THE LEXICOGRAPHER’S DAUGHTER:
A MEMOIR

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This creative nonfiction dissertation is a memoir of the author’s search for the somewhat mysterious hidden past of her father, the lexicographer Charles J. Lovell, who died in 1960, when the author was nine. Her father’s early death left the author with many unanswered questions about his past and his family and so she undertakes a search to answer, if possible, some of those questions. Her search takes her to Portland, Maine; New Bedford, Massachusetts; and Pasadena, California, where she tries to discover the facts and uncover the forces that shaped her father’s life. Along the way, she realizes how profoundly his death affected and shaped her own life, contributing to the theme of loss that pervades the memoir. In addition, she begins to realize how much her mother, Dixie Hefley Lovell, whose significance she previously overlooked, shaped her life. Ultimately, she comes to understand and accept that some of her questions are unanswerable.
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PART I: WRITING MY FATHER BACK TO LIFE ................................................................. 1
    One Memoirist’s Journey ............................................................... 2
    The Memoirist’s Dilemma ......................................................... 8
    Images and Memory ................................................................. 14
    Writing Snapshots into Life ...................................................... 17
    Bibliography ............................................................................... 28

PART II: THE LEXICOGRAPHER’S DAUGHTER: A MEMOIR ............................... 30
    Chapter 1: Daddy-Boy ............................................................. 31
    Chapter 2: Strawberry Fields Forever ....................................... 56
    Chapter 3: Lavengro, Word Master ......................................... 74
    Chapter 4: On the Road .......................................................... 95
    Chapter 5: Willy-nilly ............................................................. 114
    Chapter 6: Dreams of Days That Were ................................. 137
    Chapter 7: Pasadena, Like Paradise ....................................... 156
    Chapter 8: Gosling ................................................................. 179
    Chapter 9: Journey’s End ....................................................... 197
PART I

WRITING MY FATHER BACK TO LIFE
One Memoirist’s Journey

This traveler lives the journey idiosyncratically, . . . [m]oving through it all faithfully, not so much a survivor of a harrowing tale to tell as that older sort of traveler, the pilgrim, seeking, wondering.

—Patricia Hampl

The seed of this memoir was sown, as I write in chapter 1, “Daddy-Boy,” by a friend asking about my long-dead, long-forgotten father. I was a master’s student in English at the time, taking Lee Martin’s essay-writing class. For the essay due the next week, I was grappling with my having become—most unexpectedly, having been born and bred in the North—a southerner, and I was not making headway. It turns out I had been waiting all my life to write about my father. The seed germinated; words flew from brain to keyboard, unbidden, seemingly unmediated by thought. Any psychologist could have told me that all father-daughter relationships are rich in material; when the father dies when the daughter is ten—well!—so much the better for the memoirist. I was less interested then in my own life, inner or outer, about which I must have believed I knew all there was to know. But my father’s life was a subject of endless fascination. He had lived most of it before I existed, in places I had never been, and so it seemed mysterious, lost in history, freewheeling through space and time. It was a mystery to solve, a history to uncover.

I am, by nature and training, a researcher and historian. As a girl, one future imagined life featured me as a pith-helmeted archaeologist unearthing long-lost secrets of ancient civilizations. During hot Oklahoma summers, I became a spy disguised as a girl, picking up secret coded messages from other members of my spy ring at a “drop” in a dark, cobwebby garage or under loose bricks. Or I was a detective, a female Paul Drake, sleuthing amidst unsuspecting neighbors for secrets, clues.
Grown, I worked for fifteen years as a newspaper research librarian, digging up trivia and significant background alike on topics as varied as the Dallas Cowboys and the Dallas City Council, Dallas violence and Dallas voting patterns, Texas entertainment and the Texas environment. I earned a master’s degree in recent American history, focusing on the 1950s and 1960s, turning the years during which I grew up into the subject of scholarly inquiry. I worked as an oral historian for the city of Dallas, researching a pivotal time in recent Dallas history and recording the reminiscences of participants. History and the past have always whispered to me. And so when it came time to choose a dissertation project, the opportunity to enlarge my long-ago essay, to turn it from a personal essay into a longer form, resonated with me. Here was the perfect opportunity to pull together my training and my instincts, all the disparate paths of my past, into one project providing mystery and history.

The idea of writing memoir first occurred to me around 1984, soon after reading Joyce Johnson’s *Minor Characters* (later subtitled *A Young Woman’s Coming of Age in the Beat Generation*, and then *A Young Woman’s Coming of Age in the Beat Generation* Orbit of Jack Kerouac, and, later still, *A Beat Memoir*), her memoir about being a minor character—a woman—in the 1950s Beat Generation. (The second subtitle alludes to her status for a couple of years as Jack Kerouac’s girlfriend.) My 1960s generation followed hers. I identified with her feelings of being on the edge looking in, an observer, being a part of something and yet also apart from it. I liked the way she had placed her personal experience in the context of the times, which made her own individual story seem universal. I liked how she gave a voice to young women, who were frequently overlooked by history. As Johnson writes of herself, and by extension other women of the era, “It is only her silence that I wish finally to give up” (262). I thought that someday (a time frame that provided plenty of breathing room) I would write a
memoir about a young woman coming of age in the tumultuous 1960s. I envisioned the story as bookended by John F. Kennedy’s election the year my father died and Richard Nixon’s resignation the week I graduated from college, my own small story—one young woman but representative of many more—set against the backdrop of a world that sometimes seemed on the verge of exploding. But I was then a researcher, a librarian, a collector and compiler of facts for the use of other people—writers. I did not yet think of myself as a writer. It would take years and many plot twists before I did. But it all began with reading Joyce Johnson and admiring the way the forty-seven-year-old writer looked back on her twenty-two-year-old self with gentle affection and bemusement—recalling, recreating, and reflecting—coming to an understanding of her younger self that she could never have reached at twenty-two.

Johnson was middle-aged when she wrote *Minor Characters*. Originally what were termed “memoirs” were written by retired public figures—soldiers and statesmen—toward the end of their lives. Despite the recent raft of memoirs by callow youths, the urge to write memoir is more likely to strike in middle age, a time that marks a passage, a transition, a shift from one stage to the next, last stage of life. It seems natural to wish to look back and reflect, to discern patterns and meaning and perhaps reassurance (I didn’t do so badly after all) and guidance for the future. Certainly the memoir one writes at twenty-five will not be the memoir one writes at fifty.

For some, the desire to write memoir springs from the desire to leave a record of their lives for their children and grandchildren. And also in middle age the first signs appear of memory’s fleetingness. I often joked while writing this memoir that I can’t remember my father so naturally I’m writing a memoir about him, poking fun at the absurdity of it, the impossibility.
Besides seeing our own memories slip at middle age, we see the memories of our parents and their cronies not just slipping but disappearing into the void. Scott Russell Sanders writes,

If I live long enough, I will eventually forget my own stories, which is one reason I write them down. The mind’s grip on language and meaning is less secure than the body’s grip on life. If you doubt that, visit a nursing home . . . . [E]lders have a duty to tell the younger generations what they have learned from life, whether the lessons be great or small. So I have been moved to write by an awareness that the mind’s acuity, built up over a lifetime, is precarious and fleeting. (7)

For Sanders, telling is a duty, an imperative. I have neither children nor grandchildren; however I still felt an imperative to tell about my father’s life. I felt called to give my father, whose voice was stilled far too young, a voice, to tell something of his life story, a story few knew, as one of his colleagues commented at the time of his death. And I was at the right age to write a memoir: middle-aged.

