or may not be true. The mask theory is an ongoing debate, sort of like choosing a political side. Most are not swayed from their corner. I switch lanes to prepare for the next turnoff that will take me to Raleigh, leaving me then with two hours to go. Some idiot isn't

paying attention, is in the wrong lane, to make his exit, cutting across several lanes of traffic without signaling. I tap my brake, check my rearview mirror, when a minute later, I catch up to the Honda Civic, wondering if today's Dilbert is male or female. When I turn to look, his eyes meet mine. Not only is he male, it's hard to tell his age, but he is wearing a mask, with no one else in the vehicle. My eyes go back to the road.

Once again, Dad invades my thoughts. "Don't let any trees jump out in front of you." His advice, the first time I asked to borrow the car, soon after getting my license. It wasn't the trees he should have warned me about, but people in general. If he were still alive today, I could hear him now. "It's all bullshit!" he would say. Referring, of course, to wearing masks and the shutting down of businesses. If only he knew what he was missing. But, who knows? He may be laughing at us all, running around with our face covered, wearing gloves and surgical booties, telling us what a bunch of fools we are.

Getting closer now, I think of Mom. She must have received my card from a few days ago, letting her know of my visit. Not that she'll remember. Getting a hold of her on the phone can be tricky. Her hearing isn't so good, and her landline doesn't always work. There was a time when she would match my monthly calls and hand-written letters, telling me about her days, and asking about mine. A two-hour conversation would sometimes end with Dad's voice booming from the other room: "Are we gonna eat, or what? Get the hell off the phone already!" It sounds terrible, and it was, but that was their reality.

The thing is, I get him more clearly now.

Needing a break, I switch the radio on, searching for some beach music. *Summertime's Calling Me—Carolina Girls—Ocean Boulevard*—anything! I make myself a mental note to Google it when I get back home. I switch off the radio and hear the melody in my head, taking me back to Chocowinity's most popular VIP club. My friends and I were regulars. Never missed a Friday night. It was Jack who taught me to shag and bop. Can't say that I loved anything more, at least back then. The year we entered a dance contest that lasted the summer, made it to the finals, and then took 1st place, winning \$500, was one of my proudest moments.

I exit the freeway to my final destination. Tobacco fields come alive and all those summers, earning \$25 a day. There is a closed vegetable stand to my right, an old beat-up truck parked in someone's yard to my left, tall grass surrounding it. Two doors over is a brick home, freshly painted shutters, a wooden swing on the porch hanging from the ceiling, and wind chimes that decorate the garden. The blinking light ahead makes me sit up in my seat, just a few miles to go. I make my left turn, cross over the railroad tracks.

*Recalculating* . . . the GPS echoes. I ignore it. I've made the trip so many times, I can just about determine all the *Recalculations*.

I drive to the end, to Wildcat Road, and then turn right. The moment I arrive, nothing has changed. And yet, so much of everything has. I will stay the week at Raymonde's, Mom's younger sister, who lives across the road. The reason is that Mom's house is full, the four bedrooms are occupied. My sister lives there now with her 10-year-old grandson. An ex-brother-in-law occupies

the upstairs apartment. A caretaker will arrive in the morning to help Mom with breakfast and meds while my sister works her part-time job. Raymonde's house is comfy and tidy, with a beautiful pond outback. Lucky and Rusty quietly greet me, without so much as a bark.

"Some guard dogs, those two," she says with a scowl. I give them both a rubdown to placate them before setting my things down in my room. What used to be Lise's room, Mom's youngest sister. If only these walls could talk; this house will never feel the same, not without her in it. She was a lively one. Always telling jokes, or sharing a *mostly* true story. I can still see her doubled over, all teary-eyed, snorting a laugh, trying not to pee her pants. The three of us, Lise, Ray, and I, vacationed together. We took three cruises, a trip to Lake Tahoe, Reno, and Las Vegas, not to mention the dozen road trips to Canada and the mountains. Lise loved to go places, experience new things. She hosted dinner parties, cooked lavish meals, and would bake goods to share with the neighbors. I miss her always, she was like a sister to me. Pictures of her kids and grandkids are still on the wall, leftover clothes in the closet.

I join Raymonde, who is stirring something on the stove. "Oh, you painted the kitchen," I tell her. It's the first bit of change since her sister passed nearly three years ago. The mint green walls are now white, minus the floral border at the top. "Looks brighter," I say.

I stretch my limbs, glad to have arrived before uncorking the bottle of wine. The room is dark, just the way I like it, the mood between us relaxed. We are close to kindred spirits, she and I, despite our different views. We share a

fondness for dogs, long walks in the sun, the art of reading, with a matching sense of humor. Dinner is quite tasty, even better with my second glass of wine. We catch up on the latest gossip, then talk about the weather. It is only 9:30, and yet we're both tired, decide to call it a day.

