

The Bookmaker's Daughter

I grew up with my father telling my mother that what she saw wasn't what she saw and that what she heard wasn't really what she heard. He had the hardest job in the world. That's why, even before I saw the movie *Gaslight*, I believed in it utterly. *Gaslight* is a very old movie about a man trying to make his wife believe she is crazy by lying to her about what's going on in their house.

"Wasn't that guy Blackie or Brownie -- or whatever you call him-- wasn't it him on the phone just now?" my mother would ask.

"No, dear. I don't take bets anymore. It's too risky," he'd say, tucking a piece of thin, crisp paper behind his belt buckle, not in his pants pocket where the cops routinely pat him down.

Then, on one family vacation, we were driving home to Florida through Alabama, listening to a football game on the radio, and right after the kick-off Dad found a pay phone and hopped out of the car. When he got back inside, my mother fumed.

"You called in the bets!" she hissed.

"Now dear, I'm just trying to find us the best chicken-fried steak there is in this part of the country."

And sure enough, after five rainy and silent miles, my father produced an eatery with mouth-watering, tender, chicken-fried steak smothered in gravy, with mashed potatoes, green beans on the side, and chess pie for desert.

It was this meal that so disappointed my father in federal prison. The mashed potatoes were instant, he wrote, the steak stringy and leathery; the beans either had the flavor sucked out

of them or they swam in salt pork.

Prison is good for some people and my father is one of them. On prison food, he lost 85 pounds, almost an entire person. Dad used to have a stomach that arched over his belt and hung in the air like suspended animation. He pat it like a baby.

He loved macaroni and cheese, sausage and pancakes, chocolate cake and ice cream. His eating was like a performance piece.

“Oh, oh, is that a roast pork I see with raisins and apples?”

He would grunt softly during the meal, roll his head back, caress his stomach, lick his lips, point his fork at the table.

“That potato thing-y? Okay, potato gratin, any more left? Oh, does gratin mean **cheese**? Oh, oh.”

In prison, his meals gone, Dad was bereft. “Today we had fish sticks,” he wrote to us. “Fish sticks. Can you believe it? All mine were still frozen in the center.”

“Note the word ‘all’,” I said to my mother. “That means he ate them all even after he knew they were still partly frozen.”

While my father was in prison, my mother and I kept the house as if each room were a small shrine. All my brothers were gone but their baseball and school pennants still hung on the walls of their rooms, and their bedspreads were printed with cowboys with lassos or astronauts in space suits.

Weirdly, or what, now at least, seems weird, I started sleeping with my mother. When my father first went to prison, I was ensconced in my old bedroom with its French provincial furniture and white lacy window treatments. My high school prom picture poised on my dresser top. I found my college sorority pin in my jewelry box along with a man’s watch, a vial of acne

medicine, and an ankle bracelet from someone I could barely remember, which stung because the inscription read "Forever Yours." Except for one small detail, the room looked exactly like it had when I left it for college. The one detail was an antique washstand I'd pulled up by the window alongside the bed and outfitted with a lamp and my other essentials.

My mother went to sleep that first night with a double dose -- a Valium and a glass of sherry. I kissed her suntanned little forehead goodnight and went to my room to read. With the window open, I could ventilate the pot smoke I manufactured with a pipe safely hidden in the washstand. I opened my book and watched the words chase each other all over the page. Then I turned out the light. In the middle of the night I felt someone grab me with both their hands on both my upper arms.

"What!"

"How did all this happen?" my mother whispered in the dark.

I turned on the bedside lamp and there she was, the pupils in her eyeballs like buckshot. Her face was close to mine. You mean my pot smoking, I started to say.

"All this with Artie," she said.

"Who?"

"We all called your father Artie in the seventh grade. He won me in a game of HORSE."

"What?"

"You know, basketball. When you miss, you get a letter. First H, then O, then."

"Okay, okay." I was made uncomfortable by my mother's nightwear. By day she was well turned out, tailored things with the occasional silk scarf. At night she looked ready for, well, action. She wore an empire-style peach satin top with black spaghetti straps and black piping

running suggestively down the bodice. The matching bottoms extended to the upper thigh with bands of black lace festooned with little peach rosebuds.

The next night I heard my bedroom door creak open, and I sat up in bed, waiting for her. She was a vision in white. An ankle-long gossamer gown with something frilly or fuzzy around the neck.

“Hi, Mom.”

“It’s a shame you didn’t know him when he was young.”

I know I opened my mouth at that and kept it open without saying the obvious: I wasn’t born; how could I have known my father? I scooted over in the bed and rested my head on my elbow, listening.

“He was very athletic,” began her revisionist history.