Besides my 1960s memoir project, another “someday” project had lurked in the back of my mind for even longer: when I had the time and money, I would search for my father’s mysterious, I thought, unknown past; I would find out who he was and how he came to be Charles Julien Lovell, which was not the name he was born with. The project appealed to me because it seemed to involve both solving a mystery with my very own family at its center and placing that family squarely into history. When time to begin my dissertation approached, writing about my father seemed the more urgent of the two possible memoir projects. People who had known him were dead and dropping like flies; the one hundredth anniversary of his natal year occurred while I was in his natal city. The longer I waited, the less likely I would be able to find anyone who remembered him. So finding my father became my dissertation project.
Because I waited so many years to begin, I missed being able to interview most people who had known my father. However, having waited made my research easier in other ways because of the emergence and explosion of the World Wide Web. Once, a researcher had to travel to a federal depository library, which might be at some distance, to access census records. Then she had to struggle with recalcitrant microfilm readers and unwieldy reels that unspooled hard-to-read microfilmed pages, fighting motion sickness while scrolling through the reels of film. Now, the records are readily available online, easily enlargeable to make reading the sometimes spidery old-fashioned handwriting possible. Historical and genealogical societies and government entities are digitizing vital documents; consequently, vast numbers of records that once would have been findable only after writing letters, sending checks, or distant travel, can now be accessed with the click of a mouse. And so I was able to find some of the “facts” I sought far more readily than would have been possible even a few years ago.

I am not alone among women wanting to discover a father’s hidden past. My memoir fits firmly into the subgenre that might be labeled the Daughter’s Book of the Father (to tweak Richard Freadman’s description of sons writing memoirs about fathers) (122). And the subgenre can be divided further: Daughter’s Book of the Dead Father with a Secret. Examples of the sub-subgenre include Germaine Greer’s Daddy, We Hardly Knew You: A Memoir, Mary Gordon’s The Shadow Man: A Daughter’s Search for Her Father, and Bliss Broyard’s One Drop: My Father’s Hidden Life; A Story of Race and Family Secrets. Although her father was still alive when she began her search, Lucinda Franks’s My Father’s Secret War: A Memoir also belongs in that category. The salient feature of each of these memoirs is an attempt by a grown daughter to better understand her dead father by finding out about his hidden past, an attempt made more difficult by her father’s silence about the secrets of his past. The silence might be due to willful
repression of painful memories, as in the case of Reg Greer; a felt moral obligation to keep secrets made necessary by war (Thomas Franks); a deliberate denial of and erasure of a past and creation of a new persona (Anatole Broyard and David Gordon); or silence caused by death (Charles Lovell). The dead can answer no questions, so each memoir involves a daughter sifting through whatever archival material the family possesses—photos, letters—conducting interviews with family members and friends of her father, as well as conducting research in libraries and archives and traveling, motivated by a desire to see where her father came from, to better understand the confluence of time, place, and circumstances that shaped him and led him to become a man who withheld an essential key, to forgive him for his secrets or outright lies. Often, the daughter knew a secret existed, but her father would never talk about it. The subject was forbidden, one only her father’s death would allow her to begin to uncover. Or she only suspected something secret. Bliss Broyard writes of her own awareness about something unspoken, unknown:

    I had always sensed that there was something about my family, or even many things, that I didn’t know. As a child, when I was left alone in the house, I would search through my mother’s file cabinets and my father’s study for elaboration, clarification, some proof . . . Of what? I couldn’t exactly say. (3)

All of the fathers’ lives held secrets, known or suspected, or something they would never talk about, something that intrigued their daughters, compelling them to investigate their own fathers’ lives after their deaths. And so I too would investigate my father’s life. But, as I would discover, writing a memoir is not strictly a matter of research.
The Memoirist’s Dilemma

When I was younger I could remember anything, whether it had happened or not; but my faculties are decaying now and soon I shall be so I cannot remember any but the things that never happened.

—Mark Twain

Writing memoir involves stepping lightly through minefields, perhaps the most dangerous being the minefield of memory. Memory is unreliable. Although a frequent metaphor for the mind is a computer that stores data, unlike a computer, the mind does not spit out the data exactly as it entered the brain. Instead, it reconstructs data, something suspected as far back as 1932, when psychologist F. C. Bartlett wrote, “Remembering appears to be far more decisively an affair of reconstruction rather than one of mere reproduction” (qtd. in Yagoda 103). That theory has since been confirmed, as Paul John Eakin explains:

[M]emory, the would-be anchor of selves and lives, constructs the materials from the past that an earlier, more innocent view would have us believe it merely stored. . . [S]tudents of memory today hold that past experience is necessarily—both psychologically and neurologically—constructed anew in each memory event or act of recall. Memories, then, are constructed, and memory itself, moreover, is plural. (Eakin 106-7)

Numerous memoirists have written about their uncertainty about their memories or about the varying “versions” of the “truth” they have uncovered. Patricia Hampl, author of several memoirs, writes, “[N]o memoirist writes for long without experiencing an unsettling disbelief about the reliability of memory . . . ” (24-5). After writing about her first piano lesson, a passage containing memorable, distinct, particular details, she rereads what she just wrote and “realized that [she] had told a number of lies” (Hampl 25). As she ponders what she has written, she realizes that some of the details she presents as fact are instead things she only thinks might have been the case; she questions the accuracy of other details, and realizes with certainty that others
cannot possibly be true. And yet she intends to be exact. “My desire was to be accurate. I wished to embody the myth of memoir: to write as an act of dutiful transcription” (Hampl 26). Joan Didion tells a similar story:

“That's simply not true,” the members of my family frequently tell me when they come up against my memory of a shared event. . . . Very likely they are right, for not only have I always had trouble distinguishing between what happened and what merely might have happened, but I remain unconvinced that the distinction, for my purposes, matters. The cracked crab that I recall having for lunch the day my father came home from Detroit in 1945 must certainly be embroidery, worked into the day's pattern to lend verisimilitude; I was ten years old and would not now remember the cracked crab. The day's events did not turn on cracked crab. And yet it is precisely that fictitious crab that makes me see the afternoon all over again . . . . (119-20)

Tristine Rainer understands that “[truth’s] elusiveness tortures some memoirists” who wonder how much shaping you may do and still call what you write nonfiction (173). “I go over this question as I would a Zen koan, trying to figure out the answer, and I realize there is no right answer,” but she observes, if you don’t edit and just transcribe, “[t]he results will be the equivalent of C-Span” (Rainer 175). She concludes that “[e]ach writer makes his or her own decisions about how much poetic license to take,” knowing that “a reader is trusting you not to make up lies, not to lie about what really matters: your perceptions, feelings, motivations, your actions and those of others. Lying requires the intent to deceive” (Rainer 176). Ben Yagoda reminds us that “[t]he autobiography, more than any other genre, trades on its authenticity and credibility” (100). And so, while a memoirist may “invent” her life, hewing the raw material into
a coherent and meaningful form, she must always hew to a greater truth, which will render her memoir both authentic and credible.

Once, I struggled mightily with this memoirist’s dilemma. My job at the Dallas “newspaper of record” involved providing reporters and editors with “facts,” the truth, which, I believed existed and was findable. I was finding it every day. Journalism was supposed to be objective; despite tight deadlines, journalists did their best to report the “truth” in the stories they covered. Such too was my understanding of history. It was factual, true. I applied the same inflexible standards to memoirs. I wanted them to be inerrant. I held memories as the equivalent of a tape recording, an accurate rendering of the past. I wanted them to be “history” and therefore true. I disdained, distrusted memoirs that I deemed lax with the truth because of some detected error. But as a scholar of history, I learned that history is revised generationally. New “facts,” new ways of taking apart and looking at the world, reshape history and will continue to reshape it; every set of newly unearthed facts, every twist of the kaleidoscope through which historians peer, adds new, shifting, cascading perspectives. At some point, it struck me rather forcibly that the reason I love history is not because of long, memorized lists of battle dates and kings and queens beheaded, not because of facts, but because of the stories—the basis of the word history—the personal narratives. Certainly, as an oral historian, on more than one occasion, I recorded conflicting versions of the same event from firsthand participants. Their remembered stories offered proof that memory is by nature untrustworthy: contaminated not merely by gaps, but by distortions and fabrications that inevitably and blamelessly creep into it. It is itself a creative writer, cobbling together “actual” memories, beliefs about the world, cues from a variety of
sources, and memories of previous memories to plausibly imagine what might have been, and then in a master stroke, packaging this scenario as the real one. (Yagoda 103)

Just as history involves stories and memory writes its own stories, journalists too write “stories.”