After my shower, I lie in bed awake, feeling a mix of contentment. The people we've lost will always be missed—and those left behind still need us.

\* \* \*

"Hi, Mom. It's good to see you." I give her a squeeze as she sits, about to have her meal.

"Hi Michele," she says, with a regular expression, as if she'd seen me the day before. "What are you doing?"

"Visiting you," I tell her. "You look good, Mom."

"Did you sleep here last night?"

"No. I slept at Raymonde's house."

"Oh . . . where does she live?"

"She lives across the street, Mom." I point in the obvious direction.

"Remember the gazebo we usually sit at?"

"Where do you live now?" She seems content in getting all these facts out, before touching her oatmeal. Amber sits by patiently.

"I live in Tennessee. It's beautiful there. Lots of trees and hills."

"How far is that?" Mom scrunches her forehead. She hasn't been out of Williamston in years.

"Tennessee is over 600-miles. Eleven hours if I drive straight."

"Wow! You came here by yourself?"

"Yes." I smile. "By myself."

"Are you married?"

"No. Not for a long time now."

"You have children?"

"Yes. Jeremy. He's married now, has kids of his own. You wouldn't believe how much they've grown." She nods, takes a spoonful of her oatmeal. Amber joins in, filling the void while Mom eats.

Later, I invite Mom over. We sit at the gazebo and watch the geese swim in the pond. A few of them are decoys. Mom points to one. "Hey . . . how come he's not moving?" she asks. "I've been watching him. He hasn't moved his head at all."

"He's not real, Mom. He's fake." She accepts this and nods thoughtfully.

"Hey, Michele. . . so where do you live now?" I respond to the question, before opening the book, I planned to read her. *Forget Me Not* is a book I'd made with the help of an online app, a collection of short stories written by Mom and her sisters long ago. They are childhood memories of where they grew up near the village of Verchères along the Saint Lawrence River. After losing several family members, I typed up these stories, included some photos, and made them into a picture book. Mom will ask me half a dozen more times today where I live, but she clearly remembers her childhood. I love to read these stories aloud. It takes her mind off the questions and gets her focused on things she can relate to. Things that make her smile and start up a dialogue.



"Mlle Larose was my first teacher," the story began. "She was nice, very pretty, soft-spoken, she never yelled in class. I was young, very shy, and we were taught not to speak to strangers. It was impossible for me to raise my hand when I had to go to the bathroom. Many times, I wet my pants, and watched the water runoff the chair, onto the floor. It was embarrassing. No one laughed, and Mlle Larose didn't make a big deal about it. But the following year, Mlle Lescault was our teacher. She had a mean face—"

Mom pipes in, "Yes! She hated children, and we all knew it. She would walk around the room with her 24-inch ruler. Anytime someone missed an answer, she would swat their hand. And it wasn't a love tap either."

These stories, by now, I knew them by heart. Mom seemed to be fairing well today, more vibrant than others. "Mom, do you remember your brothers and sisters' names, in the order they were born?"

Without hesitation, she began to count them out, using her fingers: "Lucille, Pierrette, Gisèle, Marie-Jeanne, Lilianne, Fernande, Françoise, Madeleine, Raymonde, Monique, Pierre, and Lise."

"Wow! That's great, Mom. You got them all in the right order. I'm impressed. The only one you missed was Yolande, but she was a baby who died before you were born."

"Oh . . . I didn't know her." To test her further, I ask her to recite her own children. This causes her to think, and her mind is suddenly muddled. Of the eight of us, she can only remember two: Joe Roy and Peter. Not even me, her

firstborn, sitting right here. Perhaps another day, she'll remember them all. Today has gone well. I'm more pleased than not.

Each day, we do much of the same. Inside where it's cooler, we discuss the Dear Abby letters. Outside, we sit at the gazebo, count geese, watch random cars pass by, or continue reading. When things get quiet, I thumb through *Forget Me Not*, choosing another section to read aloud. Some of these happenings stay etched in my mind. "The old priest from the village visited our school once a month. He carried a large, illustrated Bible. The children would gather around the teacher's desk to have him read us a story while explaining each picture. Of course, the one of Jesus dying on the cross for our sins made a lasting impression on us, and the one of hell, with all those people burning in the fire, their arms in the air, screaming, crying." I paused a moment to see Mom and Raymonde listening intently, before continuing. "There were also two nuns that came to our school twice a year. They told us stories about China. How poor they were—so poor that their mothers could not take care of their babies. They would sell them for a quarter, and if the nuns could not pay, the mothers would take the baby by the feet, hitting them against the stone wall until it died, or throw them in the river. For a mere twenty-five cents, these good nuns could buy these innocent babies, baptize them, and save their souls. How lucky we were to have a home and food. The Chinese lived on the street, hungry and thirsty and cold. The nuns would ask us to find it in our hearts to bring as much money as we could after lunch."