I don’t know when I fell asleep. I think I was listening to something about spelling bees when I dozed off. I woke up a couple of times in the night believing that one of my dogs had snuggled up against my back. In the morning I was alone, but I found a tiny white feather on the pillow next to me and knew it was from the boa on the neckline of my mother’s nightgown.

About a month after Papa’s imprisonment, we decided to look in on boy bedroom number three since the cowboy and astronaut bedrooms had been visited frequently. I wondered how my mother was going to put a good face on this one. I knew for a fact there was porn in there, and a few swastikas, as well.

“Miss May’s coming down,” she said.

I stood behind her trying not to notice the odor of gym shorts and old socks.

“And the Confederate flag, I hope,” I added. Then I said of this brother what was often said of me. “I sure hope Zeb is going to find his *niche*.”

My mother did not respond to this jab but said, rather distractedly, "I think I have some type of heartburn." She put her hand to her throat and said, "I think I have to lie down. Call Cora, would you?"

Native Floridians are scarce. Cora is one, an African-American healer who worked at one time as a nurse. She has a woven bag full of remedies and comes to Mother whenever she calls. (Cora doesn't come to everybody.) Once, after a Cora visit, I found Mother in the bath surrounded by weeds.

"What's in the tub?" I shouted. My mother had asked me to come in for a moment and I, a little scared to see her naked, reluctantly agreed.

"Cora says this is aromatherapy," she said, holding some type of plant product upwards to me.

It was lavender and it smelled delightful.

"I need some more hot water in here, please," she said. She motioned to a pitcher near the tub.

The aromatherapy didn't work beyond a palliative cure. It soothed her and it relieved many of her symptoms, but it didn't cure her.

For prison killed my mother. The anonymity of it. The searches through her purse.

I know there was an actual diagnosis. I know it was cancer. But you know what you know.

My father came to my mother's funeral in handcuffs. He was linked at the wrist to a jail warden named Bob whose solicitude toward him was so real and so touching that I found I had

to look away.

The one brother I had counted on, Tony, the brother whose room had the astronaut theme, was on a safari in Africa and couldn't be reached in time. Of course, Zeb, the porn and swastika brother, was ever so available. He put the house on the market before I could think straight. But before we knew it, the I.R.S. was on our case like stink on shit. With amazing alacrity, the agents showed up, comparing what we owned with my father's reported earnings. Then they showed us their estimate of what my father probably made as a bookmaker and what was due the United States government. Plus the interest that money would have gained since the last time my father filed an honest income tax report.

The house sale went south and Zeb went into hiding. The cowboy brother, Edison, said he thought the "good faith" money the potential house buyer had paid us also went into hiding with Zeb, but I told him I didn't care. I was past caring.

Edison wanted to plow some familiar ground, and we talked all through those things, deep into the night, one night. We talked about how, during our childhood, we knew our father's business wasn't like most fathers. We knew when we had soup and sandwiches for dinner that things were tight. We knew when we had to get haircuts every couple of weeks that our father was collecting from the barber. When we ate out at a bar every night, we knew the same thing. Both of us had a memory of hearing our mother say, "Don't dentists ever gamble? The children need dental appointments."

Oddly enough, before my father became a bookie, he was in oil. I remember my mother saying to a friend, "All that moving. Texas to Oklahoma, Oklahoma to Texas. I couldn't take the oil business anymore. Plus, it was risky."

We both remember watching in fascination as our parents danced to music on television.

I thought they danced to the Ed Sullivan Show but Edison, correctly, remembered it as the Lawrence Welk show.

As we sat opposite each other in the living room, talking like this, I was tempted to tell him about mother's nightwear and our sleeping together until she got sick. But every time I got close to that story, the most recent one of our mother, I choked on it. I pictured that tiny white feather on my pillow.

When our father got out of prison, he remarried almost immediately. He met this woman while still in prison, so he didn't have much explaining to do. The first thing they did was take up residence in my old room. After the I.R.S. agents showed up at the house again, wearing their shiny, black shoes, my father started paying off the government in increments, and my new stepmother couldn't do the re-decorating she'd planned. Forewarned, I picked out a few things from my old room that I wanted to keep. During the last night I spent there, under the canopy of my French provincial bed. I gathered in my high school ring and college sorority pin from my jewelry box and stashed them inside a box of sheet music. My stepmother could wear the "Forever Yours" anklet fastened around her ankle forever if she wanted to. She and my father were camped out for the night on the hide-a-bed sofa in the den watching old movies. She had made it clear it was to be my last night here in my old room.