My English master’s thesis consists of three personal essays, portions of which, much revised, appear in *The Lexicographer’s Daughter: A Memoir*. But I had not yet capitulated to the idea of memoir as art or literature rather than history. My essays are short on dialogue, short on scenes; if I couldn’t remember it, I didn’t include it. I didn’t believe I could ethically do so. I wanted to follow the model of historian Doris Kearns Goodwin when writing her own coming-of-age memoir, *Wait Till Next Year: A Memoir*. She writes that my own memory was not equal to my expanding ambition. Some of my most vivid private recollections of people and events seemed ambiguous and fragmentary when subjected to the necessities of public narrative. If I were to be faithful to my tale, it would be necessary to summon to my own history the tools I had acquired in investigating the history of others. I would look for evidence, not simply to confirm my own memory, but to stimulate it . . . . (10-11)

And so she embarks on a methodical search for documents, photographs, and yearbooks, and she conducts interviews, just the research process she undertakes before writing about historical figures such as Lyndon Johnson or Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt. Yet despite the lengths she goes to to ensure her story is accurate, she concedes that it is still a recreation. It was beginning to occur to me that anything else was impossible; if I wanted to truly follow Goodwin’s model, I too would have to recreate.

Journalist Russell Baker, another practitioner of a field I once believed was a repository of facts, describes writing his memoir about his Depression boyhood, *Growing Up*. He became
anxious when his agent and editor never called him back, month after month, and so he finally reread what he had written.

[I]t was an extremely responsible book. Everything in it was correct, the quotations were accurate, everything had been double-checked . . . but it was really nothing but journalism . . . . I decided that although nobody’s life makes any sense, if you’re going to make a book out of it you might as well make it into a story. (qtd. in Zinsser 161-2)

So, I thought, a historian and a journalist whom I respect have recreated and invented. As I read more and more memoirs, I finally began to understand why theorists of autobiography and memoir had already decided in favor of memoir as art, “as literary texts, rather than documentary histories” (Smith and Watson 7). Georges Gusdorf writes

The significance of autobiography should . . . be sought beyond truth and falsity . . . . It is unquestionably a document about life, and the historian has a perfect right to check out its testimony and verify its accuracy. But it is also a work of art, and the literary devotee, for his part, will be aware of its stylistic harmony. It is therefore of little consequence that the Memoires d'outretombe should be full of errors, omissions, and lies . . . . We may call it fiction or fraud, but its artistic value is real: there is a truth affirmed . . . . (43)

Many memoirists have explained their choices. E. Ethelbert Miller makes a different choice than Goodwin when writing about his dead father in Fathering Words: The Making of an African American Writer:

I wrote Fathering Words in much the same manner prophets receive revelations. One becomes a medium for a visit from the spirits. I wrote while embracing mystery. I felt guided by an inner light that permitted me to see around corners of my past. I wrote from
memory. I decided not to read old journals or letters. I didn’t want to talk to anyone to obtain an opinion or insight. I needed to trust my memory. (159)

Nancy K. Miller reports, “I could write down what I remembered; or I could craft a memoir. One might be the truth; the other, a good story” (“Ethics” 149). And Mary Karr, author of three memoirs, tells Terry Gross on the radio program *Fresh Air*, “For me, memoir is an act of memory and not an act of history. It’s remembered experience; it’s not lived experience” (Gross 52). Through reading other memoirists, both their memoirs and their discussions about writing memoir, I finally came to understand and to accept that the nature of memoirs and the nature of memory are identical; indeed, they cannot be otherwise. I came to understand what Timothy Dow Adams writes in his study of truth and lies in the memoirs of Mary McCarthy, Lillian Hellman, Richard Wright, Sherwood Anderson, and Gertrude Stein: “What makes autobiography valuable then is not its fidelity to fact but its revelations—to the writer as much as to the reader—of self” (170). But as a memoirist I wondered how I would come to these revelations. Once more, I turned to memoirists who had been there for guidance.
Images and Memory

Patricia Hampl, explaining how she discovers meaning as she crafts her memoirs, writes about the primacy of images. She believes that “[w]e store in memory only images of value. . . . Over time the value (the feeling) and the stored memory (the image) may become estranged” (Hampl 29). She sees the memoirist’s job as exploring the connection between the images and her buried feelings: “Stalking the relationship, seeking the congruence between stored image and hidden emotion—that’s the job of memoir” (Hampl 30). She seeks “private associations” to enlarge the meanings of remembered images and, as she discovers, although she begins with the images, the emergent feelings are what give the memories meaning (Hampl 31). Maureen Murdock, in *Unreliable Truth: On Memoir and Memory*, concurs: “We know that we usually remember images that carry strong feelings. Powerful emotions, positive or negative, are vivid . . . .” (12). Giving an example of a harrowing experience from her own life—a fall she cannot remember and the possible—although she cannot be certain—memory of a bear in the background. “The passage of time . . . ha[s] forced my feelings associated with the memory and the stored image to become estranged. Writing memoir heals that estrangement” (Murdock 12). And exploring the relationship is how a memoirist goes about that healing process. Meredith Hall writes of images and her own memoir-writing process: “I circle my own obsessive images, examining each small fragment in the light, laying one against the next until the image becomes memory. . . . What happened has become part of me, etched and immutable. I want to rely on these truths” (74). But as she studies the “obsessive images” she has stored, she realizes, “These are shifting sands” (Hall 74). As Hampl points out, “Here memory impulsively reaches out and embraces imagination. That is the resort to invention. It isn’t a lie, but an act of necessity, as the
innate urge to locate truth always is” (31). She concludes that “[i]nvention is inevitable” (Hampl 32). It should be no surprise since the words *image* and *imagination* share a root.

Like Hampl and Hall and Murdock, I use images in my text to attempt to locate the truth. Like Hampl, I find it “an act of necessity.” The first chapter, “Daddy-Boy,” opens with contrasting images of the sky: one in the present, a Dust Bowl sky, in North Texas where I live; the other in the past, a clear, perfectly cloudless blue sky, in northern Illinois where I grew up. I use the images to begin to convey meaning. But the image is sparked by my memory of words. The blue sky the day after the dust storm makes me remember my father saying, “The sky’s blue enough to make ten pairs of Dutchman’s britches.” I show my family walking toward the nearby forest preserve, the sky above just such a blue. I write, “As a girl, I pictured a Dutchman’s bright blue puffy-legged pantaloons spread like pattern pieces against the cutting table of the sky.” The memory combines language—signifying my father as a lexicographer, a man of words—and nature—signifying my father as a naturalist, a man of the great outdoors. We are walking to the forest, a regular occurrence, and we are walking together, a family united, heading for adventure. But what is unknown at the time, although known to me now as the writer, is that within a year or so, my father will be dead. We will no longer walk to the forest. The image helps recreate our family and helps shape my narrative about my father.

I open chapter 2, “Strawberry Fields Forever,” with a strong visual image, evoking colorful children’s books of fairy tales, which is how I remember our house on a wooded lot near a forest: “I see our small, shingled cottage, a fairy-tale cottage if ever there was one, painted vivid pink and trimmed in pastel green, snug in a valley, sheltered by the branches of towering oak and maple trees.” I hope to transport the reader, just as I transport myself in memory, “to a
world I long ago lost.” The richness of the memory contrasts with the inevitable, although as yet undescribed, loss of the fairy-tale past.