Mom smiled, nodded, and said: "I remember walking home that day. We felt sad for those poor innocent babies. We told our mother the story of the Chinese and asked if she could spare some change for us to give the nuns to save those dying children. Maman put her hands on her hips, and in a no-nonsense tone, she said: 'You go back to school, and you tell those nuns, I am already taking care of twelve Chinese children, and I have enough!'" Mom and Raymonde chuckled, as they knew what was coming next.

I got back to reading. "That afternoon, the nuns came back to gather donations. Everyone had something to contribute, except for us. When the nun mentioned this to the class, our sister Lilianne, the brave one, got up as our spokesman. In a serious tone and a confidence none of us had, she told the nun exactly what our mother had said—that she already had twelve Chinese mouths to feed, and that was enough! The room went silent. The nuns, even the teacher, looked ill at ease. Lilianne must have realized she said something wrong. Her face turned red, and she quietly sat down." Mom and Raymonde explode with laughter.

"That's exactly what happened," Mom said. "We were poor, you know, wearing the same clothes day after day, a bath maybe once a week, all of us using the same dirty water."

Of course, I knew all about their hard times. Had heard the many stories all my life. And yet they still fascinated me. Winters were brutal, with below freezing temps, ice forming on the walls in their room, sleeping four to a bed under mountains of blankets, feeding off each other's heat. The tin roof of their

home was held on with chicken wire, only to be blown off onto the road, stopping the traffic of a major thoroughfare—not once, but twice. It took several local farmers and willing townsmen to aid in putting the roof back on again. This created much teasing at school, much humiliation, and when they complained to their mother, she would remind them that they owned their home, at least, instead of renting.

The days passed by one by one with little change to the agenda; the short walks, the stories, the questions, and visiting with family. On my last evening, we sat in Raymonde's kitchen; the sun had gone down, the night growing dimmer.

"What time is it?" Mom asked.

"It's 8:45," I told her, surprised to have her out this late.

"Oh. It's time for bed." She says this and smiles, not eager to leave. I walk her back to the house, holding onto her arm, and tell her that I'll be leaving in the morning to head back home.

"Where do you live?" She asks, and I tell her. We make it to the front door. I walk her inside and remind her again.

"Oh, where are you going?" I hug her good-bye, kiss her on the cheek. We chat a few minutes longer, she seems wide awake.

"I love you, Mom." I hug her a second time and force a smile to stifle the ache.

"Love you too," she says. I let myself out, place one foot in front of the other to head back, my heart growing heavier along the way.

When I return, I keep myself busy, packing my bags, and load up the car. Before long, I am showered clean, lying in bed, my legs on top of the covers. The ceiling fan is quiet, the slight breeze relaxing. I think how strange our lives turn out. Mom survived a childhood that most people today could not fathom. She married young, managed a hair salon with my father, and raised eight children, two of whom are deaf. She battled breast cancer, outlived eight of her siblings, buried a husband, and now can barely remember any of it. I can't decide if Mom is blessed or cursed. Each time I see her, she declines a bit more, and I so miss who she used to be.

I crawl beneath the covers, knowing that soon I'll be kicking them off again—hot one minute, cold the next. I smile at something Amber told me. "I've been a caretaker for 25-years," she said, "and your mom is the sweetest client I've ever had." The comment didn't surprise me. Mom has always been a peaceful, easygoing soul. "You should have met my dad," I told her, grinning. "He was as stubborn and hard-headed as they come."

My mind begins to drift off, and I think of Dad now, recalling our last conversation. He'd been living in Williamston House, assisted living, for several months, angry with those who played a part in placing him there. We had no choice, it was what was best for Mom and her well-being. But Dad was used to having his way, despite the effect it had on others.

It was August 2016, my final evening during a visit, I went to see Dad, alone, to tell him good-bye. I pretended not to notice they had just cleaned him up, after an *accident*, the attendant was changing his bedsheet. The two of us

sat in a chair in his room, searching for what to say. I didn't plan to stay long, knew how he could be, and told myself to just get this over. The thing was, I was good at getting a conversation started, but Dad, too, was just as good at steering it away. The doctor's recent diagnosis was that he had pancreatic cancer. This, on top of all his other ailments; his diabetes, high blood pressure, too much iron, poor blood circulation, an unrecovered knee replacement, and a kidney infection. For a while now, he'd been a walking time-bomb, and had verbalized many times how he just wanted to die and leave this rotten world. When his skin turned jaundiced, they sent him to the ER. My sister and I were with him when he got the news.