Inside the box of sheet music were Kalmus editions of Chopin and Schumann. Beethoven and Bach still came in those thick yellow books called "Schirmer's Library of Musical Classics." Unaccountably, I had about a half year's subscription to a magazine called *Sheet Music*. The magazines had barely been opened so I culled through them, looking at songs like "Alfie" asking "What's it all about?" and arranged for something called "Easy Piano," words that make any

serious piano player shiver. These magazines were packed away with my college things because the subscription belonged to Eve, a suitemate who dropped out one year, pregnant, at mid-semester. The magazines were stacked underneath my real music and that was understandable. I hadn't wanted anyone to see them. But why hadn't I thrown them away? I may have hoped that Eve, who played electric piano with campus bands, would return. I never thought the pregnancy would come to a happy end since Eve existed on a steady diet of LSD and Tab cola, but she had a healthy baby girl who was adopted by a Mennonite family, and Eve transferred to a college where she was less well known.

In one *Sheet Music* magazine, the score for "The Nearness of You" by Hoagy Carmichael was side by side with "Cold, Cold Heart" by Hank Williams. George Gershwin's "Someone to Watch Over Me" faces a page printed with Willie Nelson's "Crazy." The magazine editor was clearly on some type of pharmaceutical.

I picked up the pink princess telephone I'd gotten for my 16th birthday and started dialing. My mother liked good wine and kept quite a bit of it in the basement so I hauled up a bottle, tiptoeing past the den, thinking "drunken dialing" could be thought of as dunking doughnuts, an indulgence, nothing more. I had a number of old friends who seemed to bang about the country -- ricocheting off old connections: parents, college lovers, even high school boyfriends and girlfriends. I reached one of those friends, Paul, that same night, and he told me about a restaurant called the **Gaslight** that was looking for a piano bar player. Paul's father was a very successful surgeon who gave a huge Christmas party every year and the year I visited Paul, his father hired me to play at this party after he heard me practice on his wife's Baby Grand. Paul described the **Gaslight's** owner as someone who "had pretensions." This restaurateur wore a beret and tried to serve French food even though the restaurant was located in a smallish Virginia

city. He had a nice piano in the bar area and favored classical music, jazz, and blues over Broadway tunes, though he conceded those melodies were what the bar patrons wanted.

Traditional piano bar players, Paul said, did not last very long.

I knew that job was for me as soon as I heard the name, **Gaslight**. You think one thing; it's another.

Florida can be a long state to travel through. On the way down, you're part way through the state of Florida before you know you're not in Georgia anymore. Inundated by pines and small lakes, that section of Florida looks nothing like postcard-Florida. Postcard-Florida is a redhead on water skis with an orange blossom in her hair. Or a stand of palm trees on a sand dune that gently gives way to a beach where waves lap at a shoreline -- that's South Florida, postcard-Florida. Here, in northern Florida, cypress trees sit in gnarled, unhappy clumps, and Spanish moss hangs menacingly in willow trees. Men rocking in bass boats on the St. John's River stop to look daggers at you. Old women sitting under Live Oak trees on the courthouse lawn stare at outsiders with an unhealthy curiosity and suck air through their teeth.

On the way back up to the venerated Northeast, you have to pass through states like North Carolina, which went through a sea change where sections of New Jersey somehow relocated down to Charlotte, and South Carolina, where liquor stores are easily located because the buildings sprout a large red dot on one side. I pulled up in front of one of those dots and went inside. I'd decided to knock myself out with liquor to get to sleep.

The man at the cash register was eating Vienna sausages out of a can and looked at me with suspicion. After a moment of hesitation, I picked up a bottle of

Virginia Gentleman. I'm nothing if not ironic. Then I noticed a better message and replaced my gentleman with a fifth of Southern Comfort.

My little car became choosy; it slowed down to a chug near an Aunt Sarah's Pancake House off Virginia's Interstate 81. After I stuffed myself with banana pancakes and sausage, got wired on coffee with sugar, I checked in at the chain motel next door, thinking I'd better get used to places like *Budget Six*, *The Starlight Motel*, and *Econo Lodge*. I was homeless, after all.

The motel television had cable but the thought of watching old movies reminded me of my father and new step-mother so; instead, I hit the *Sheet Music* magazines I'd packed and the Gideon *Bible* in the nightstand drawer. I played a game I'd played at sleep-overs during adolescence. I took a couple swigs of Southern Comfort and flipped the *Bible* open randomly for my fortune. The Book of Ruth. In Chapter three, verse seventeen, it said, "Go not empty unto thy mother in law." Oh please, I thought, drank some more whiskey, and flipped through the Book of Ruth again until I found something satisfying. There it was in the first chapter: "Whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God." Then I got out *Sheet Music* and memorized the melody line for "Moon River."