In the same chapter, another vivid image helps me begin to explicitly make clear the theme of loss:

Here is another memory, as indelible as India ink, as unforgettable as a movie seen so many times I know its lines by heart: the four of us, bundled up, holding hands, walking up and down the hilly streets of Willow Springs calling, “Queenie! Queenie! Queenie! Where are you, Queenie? Queenie, come home! Come home, Queenie!” The night is pitch; sleet pelts us; its ice-cold needles pierce our faces, stinging our foreheads. My head is bursting; I am in pain and the orange children’s aspirin I swallow can’t cure the worst of that pain.

The image is linked inextricably to my first knowledge of loss, of finality. “I learned how, in one minute—and you don’t know when that minute will be, the world can change forever. One minute you are safe, secure, dog at your side; the next, the world is torn asunder; you are alone and, hope and pray all you want, Queenie will never come back, never ever.” And so the vivid image links to the powerful emotions, helping me to tell my story, foreshadowing the loss that would be central to my life, that of my father.

But some of the images I use are stored not in memory but in photographs.
Writing Snapshots into Life

[T]o have such a memorial of every being dear to me in the world. It is not merely the likeness which is precious in such cases—but the association and the sense of nearness involved in the thing . . . the fact of the very shadow of the person lying fixed forever.

—Elizabeth Barrett

Memory and photographs intertwine in an intimate dance; it is no wonder then that contemporary memoirists often make use of photographs, either actual or described, in their memoirs. Gunnthórunn Gudmundsdóttir observes that “[a]lmost every autobiography now contains some photographs, and even if they do not, many autobiographers discuss photographs from their past” (221). There are many reasons for this trend, including today’s very visual culture. For the memoirist, photographs serve as powerful *aides-mémoires*. To see a photograph from the past is to recall a moment, once frozen in time, now revitalized by memory, bringing the past into the present. If the picture goes back far enough in time—before memory—the photo itself becomes the memory. John F. Kennedy Jr., speaking of the famous picture of him crawling under his father’s desk in the Oval Office, admitted he was never sure if he remembered doing that or just remembered seeing the picture. Photographs of ancestors we have never known also have the power to evoke a distant past that is entirely unknown to us, serving as a spark for imaginative fires. And, as Gudmundsdóttir also notes, sometimes memoirists “show an awareness of the complex power of photography and so the photographs (sometimes only mentioned and not included) are of a more thematic and structural importance and can serve a distinct purpose in the author’s rendering of his or her life” (221).

Joyce Johnson begins *Minor Characters* by describing what has become an iconic photograph of some of the founding members of the Beat Generation—Hal Chase, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William Burroughs—on the Columbia University campus in 1945:
As I’ve grown older, the figures in the photo have grown younger. They’re dressed with the startling formality of the period that seems so peculiarly innocent now . . . . There’s Jack in the center. . . . A cigarette dangles from his mouth in the romantic style of jazz piano players or hard-boiled all-night journalists in movies. (1)

With this description, she pulls the reader into a distinct time and place, foregrounding the men who were her generation’s “major characters.” She continues, writing of the women involved with Kerouac and Burroughs in those years, “As for the girls, I’ve never seen pictures of them anywhere,” setting up her theme of women as minor characters in the Beat Generation (Johnson 2).

Later, she describes a photograph she sees in proof form from a forthcoming issue of Mademoiselle magazine of Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Philip Whalen, and “a writer who had a crucifix around his neck and tangled black hair plastered against his forehead as if he’d just walked out of the rain. He looked wild and sad . . . ” (Johnson 118). Her description of the photograph pulls the reader in, just as the actual photograph pulls Johnson in, drawing her to “the man with the dark, anguished face” (119). Her descriptions of the photographs of Kerouac’s face—“wild and sad,” “anguished”—foreshadow the anguish that will occur in her own life but especially in Kerouac’s and so they help her render their lives.

Photographs are crucial in my rendering of my life and my father’s because, absent memories, photos are what remain. They serve as a launch pad for exploration. David Ellis, discussing the use of photographs in D. H. Lawrence’s biography, writes, “If our means of access to the past were satisfactory, there would be every reason for turning our back on photographs. It is because they are not that photographic portraits remain invaluable” (qtd. in Gudmundsdóttir 226). And, indeed, photographic portraits prove invaluable to me. I use
I make the most extensive use of photographs in chapter 5, “Willy-nilly.” I begin by flipping through old family photographs stuffed in no particular order in a Christmas card box. The photographs are from my father’s childhood. Except for my father, the people in the photographs are entirely unknown, although when I first wrote about them, I did not know that. I believed that the little girl in many of the pictures was my father’s sister, Alice. Much later, I discovered that the little girl’s identity was, like that of the other people in the pictures, entirely unknown. My father didn’t have a sister named Alice; he did have a half sister, but her name wouldn’t have been Alice, which was the name of her father’s first wife. The little girl may have been a half sister; she may have been a temporary foster sister; she is entirely unknown, although the photo is evidence she existed. So the pictures first tell one story, and then another.

Gudmundsdóttir writes of Georges Perce’s memoir,

The very detailed descriptions of the photographs; of what everyone is wearing, their posture and background, remind us of the lack the whole autobiography describes: a lack of memory, of name . . . . They are historical documents that do not give out any information beyond their appearance, clues to a gap, a lack, to nothing. (244)

And so my father’s childhood photographs withhold crucial information, giving clues only to a gap that I would try to close.

The old-fashioned clothes the children wear recall the first decade of the twentieth century, but I tell the story surrounding the photographs, not from history, but from speculation, imagination, and faintly remembered family legends. However, after studying the pictures and later doing research, I am forced to revise one of my favorite longstanding myths about my
father’s past: he was a poor, wretched orphan. The photographs prove a different “truth”: For at least one period of his life, he lived with people who dressed him well, people with the means and the leisure to take photographs. As in Pèrej’s memoir, “The descriptions are part of [my] hunt for [my father’s] past; [my] hunt for memories that are not there . . .” (Gudmundsdóttir 247). Studying the pictures revises my view of the past, just as newly discovered information causes me to revise the story I will tell, which is always unfolding.

Later in the same chapter, I move to the framed photographs of my father on my mother’s dresser, photographs that had been there so long they became invisible, unseen. Gudmundsdóttir finds that

[i]n cases where the photograph is of someone who has died, . . . the photograph is what keeps them alive. The images are all connected to the authors’ attempts to bring some meaning or cohesion to their memories of their parents. Photographs are a material proof of the existence of these people, and are therefore constantly evoked when the authors attempt to prevent their parents from disappearing. (250)

By seeing them again and then describing them, I am trying to write my father back to life. One of the photographs is from the days of my father and mother’s courtship, a studio portrait of a dashing young man with a romantic inscription across the front; another is of my father, the naturalist, displaying the cocoons he collects and observes; another is of our small family, including me as a toddler. I study them looking for coherence; I invoke them, hoping to prevent his disappearance.

I describe two significant features in the second “dresser photograph” in some detail: my father’s lapel pin from one of the hiking clubs to which he belonged and the box full of cocoons
of Prometheus moths he holds. Gudmundsdóttir analyzes Vladimir Nabokov’s caption for a photograph from *Speak, Memory*, the typical pose of a “writer at work”: 

The snapshot that is reproduced in the book does not tell the reader very much; it is the caption that gives it meaning. . . . This photograph, therefore, is a starting point for Nabokov’s memories and gains an almost symbolic resonance as every detail in it tells us something about his life. Nabokov “reads” the photograph in such a way as to make the reader believe in its complete referentiality; it refers to every facet of his life. It is the correspondence between the image and the life we inevitably look for in photographs in autobiographies. (225-6)

While I focus on only two details in the photograph, the details are ones that correspond between the image of my father and his life. He is wearing a mountaineering-club lapel pin, a reminder of the mountains that figure prominently in his life; he is displaying cocoons of moths, a reminder that, besides being a lexicographer, he is a naturalist. By focusing attention on these two significant details, I magnify them in the reader’s mind.

