

FT. WORTH, TEXAS, 1921.

“Your mother is burning in hell.

What she did is an unforgivable sin,”

Grandma West pronounced, to Ruby, age thirteen,
and suffering raw and scalding grief.

Cause of death – ‘Pneumonia,’

wrote the doctor charitably on the record.

Wasn’t pneumonia.

Massive hemorrhaging
from a botched abortion.

Grandma West knew what Mama had suffered.

Too many pregnancies;

too many pregnancies with twins;

too many miscarriages, still births, deliveries of twins with both dying,

or one living, and one dying soon after birth, staying around just long enough
to become a lovable fixture whose passing would cause more pain by having
stayed around a little while.

“I never forgave Grandma.

Her words rose up often in my head and hurt me
the way Grandma meant them to.

Grandma couldn’t scold her daughter, so
she hurt the closest thing resembling her daughter,
and that was me.”

“I was the oldest of Mama’s five surviving children,

and the one who’d been hurt the most.

“Grandma West wasn’t as close to Mama as I was.

She wrapped herself with religious sanctimony,
but I couldn’t; I had to help Mama with the babies

After she died I had to take care of the babies by myself.”

“Then, one night, a strange thing happened that made me feel better.

We lived out on the prairie in an oil company house.

I was so tired and sad I wanted to die.

I closed my eyes, then opened them.

I looked out the window.

A bright light rolled in from the distance
and came up close to the house.

Two huge golden doors opened in the middle of the light, and
women in white robes holding lighted oil lamps
walked slowly up several steps and through the doors.

Then the doors closed and the light went out.

I knew that Mama was in Heaven.”

“Did you ever visit Mama’s grave,” I asked.

“No, I was afraid to.

1922, the Trinity River flooded.

The water took a huge slab off
the edge of Greenwood Cemetery,
with grave plots sloughing off into the river
and the rushing water opened coffins and
hurled rotted-down remains into the river
and on down the river and through the town
and out onto the prairie.”

For years, Ruby suffered nightmares of the worse imaginings.

Mama’s grave was far enough back from the river’s edge
but that comforting fact never reached
the grief-stricken child.

1985, Mama’s grave still unmarked.

Ruby had never gone back, fearing the worst.

I placed a memorial headstone.

and in broiling heat I walked her to the grave.

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MAMA WEPT AT VICKSBURG, 1985

Out of curiosity or remembrance, people visit, but not many,
as Vicksburg's not a glamorous place,
just a worn and slumbering spot
on the Great River.

One hundred and twenty-three years gone by,
the ground churned raw from siege bombardment
softened now and rolling under manicured grass,
the cannons merely decorative memorials to slaughter.

Walk into a sunken cave, a "living history" display,
depicting defiance despite starvation, and
wounds grotesque and rotting.

How different the memorial shrines:
marble monuments to the victor,
brass plaques for the vanquished.

How different the burial rites:
the fallen Federals, lie in rows of regiment and rank,
with names and dates in regulation stones
beneath adorning trees.

Mama rests a moment in shade
before moving on into withering heat.

Where are the graves of the fallen Grays?
she asks the Ranger guide.
He motions wide.
No particular place.
One over yonder.

Sudden tears fall
onto tiny bits of stone
etched with numbers,
signifying a common grave.

She feels and sees
as the sloughing, fetid flesh
of babes and little children
is placed or pitched
into the pit.

She knows, and weeps.

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BABY GIRL DOE

12:44, delivery nurse declares and duly notes,
when newborn girl comes sliding down wet
and flops out bloody.

Tag on nursery's plastic warming bin reads
Baby Girl Doe.

Step up here, girl, and state your name,
the judge commands.

Baby Girl Doe, I say.

Him say back, My sass jar pret' near full up 'aready.
No jokes now, this here's a law court,
and you're charged with crime.

Says here, says judge, lookin' at paper,
Your name's Baby Girl Doe,
but that can't be so.

I say Thas' right, my name's Baby Girl Doe,
but fast-like, I tack on Y'Honor.

I hear judge ask, Can you berry pie that?

I say back, Judge, that don't make no sense.

Him say, What don't make no sense?

I say, What's berry pie got to do with ennything?

Judge twistin' and liftin' and
'bout to come outa his big chair;
face red as Rudolph's nose.

Judge say, Good Lord, girl,
all I'm askin' Never mind.

Him ask do I have a driver's license.