The next morning I got a map of Virginia from a friendly desk clerk, who correctly diagnosed my slowing vehicle by asking, "Are you out of gas?" I was surprised to find I was very near Lexington, home of Washington and Lee University and only an hour away from my destination of Charlottesville. I chatted amiably with the desk clerk, who kept fiddling with his bow tie. I felt I owed him some conversation since I had spread his map out on the counter, overtaking it completely. Somehow he misinterpreted something I said.

"Well," he said, "welcome home."

Tears filled my eyes. Home. I lowered my head, folded his map, and gave it back to him.

Paul met me in front of the restaurant. I was so tired my eyeballs scraped my eyelids like sand. I kept blinking, trying to see straight, like a drunk.

“Hey, Paul,” I said.

He stepped out of the darkness, illuminated in back by candlelight from inside the restaurant.

“Hey, Paula,” he said.

Paula? I thought as he launched into a falsetto, high and plaintive, singing rather loudly for a quasi-public place -- that is, on a sidewalk under a restaurant awning, singing:

Hey, hey, Paul, I want to marry you.

There was nothing to do but follow that line, in the lowest voice I could muster.

Hey, hey Paula, I want to marry you too.

In the 1960's there was a love song, a duet called “Hey, Paula,” with a man's voice, then a woman's, interchanging those lyrics. So, under that awning, there was nothing more to do. I was lost in the world of the popular song. I sang:

I've waited so long, for school to be through. Paula, I can't wait no more for you. My-eye love.

Then Paul sang back to me in his falsetto.

My-eye love.

“Where are you appearing next?” A woman's voice came out of nowhere.”

“Right here,” I said and pointed to the sign that read: **Gaslight.**

Paul steered me inside where the restaurant owner stood behind the bar polishing glasses, wearing his beret. He didn't say “Bravo” so he might not have heard us. He did motion toward

the piano at the back of the room.

“Here’s where you try out,” he said.

I hadn’t heard the word “try-out” since my attempt at the cheerleading squad when my mother wildly applauded my clumsy efforts while my classmates and teachers silently voted in a perky blonde.

Candles lined the top and sides of the piano. I settled in on the piano bench to play “Moon River,” going up and down the 11-note melodic journey that *Sheet Music* set out for its subscribers.

In the movie *Gaslight*, Ingrid Bergman’s husband, Charles Boyer, tries to make her think she’s going crazy by telling her she’s lost things in the house. When she hears noises above her head, she imagines the gas ceiling lights are going up and down at will. In fact, her husband is up in the attic searching around in the belongings of her aunt, looking for the lost crown jewels of some country too small to be mentioned. The crown jewels are discovered sewn into a dress the aunt wore all over the world, in full face of everyone, for her opera appearances. Joseph Cotton sets up the husband to be discovered and shows Ingrid that when the gas lights in the attic are turned up, the ones over her head automatically lower down. Ingrid’s name in the movie is “Paula.”

I remembered that in a flash as I played the 5-note interval between “Moon” and “*RI-ver...*” I never miss a beat, but I believe that name recognition caused me to miss a fraction of a beat, between that 5-note span of **rhe** and **zur**, the exact time it took me to register how comfortable Paul sounded singing in falsetto. Was he gay? There was the fact that he’d barely kissed me at his father’s Christmas party, and I’d thrown my whole body into his. Was I half-chasing a gay man? Yes, I was.

“Why don’t you play whatever it is you **like** to play?” asked the man in the beret.

So I played Beethoven’s romantic “Moonlight Sonata” and the light around that piano became luminous. Then Erik Satie’s “Three Gymnopedies,” which has a haunting quality. I followed that up with Ravel’s semi-morbid but still lovely “Pavane de la Belle au bois dormant” (Dance for a Dead Princess). I paused, but very briefly, not ready to put my hands in my lap, concentrating on what should be next.

“Go on,” said the man in the beret.

I had forgotten he was there, and I never had a better audience. The lights flickered; went up, went down, but I went on. I didn’t stop until luminosity surrounded me, until I was the illuminated one. Then I could close my eyes and play the Major 4 chord, then the Major 1 chord in any given key; it is the Amen (*Ahh-MEN*) chording and most people recognize it. Though I’m not religious, I know resolution when I hear it. I heard it then, and I knew it was the end of the road for me. I had become a piano bar player for life.

I bet on a long shot that the fake Frenchman would like me but he did. It was another long shot that Paul would want to jump my bones and thereby warm my nights but, being gay, he didn’t. I lost that one but it’s okay because I know you win some and you lose some.