In three places throughout the text, I describe photographs to express a theme, although certainly when I first began writing about the photographs, I had little idea they would have a thematic purpose. Gudmundsdóttir “believe[s] the use of photographs in autobiographies can have much broader implications than is apparent at first sight. They can and often do highlight the main themes and preoccupation of autobiographies, such as memory, relationship to parents, to the past, fictionality, self-invention and self-image” (260). I describe the third “dresser photo” in chapter 5, a picture taken around the red Formica kitchen table, with Daddy serving New Mexican rollups:
I am in my high chair laughing with glee, my chubby sixteen-month-old hands reaching out to grab everything Daddy is passing out: food, words, love.

All three photos are ripe with expectancy: My father inscribed his formal photograph, “With all my love,” to the woman he hoped to marry, my mother, “the greatest girl in the world.” In their cocoons, the moth larvae are undergoing a metamorphosis before bursting into the world. And I am reaching out, hands spread open, for more, more, more.

By “reading” the three photographs, I turn them into symbols of something more than the images alone can express—a hopefulness about the future that did and did not come true. Back at the Christmas card box, I encounter another photograph, describing it in terms of an impressionist painting:

Green dappled light filters through the leaves of the embracing trees as if painted by Monet. Mama and Daddy have their arms around each other in a big bear hug, smooching like teenagers. I am wearing a pink-and-white checked apron over my Brownie uniform, my hair in pigtails under my brown beanie. . . . I’m holding an apple blossom branch. Charlie is shinnying up a tree like a monkey. In all the pictures, the green is dappled pale pink with apple blossoms, the apple blossoms that cause my mother to recall those as “the apple blossom years.”

The photograph, smack in the middle of the text, brings back associations and impressions from the first chapter when I describe the day of my father’s funeral: “The air was moist, breezy, and smelled like apple blossoms. It was the first full day of spring. I was nine years old, and my father was dead.” And so the apple blossoms evoke both an ecstatic present and an immeasurable loss.
In the final chapter, “Journey’s End,” I return to the photograph of my father holding the box of cocoons. Now, it is no longer the photograph on my mother’s dresser but a copy that I framed and hung on my kitchen wall.

It looks down on me while I cook or study or read. Daddy . . . is smiling down at the moth, and I feel like he is smiling down on me, as though I am inside the cocoon. He’s gently protective of my cocoon, but he will die, and I will emerge from my cocoon into the world without him.

So I invoke the power of a photograph, a visual image, to create meaning, significance, with the cocoon as a reminder of my father’s life and as a symbol of my own emergence into the world.

Possibly my most powerful use of a photograph is of a photo I did not possess, had never even seen, but longed to see: a photograph of my unknown grandmother, Alice Budd.

I paw through boxes of old photographs in antique stores and junk stores, looking at people in their old-timey outfits, people once important to somebody, now abandoned, unidentified faces on photographs. My heart quickens when, rooting through boxes, I discover a batch of photographs from New England. What serendipity to have Alice Budd’s photograph fall into my hands! . . . But the dusty boxes of photos are a reminder, a warning: someday all of our family photographs could end up abandoned and unidentified, in junk stores in boxes draped with cobwebs where strangers will paw through them.

In that instance, I use the absence of a photo that must have existed somewhere once to express a profound sense of loss and longing and to further express a grief for a future loss that will undoubtedly occur.
Much to my amazement, when I traveled to New Bedford, Massachusetts, where my father grew up, I did find the photograph I had longed to see—not the actual photograph, only a bad image on a balky reel of microfilm with a smear though my grandmother’s face, but the experience of finding it is everything I could have imagined. I recognize my face in hers, feel a sense of belonging to a grandmother I have never known, as if something lost had been found, recovered. But at the same time, I wonder what happened to the real photograph from which the newspaper image was created. I fear that it has become “one of those photos in an antique shop that scare me so.” And so my jubilation at finding the picture is tempered by a sense of loss at something I will never truly possess.

As Gudmundsdóttir concludes, “In all this it does not matter what the photos look like . . . . It is what the writers make of them, how they use them in the text, whether as a source of memory, of creativity, or of new understanding, that counts” (260). For me, writing my father’s life, photographs provide me with all of those: prods to memory, magic carpets for imagining my father’s life, and vessels for understanding the forces that shaped our lives.

Some of the “photographs” I invoke are not actual photographs from my family’s Christmas card box but are instead filmic images stored in the collective memory of contemporary American culture. While the family photographs I describe are particular to my family, they can be imagined in varying degrees of accuracy by readers; however, the images of actors from well-known films can be recalled precisely by any readers familiar with American film history. Without a living father, I imagine various movie stars in various movie roles as how my father might have been. In chapter 5, “Willy-nilly,” I imagine my father as Clark Gable, but after my mother tells me he looked more like Glenn Ford,
I would look for Glenn Ford movies on TV and study his characters avidly, searching for clues as to how my father might have behaved in various circumstances: as an honest detective, an idealistic schoolteacher, a small-time hood, a bereaved widower with a son.

I particularly sought out Glenn Ford’s more recent movies. I wanted to see how my father might have looked had he been allowed to grow old.

In chapter 6, “Dreams of Days That Were,” I try to picture my father’s family, only for some reason, they look like the Corleone family—Vito, Mama in her long white dress, Sonny in his sailor suit, and baby Fredo, sitting on the front steps of their tenement apartment watching the festivities as their immigrant Italian neighborhood celebrates the feast of San Gennaro.

I imagine them that way because fictional filmed images of a family of the early twentieth century living in an urban immigrant neighborhood are the only images I have. Nothing in my real life can make me imagine what might have been something close to my father’s life as clearly as the scenes I have seen over and over in repeated viewings of *The Godfather: Part II.* By invoking a shared cultural image, I invite everyone who has seen that film to see exactly the images that I see, imagine exactly the past I imagine.

Still later, in chapter 7, “Pasadena, Like Paradise,” I again imagine my father with moving images from moving pictures:

Clark Gable, slicked-back dark brown hair with widow's peak: Daddy. Joel McCrea, dressed as a hobo, sitting next to Veronica Lake . . . Daddy. Shy, bookish slang researcher Gary Cooper as a philology professor who learns all about slang from Barbara Stanwyck . . . Daddy.
I write, “It's as though I believe that by watching the films, over and over and over, whenever they show up on the classic movie station, I will be transported to that era, be there, know how it was, know what my father’s life was like, know my father.” Indeed, in watching the films over and over, my father, in the guise of Glenn Ford, Clark Gable, Joel McCrea, and Gary Cooper, comes back to life because the films are always available for viewing and so he can always be alive. In the last chapter, “Journey’s End,” I equate my father with Atticus Finch. While I do not specify whether I intend Harper Lee’s Atticus Finch or Gregory Peck’s Atticus Finch, most readers will immediately see Gregory Peck, larger than life in black and white. Through shared stored images, I invite readers to make their own associations, and so my father’s story becomes part of popular culture. Public memory becomes part of my private memory, and my private memory becomes part of public memory.

Writing my father’s life, I came to realize, is my effort to restore him to life. I become his co-creator just as he was my co-creator. While I incorporate research and the results of my travels to see for myself the places that shaped him, what sparks most of my understanding comes from images—both vivid stored memories and photographs. Research alone could never create a full picture of the whole man. Images turn out to be more crucial than history because it isn’t the facts that make history; it’s the meanings we apply to them, and those meanings, at least for me, are more available from doing what Hampl calls “the real job of memoir”—“[s]talking the relationship, seeking the congruence between hidden image and hidden emotion” (30). And although I conclude in “Journey’s End” that I will never know all I once thought I could discover about my father’s life but that what I know is enough, I am still alive. After all, as Nancy K. Miller observes, “It is no wonder that just as you think you’ve gotten to the end you discover that every memory trunk has fake bottoms” (But Enough 25). I am still a researcher by nature. I will
probably always seek more clues, more facts, to incorporate into my image bank, and so my father’s story will never end until my memory ends.
Bibliography


PART II

THE LEXICOGRAPHER’S DAUGHTER: A MEMOIR
Chapter 1

Daddy-Boy

One Saturday in late February, a fierce wind whipped across southern Oklahoma and northern Texas, emptying West Texas and the Panhandle of dirt, painting the sky over Denton, where I live, an eerie yellow brown. As I scurried down Hickory Street, clutching my papers to my chest, squinting my eyes to keep out the grit, I tried to remember if I had ever seen such a sky—a Dust Bowl sky, an end-of-the-world sky.