"How much time do I have?" Dad asked. The doctor shrugged, "Maybe a year." Dad gazed blankly across the room, to no one in particular. I had no clue as to what he may have been feeling. Fear of the unknown? Or that finally his prayers have been answered? I couldn't even say for sure if he still prayed at all. I suspect he may have stopped long ago. We didn't have the kind of relationship where tears were in order. In fact, he despised the sight of them, saw them as a sign of weakness.

Two days later, I sit across from Dad back in his room, not knowing if this could be my final good-bye, or if the doctor's assessment was accurate. My goal was to stay positive and leave on a good note, despite his tenacious ways to be contrary. Maybe now, things will be different.

I wonder when was the last time we sat like this, just the two of us. In the past few months, there were times when Mom came to see him, and he

refused to even look at her. My cousin Carmen, from Canada, came once, and he barely mumbled *hello*. Many of my siblings and family members had stopped coming at all.

"So Dad," I say finally. "Are you looking forward to living on a paradise Earth?" He had stopped attending the Kingdom Hall long ago, decades, in fact. But he liked to stick by his beliefs, at least when it suited him. As a baptized Witness, it was known that once God's Kingdom took over, Jesus would resurrect the dead to live forever on a paradise Earth.

He lowered his eyes, unprepared for the question. "Nah..." he said, barely a whisper. "I don't deserve it." It was the first time I got an inkling that he had regrets about his life, not just regrets but that he would admit them out loud. If he had the chance to do it over, what might he do differently? But before the conversation could take form, a black, heavysset woman stuck her head in the door.

"Heyyyy . . . Mr. Joe," she said in a heavy southern drawl, leaning against her walker, a wide grin exposing the whitest of teeth.

Dad nodded, mumbled hello.

"I heard the bad news, Mr. Joe. Sure am sorry." She seemed well-meaning, but Dad, clearly uncomfortable, looked my way. It was good to know that the residents knew him by name, that he must be making an effort with these people, if not his own family. I waited for him to respond, to thank her at least, but when he lowered his eyes, I introduced myself as his daughter. She was friendly, and we chatted a bit. So not to impose on our time any longer,

she started to leave. "You take care, Mr. Joe." She inched back from the doorway. "We love you, Mr. Joe. You take care." And then she was gone.

"You see that?" Dad shakes his head, a look of disgust. "People here are crazy!"

"She was nice, Dad, friendly, that doesn't make her crazy." My shoulders shook as I attempted to stifle a laugh. He was definitely out of his element.

"Yeah, sure—she loves me—she doesn't even know me!" It struck me how uptight he was with the sentiment that someone he barely knew would dare to go there. I thought she deserved credit for being kind to my father, but suddenly the mood between us changed. The conversation beforehand was lost. And there was no gentle way to bring it back. Instead, Dad does what Dad does best, rehashing the past, mistakes I made—the ultimate one being the man I married—*was* married to—for less than two years. Before he could go further, I interjected.

"That was a long time ago, Dad. I was very young then. Didn't you make mistakes at that age?"

"Not that bad!" He says, looking me straight in the eye, so sure of himself. I couldn't help but think, maybe not, but Mom sure did.

"You know, Dad—We all make mistakes growing up, make bad decisions. It's part of growing up. But you know what? I came out ahead with a son, whom I'm very proud of. I wouldn't change that for anything. And I was smart enough to get out of that relationship when I did—I didn't let it destroy me. We can't beat ourselves up over the poor choices we make. We learn from it. We



move on." It was a mouthful, and it felt good to say what was needed without shedding a tear. Once I finished, I was not about to give him the upper hand and saw this as an opportunity to make my exit. I glanced at my watch. It was past dinnertime.

"I need to get back, have an early start in the morning, a long drive ahead," I say. I lean in and hug Dad bye, he kisses me lightly on the cheek. Getting up from my chair, my purse at my side, I tell him to take care, all without him saying a word. I reach the door, feeling his eyes on me, and glance over my shoulder to where he sits. "I love you, Dad." The words came quick, unplanned, as my heart raced. It was all in a split second. I didn't give him a chance to reply, but caught his lips moving before stepping away, my legs carrying me down the hall.

When I saw him weeks later in the hospice room, several of us were at his side, scrambling for what to say, the moment between us had passed. He was here today, gone tomorrow.

If I had the chance to go back—maybe slow down and do things over, I would hug him a bit tighter, a bit longer, and tell him that I love him. For it's true in what they say—those that are hardest to love are the ones who need it the most.