No, I say. Don't need one. Don't never leave town.

Him say, You employed?

I say, What?

Him say, Good Lord again, then yells
Do you work? Have a job?

Yessir, I say.

Well?

Well what? I say.

Good Lord, again. What and where's your job?

Wal-Mart, I say. Stockin' shelves. Graveyard shift.
Ten years come Tuesday.

Him ask do I have any ID? Identification? Work badge?

Work badge, I got it, yeah, I say.

Him ask is my name on it?

Yessir.

What's the name on the work badge?

Baby Girl Doe, I say.

Judge say, Lemme see it.

Him say, Baby Girl Doe, out loud, like me,
and ask how that come to be.

I say, this way, judge:

Mama must'a been tired
and all worshed up,
'cause I was number eight
when she was only twenty-eight.

Mama run outa names
or run outa carin' 'bout names.

Brother tells me mama say one day,
Well, she is a girl, and cute,
like Bambi's mama, a Doe.

Judge winks over at his bailiff standin' by.
Bailiff smiling a smirky-smile and shakin' his head.
I know that look, that smile, that head shake.
Says, *These People*.

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THE FIRST TIME I HEARD ELVIS.

The first time I heard His voice
my head exploded
and my body morphed
into a new dimension.

His heavy voice
came disembodied
from a jukebox
to fill every inch
of the shack
at Foothill Boulevard and Madison Ave,
Monrovia California
where we ate and hung out after school.

What is this?
I asked myself in 1956.
Everything
about the voice,
the sound,
the song,
was new.

He sang about
some Heartbreak Hotel
down on Lonely Street.
I was a lowly high school freshman
and knew all about lonely,
but no one sang about lonely.

Pat Boone sang puppy love
in his powder blue sweater
and white buck shoes.
Pat's voice smiled.

This new guy wasn't smiling.
I'd never seen him,
but I knew he wasn't wearing
no powder blue sweater
and white shoes.
And He wasn't prancing.
He was sweating music
out of every pore.
He was reeking, too.
He wasn't clean.
He was BAD.

He was from Mississippi.
Mississippi?!
Music from Mississippi?
Nobody came from Mississippi,
swamps and snakes,
hicks and hayseeds,
crackers and low-lives,
Tobacco Road.
My ignorance was abysmal.
I didn't know shit.

Music was born in L.A.
Pat Boone,
Jan and Dean,
The Beach Boys,
guys who might have come
from elsewhere,
but they came *to* L.A.
and they *became* L.A.

I didn't know there was life beyond L.A.
and I didn't even like L.A.,
felt out of place
and hungered
for a different place,
a place with grit.

In His music I found grit,
with a bonus - sorrow.
I had sorrow in my life.
I heard sorrow when I heard Him.
Grit and sorrow.

His music was born of the Blues,
but I didn't know what the Blues was,
or much about black music,
what we called Negro music.
Little Richard
was alive and screaming
off the charts,
and he was
black music then,
but he didn't speak to me.

Little Richard of the glistening Pompadour
was loud and fast and hot.
My world was slow, static,
dull and morbid.

Elvis burrowed into a raw nerve
with his song of loneliness and sorrow.
His music reached for me,
found me
and hit me hard.

His music –
the cosmic fusion
of Rockabilly,
black Blues,
black and white
Southern gospel music,
the bastard mongrel child
of mixed and blended lineage,
and Mississippi born,
like Him.

Elvis Aaron Presley
from hill country Mississippi
opened the door into the Dark,
and flooded my white world with black music.

*Listen up, y'all,
this cracker from Tupelo, Mississippi is here,
bigger than life,
and I'm the messenger*

*that's gonna rip all y'all's soul wide open,
change y'all forever,
you and the whole damn country.*

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THE DEAD ACROSS THE LAND.

My people, a string of country graves across the land,
remains of long-stemmed rag weed women,
buried beyond finding, beyond touch, beyond recovery.

Sitting still, seeking less that lies ahead;
seeking more that lies behind.
Go backwards to see and savor the spirits of
the overlooked and unrecovered,
and feel how much is lost forever.
Go backwards and find the things
I left or lost along the way.

Go backwards from a new and different vantage point,
a porch, a desk, a chair, a fragrant, sunken garden,
an arm's length vista,
to fill my empty sockets,
with form and color, with faces,
to substitute the imagined
for the actual but unrealized.

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