Finally, the wind subsided, the air cleared, and for two days, the sky was solid blue. From horizon to horizon, not a wisp of a cloud intruded. The sixty-miles-per-hour winds had blown away everything but blue. And then I heard my father’s voice, his thick eastern New England accent, part Robert Frost, part John F. Kennedy, speaking to me through the almost fifty years that had passed: “The sky’s blue enough to make ten pairs of Dutchman’s britches.”

All at once, I could see my father, in his brown plaid woolen jacket and tan suede cap, glancing upward to the blanket of blue covering the northern Illinois sky, his hand shielding his eyes from the sun as he checked the sky for signs as we started our outing. A sky so blue was indeed a positive sign. As a girl, I pictured a Dutchman’s bright blue puffy-legged pantaloons spread like pattern pieces against the cutting table of the sky. The four of us—Daddy, Mama, my brother, Charlie, and me—headed up Oakwood Avenue toward the Cook County Forest Preserve. If it were spring and windy, we might be carrying a kite, or in summer, pails to gather berries.

Once, only yesterday, I could barely remember my 1950s childhood or my father. Then, a question from an old boyfriend sparked a quest to remember him. Now, the deeper I delve in the caverns of memory, more and more memories arrive, helping me stitch my tattered scraps of memories back into the crazy quilt that is my life.
On a crisp, clear October night, Stanley Miller drove up from Dallas to take me to dinner. We settled into the Granny-Smith-green booth at Yummy’s Greek Restaurant, from time to time glancing into each other’s eyes, where we could see our pasts, and sometimes, we thought, our futures. Between nibbles of stuffed grape leaves, our conversation ranged over more than thirty years. I was biting into an olive, savoring its briny tang, when Stanley said, out of the blue, “You never talk about your father. Don’t you remember him?”

His question caught me by surprise. I hadn’t thought about my father in years. I leaned back against the booth, closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and sent an exploratory probe to a distant planet. My father. Daddy. Daddy-boy. Do I remember him? I wondered. Under the table, I tapped my fingers, marking decades as I counted them off in my head: My father died when I was nine; I was then forty-nine. I could feel the tectonic plates shifting; shock wave after shock wave radiated from the epicenter of my psyche: My father had been dead forty years; I was the exact same age as my father when he died; and, no, I didn’t remember my father.

Stanley waited. Our silences were as comfortable as our conversations, so I continued examining all facets of the question, tucking the olive pit into my cheek with my tongue as I thought, finally removing it before I replied. “I remember him a little,” I said. Admitting what had dawned on me, that I didn’t remember him, was too terrifying. Memories I had thought would stay forever safe, ready to retrieve whenever I wanted them, like my “Alice blue” silk wedding dress hanging in the farthest reaches of my closet, were frayed, as though feasted on by generations of moths. Some had disappeared, perhaps forever.

If I didn’t remember my father, I had lost my childhood, a chunk of my life that was irreplaceable. Without my memories, I had no past, no history, and I wondered how I could ever recover it or even if I could. In four days, a personal essay was due in my creative-writing class,
an essay I had yet to begin. Stanley handed me my subject: my father. All weekend, I wrote feverishly; by the time class met, I had a draft. The essay, short on memories, barely captured my father as a living, breathing character. Rather, it coalesced around my dead father and my search for a man like him in the men I loved—or so I speculated. As I think back, I see that its true subject was loss. When he died, I lost my father; now, I had lost my memories of him, all I had left, and so I had lost him twice. Without memories, I felt unmoored, although I didn’t say so. Maybe I didn’t know it yet.

My indistinct, impressionistic memories of my father formed a collage of fading snapshots, a montage of movie stills rather than scenes complete with beginning, middle, and end. In my mind’s eye, I could see Daddy in the middle of his and Mama’s brown metal bed, Charlie snuggled on one side, me on the other. Daddy was wearing a plaid flannel outdoorsman’s shirt, his sturdy body “warm, like a furnace,” as Mama always said. Mama was at her circle meeting at the Willow Springs Presbyterian Church, so it was just we three.

Some nights, Daddy regaled us with another in The Adventures of Boofus and Peter Pepper, a series of animal adventure stories he invented for us. Other times, we pretended to be a German brass band, sliding and fingerling and blowing our imaginary trombone and trumpet and flugelhorn, humming a lively march or polka, bouncing to the beat. Or we’d be sailors singing our favorite nonsensical sea chantey, delighting in creatures with whimsical names like Tickletoeteasers and Binnacle-bats, the pleasurable sounds of the words, and the preposterous but wonderful story:

A capital ship for an ocean trip

Was the Walloping Window-Blind—

No gale that blew dismayed her crew
Or troubled the captain's mind.

With every verse, we became more animated, ending each line with a bounce, until we reached the resounding conclusion:

She was stubby and square, but we didn't much care,
And we cheerily put to sea;
And we left the crew of the junk to chew
The bark of the rubagub tree.

Between his bouncing children in the middle of the double bed, Daddy was not just our father, but became Daddy-Boy, the name he signed to postcards and letters he wrote when we visited our maternal grandparents in Oklahoma and he stayed home or when he attended linguistics conferences in Canada: Daddy-Boy, XOXOX.

Frequently, my memories were triggered by the smell of bread. It was early morning and Daddy was in the kitchen, baking. He had been baking ever since he was a galley slave in one of his foster homes, forced to bake all of his family’s breads. A heavenly aroma wafted down the hall of our little frame house, waking Charlie and me before Mama or Daddy could call, “Rise and shine! It’s a new day!” We climbed out of our beds and padded down the hall in our footed pajamas, rubbing sleep from our eyes, and sat down at our places at the shiny red table. Daddy placed a pan before us, folding back the dishtowel covering to reveal the steaming bread he had cooked just for us. “Get it while it’s hot!” he said.

On Good Friday, Daddy baked hot-cross buns. For Easter, he baked a cake decorated with marshmallow Peep chickens nestled in beds of dyed-green coconut. In summer, he made strawberry shortcake using the fragrant wild strawberries that gave our home its name, The
Strawberry Patch, and blueberry muffins and pancakes, which always called for a rereading of *Blueberries for Sal*, about a little girl and a baby bear in Maine. In fall and in winter, he cooked earthy buckwheat cakes, about which he always sang:

There’s buckwheat cakes and Injun batter,

Makes you fat or a little bit fatter;

Look away! Look away! Look away, Dixie Land!

Our rituals all had personal connections, personal significance. Daddy was from Maine, just like Sal. And Mama was Dixie; she was Dixie from Dixie Land—the South.

At Christmas, Daddy baked fruitcakes; he shaped dough into Swedish tea rings that he decorated with candied green and red cherries to look like holly berries and leaves; he cut cardboard patterns in the shapes of boys and girls to make gingerbread cookies. After they emerged from the oven, he gave them raisin buttons and eyes and piped with icing our names—Bonnie Alice, Charles Muir—and the names of our friends—Mana Lowa, David, Larry, Cecilia, Jean, Kay Kay.

One memory I can reconstruct in detail because, for a time, I kept a diary. It was a padded, heart-shaped volume, with a pony-tailed bobby-soxer on its cover, a Christmas present chosen from the Sears, Roebuck catalog that came with a matching autograph book. I locked it with a tiny key and hid it from my brother in a cigar box containing my treasures: cigar bands, gumball machine rings, a gold bracelet engraved “Bonnie Alice,” a tiny heart-shaped locket containing my baby picture, bluebird feathers, shells, a compass, and a wooden Tiki god on a leather cord that was supposed to bring good luck if you rubbed the rhinestone on his belly. Not all the details are found in the diary’s account, of course. How could they be? Many are inscribed instead in the
spaces between the lines of a nine-year-old’s handwriting, scorched in the grooves or ruts or neurons or gray matter or whatever in my brain constructs memories.

On Saint Patrick’s Day, in 1960, the aroma of Irish raisin buns woke us. That day, my fourth-grade class, led by Miss Helen Kott, took a field trip into Chicago. I didn’t record where we went, but I know what I wore: a long chain necklace made by hooking together paper clips, a white blouse, white sweater, and pleated navy-and-white-checked skirt. I liked my outfit; it looked like a Catholic girls’ school uniform, and I longed to be a Catholic. I longed to go to catechism classes, have my first communion in a beautiful white dress, like a wedding dress, wear a lace mantilla to mass, choose a special name—I wondered what name I would choose—eat fish every Friday, and marry Ray Gluszek. Chicago, with its large Irish population, celebrated St. Patrick’s Day as a national holiday. I didn’t wear green, so I was in danger of getting pinched by the boys on the school bus who were more boisterous than usual outside the bounds of Willow Springs School. “I have green on my slip,” I said.

That morning, after making us raisin buns and getting us off to school, Daddy walked down the hill to Archer Avenue, taking the shortcut to the post office where he mailed some letters and checked the post office box. Just days before a letter had arrived with news that was going to change all of our lives: He had won a grant to conduct research in Canada on a proposed Canadian dictionary. We were moving to Canada for a year, and there was a lot to do to set the wheels in motion. That afternoon, he was tired and took a nap. That evening, after cooking supper, he told my mother, when she came home from work, that he had been so out of breath coming back up the hill from the post office that he had had to sit down and rest before coming home.

The next morning, no smell woke us. Nobody came to wake us at all. In his twin bed, Charlie was sleeping, but I was wide-awake. I could tell by the sun streaming under the scalloped
edges of the rainbow-striped curtains that it was past time for us to be dressed and off to school. I
listened, straining to hear the early morning bustle: Daddy in the kitchen fixing breakfast, Mama
dressing for work. The house was still. I waited. Finally, I climbed out of bed and walked down
the hall to Mama and Daddy’s bedroom.

Mama, wearing Daddy’s red-and-black-checked flannel shirt, was standing at the ironing
board, running a hot iron back and forth over one of Daddy’s dress shirts. Her eyes were rimmed
with red, and she was sniffling like she had a bad cold. Something was wrong. Why wasn’t Mama
at work? Where was Daddy? My stomach churned.

I asked the question that somehow I knew I didn’t want to hear the answer to. “Where’s Daddy?”

I don’t remember: Did she pause before answering? I wonder how a mother could ever
tell her child such a thing as she was about to tell me without her heart breaking.

“Daddy died last night,” she said.

A hammer in my stomach pounded; my ears filled with blood as if to block the sound of
her voice, but she kept talking. I heard her through a filter of flannel.

“He had a heart attack, and an ambulance came and took him away.”

“He’s coming back, though?” I asked. Panic was rising, gripping my heart, squeezing it
tight. I wonder how my small body contained all that panic, all that pain, pain that felt like it
would burst my skull into pieces.

“No, he’s dead. He’s not coming back,” she said, trying to explain the unexplainable.

Her words echoed inside my head: “He’s not coming back.” I knew that she meant never,
never ever, forever. How does a nine-year-old absorb “forever”? I didn’t, couldn’t. “They
could’ve made a mistake?” I wasn’t asking; I was begging.

She shook her head.
They hadn’t made a mistake: not the ambulance personnel who couldn’t revive him, not the doctor who signed the death certificate, not Jesus who raised Lazarus from the dead. My daddy, her husband, was dead of a heart attack, his second and last. At thirty-six, she was a widow with two children. Overnight, the trajectory of our lives changed. Had Daddy lived, we would have gone to live for a year in Canada. We would have hiked with the Skyline Hikers in the Canadian Rockies. Daddy would have danced at my wedding and bounced grandchildren on his knee. We would have lived happy ever after. Instead, he died, and our lives veered off course. But I knew nothing of trajectories then.

At the funeral home, I approached the casket. I had seen a dead person once, or an almost dead one, so I thought I knew what to expect. When I was six, Lillian Kubaitis, who lived three houses down, had died of leukemia when she was only seven. Lillian had long, wavy blonde hair and looked like a fairy princess. She was as good as she was beautiful. Our mothers held her up as the perfect little girl. She never got her ruffled dresses dirty; she never disobeyed. Even before Lillian fell sick, people said, “Such an angel,” and, “She’s a saint.” Nobody was surprised that Lillian would die young. She had always seemed ethereal. In the last days before she died, I went to say goodbye. Her mother led me into the room where Lillian lay in bed, her frail hand clutching her rosary. Her gray skin was pulled taut over her skeleton, which glowed through her skin like at Halloween when we shone flashlights through our hands revealing our bones. She smiled and spoke gently. She wasn’t afraid because the angels were coming to carry her to Heaven to be with Jesus.
But Daddy looked nothing like Lillian. He looked handsome in his gray-striped suit and freshly ironed shirt. He looked like he was asleep and might wake up at any moment and come bounding out of his white-satin-lined casket, ready for a tramp through the woods.

I carefully touched his forehead. I wasn’t certain what Amy Vanderbilt would advise about the propriety of touching a body, but I was curious what it would feel like. And he was my father, whom I would never touch again, never ever. I wanted to touch him good-bye. Deep inside, I did know what “forever” meant. I also knew about Madame Tussaud’s wax museum in London. That was what he felt like, I suspected, a wax figure.

Paddy Drysdale, who worked for Daddy’s Canadian publisher, Gage Publishing Company, and his wife, Olwen, drove down from Toronto for the funeral. They brought Charlie and me books, with inscribed title pages. Mine was a Big Golden Book illustrated edition of Robert Louis Stevenson’s *A Child’s Garden of Verses*. I paged through it, studying the pictures, reading the familiar verses:

The coach is at the door at last;

The eager children, mounting fast
And kissing hands, in chorus sing:
Good-bye, good-bye, to everything!

To house and garden, field and lawn,
The meadow-gates we swang upon,
To pump and stable, tree and swing,
Good-bye, good-bye, to everything!
When Paddy Drysdale returned to Canada, he took with him what he had come for: the entirety of my father’s lexicographical research, his lifework, retrieved from shoeboxes on shelves and under my parents’ bed. They would form the basis for my father’s dreamed-of dictionary, the *Dictionary of Canadianisms on Historical Principles*, finally published in 1967, with my father credited as the original editor.

At the funeral, Mama’s best friend, Ann Smith, was on the front row bawling, clutching her hankie and her husband’s arm. She stopped for a second, snorted, unfolded her hankie, blew her nose, caught her breath, and resumed crying. I didn’t record in my diary whether I cried, but photos taken that night at the home of the Rylanders, who had us over for dinner, showed Charlie and me making goofy faces for the camera. My eyes are as red as rhubarb.

At Fairmount Willow Hills Cemetery, I stood on the lush green grass while the coffin was lowered into the ground, keeping back from the cluster of mourners to be alone with my thoughts. I had to hold down the skirt of my light-blue-and-white-checked dress because the wind kept lifting it. The air was moist, breezy, and smelled like apple blossoms. It was the first full day of spring. I was nine years old, and my father was dead.

That summer, I was playing with Mary Jo Hunt and Vickii Beliel. They were curious about dying, and being an expert on the subject, I told them the whole story: “The Day My Father Died.”

“He went just like that.” I snapped my fingers, telling the story exactly how my mother told it, stressing the words she stressed, snapping my fingers exactly when she did. I wanted to be an actress, and I was conscious of movie cameras rolling as I performed the script I had
memorized. “The ambulance got there in three minutes, but he was already gone.” I didn’t know any other way for life to be. Daddies have heart attacks, and daddies die.

Mama always wanted Charlie and me to tell teachers that our father is dead. So? I said, setting my jaw, narrowing my eyes. I never told them. I didn’t want anyone to feel sorry for me or give me special privileges just because I had no father. It was just one of those things, one of the vital statistics of our lives, like being born in Chicago or being born in November. He died, and the cosmos reeled from the gaping hole his dying left. But, like solar storms and black holes, the hole was undetectable except with the special measuring devices of our lives.

“Come on home, Sis,” my grandmother wrote to my mother. The “home” to which Granny summoned us was a small white bungalow in the small town of Ardmore, Oklahoma, where my mother grew up, its red brick streets familiar to Charlie and me from vacations. Mama heeded the traditional advice not to make drastic changes in the year after a death, but one year and one month later, she sold the house that she and my father had built. Movers collected our furniture and two trunks containing what remained of my father’s books and papers, and we boarded a Santa Fe train that took us eight hundred and seventy-five miles away from Willow Springs, Illinois, and the Strawberry Patch, the only home I had ever known. Good-bye, good-bye, to everything.

We left behind my tabby cat, Alaska, and her gray kittens, Misty and Smoky, to be picked up by the Animal Welfare League; my best friends, Jean Peterson, and Kay McSweeney; and Ray Gluszek, my sweetheart since the first day of third grade when he stood next to me in line and punched me in the arm until I looked up into his gray-blue eyes. We left my father alone on a hill
under six feet of dirt. He had wanted us to scatter his ashes in the mountains he loved. Instead, we confined his body to a cold metal casket.

And fare you well for evermore,
O ladder at the hayloft door,
O hayloft where the cobwebs cling,
Good-bye, good-bye, to everything!

Crack goes the whip, and off we go;
The trees and houses smaller grow;
Last, round the woody turn we sing:
Good-bye, good-bye, to everything.

In fewer than four years, we moved six times. From our cottage, snug in a valley, shielded by tall oak and maple trees, we hopscotched from one small Oklahoma town to another—Ardmore, Apache, Fox, Stillwater, back to Ardmore. Mama wanted work hours to match our school hours, so she thought she’d become a schoolteacher. She started teaching classes in Chicago and continued in Oklahoma, getting state certification. But she lasted only one semester teaching high school English in Apache, where her male students were so rough, the day after Halloween most of them were absent because they were in the town pokey, having firebombed several teachers’ houses, including ours. In Fox, smack in the middle of nowhere, she taught second grade for one semester, which she loved, but when a better-paying job as the bookmobile librarian opened up back in Ardmore, she took it. For me and Charlie, moving was always an adventure. Apache had actual Indians roaming its streets, their long black braids wrapped with colorful felt. The general store on the square sold long burlap gunnysacks for picking cotton, and
the school let out when students had to help their families pick. Fox was an oil patch town and we
rode on the pumpjacks as if they were teeter-totters and walked across exposed pipelines,
balancing like tightrope-walkers. In, Stillwater, a placid college town, I collected golf balls from
the golf course adjacent to the married-students’ apartments where we lived and secretly fell in
love with our next-door neighbor, Danny Mauk, even though he was an older man. He was about
to start eighth grade while I was only going to start sixth. Perhaps the continual moving, the
constant adventures, the complete changes of scenery made it more likely that the past—Daddy
and Willow Springs—would recede far into memory. Finally, in 1965, Mama took an even better-
paying job, as a technical librarian in Dallas, and so we landed where I would live for almost thirty
years.

In the first eight years after we moved, I returned to Willow Springs twice. Only once did I
go to the cemetery to stand at my father’s grave, and that was more than forty years ago.
Gradually, my memories of my father stopped, or rather I stopped bringing them out for viewing,
trusting they would always be waiting, like my father’s color slides, lined up in orderly rows in
their protective metal cases.

I no longer remember exactly what I told Stanley that night. Probably I relayed facts about
his life—or what I believed were facts—rather than my memories of him. That was usually how I
responded to questions about my father, although I hadn’t been asked for a long time. For Stanley,
I gave the unabridged version of *The Life of Charles Julien Lovell*:

“Gosh, it’s all so long ago. I hardly know where to begin. We never knew much about my
father’s past, and I’ve forgotten a lot of what I knew. But this is what I remember: He was born in
Portland, Maine—or that’s where he thought he was born—on December 3, 1911—or that’s when
he said he was born—Mother thinks he might have been older—and he grew up in New Bedford, Massachusetts—or it may have been the other way around. His mother, Alice Budd, was supposed to be an artist from an old family.”

“So you were named after his mother—Bonnie Alice.” Stanley would have noted that detail.

“Yes. Her family was displeased—they may have actually disowned her—when she married my grandfather. He was supposed to be a soldier and of a different religion. His last name was Steckwich. We don’t know where Daddy got the name Lovell. Maybe from one of his foster families. Or maybe he picked it from the phone book. We don’t even know if he was born ‘Charles Julien.’

“His parents had another son and a daughter—Daddy was the oldest—and then they died. I always wondered if they died in the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918. Or maybe his father was killed in the war if he was a soldier. I don’t know what happened to his brother or sister. So he grew up in foster homes, most of them wretched. One family wouldn’t take him to a doctor when he was crying in pain from an earache, and he lost most of his hearing. That may have been the same home where he was forced to bake all the family’s breads—you know, back before you could buy bread at any grocery store.”

“In other words, an unpaid servant,” Stanley said.

“Exactly. At another home, his foster mother—an old woman—made his underwear by cutting down her old petticoats. He was humiliated; he was sure the other kids could tell he was wearing ladies’ underwear.”
I might have left out that story, even for Stanley, as though telling it would make my father relive his humiliation, as though by omitting it, I could protect him from those horrid, snickering children.

“And she made him wear a pouch of asafetida around his neck to ward off illness. It stinks to high heaven, plus it was a very old-fashioned remedy, so that added to his humiliation.”

Stanley’s eyes were grave. “This is straight from Charles Dickens.”

“Yes—and Woody Allen. You know his old joke about how his parents sent him out to play and when he came home, his parents had moved?”

Stanley nodded.

“That actually happened to my father. One day, he came home from school. The house was empty. The family had moved to Florida. The police came and took him door to door, trying to find someone to take him in. Finally, he went to live with a family who treated him well. He understood they were going to adopt him. But then, all of a sudden, he was sent to another foster home. Years later, he learned that his foster mother had given birth to a son soon after they gave him up. He speculated that they couldn’t afford him anymore, but he never knew for sure.”

Maybe I paused to let the full impact sink in: a little boy, shunted from one miserable house to another, had finally found love, he thought, only to have it snatched away with no explanation whatsoever. A world where that could happen must have made no sense to that little boy.

Stanley’s eyes reflected the pain in mine.

I continued. “He used to roam nearby fields by himself, and he taught himself the names of all the birds, animals, plants, flowers, trees, constellations—not just their regional nicknames and
their common names but their Latin names too. That may be where he got interested in words. At school, the other kids called him ‘Professor.’

“After high school, he ran away—to California. He went to work at a nursery. I think it was called Elysian Fields. And later he worked at the Pasadena Playhouse when Raymond Burr was a student there. They used to run together on the beach.”

Maybe Stanley said, “Perry Mason! That’s so cool!” at that revelation.

“During the war, he couldn’t serve because of his hearing, but he worked in an airplane plant and he set a record for donating blood—President Roosevelt sent him a thank-you letter. He climbed mountains and he served as a guide in California and Canada. He may have fought forest fires too; I seem to remember hearing that. Somehow, he became a lexicographer—you know, a writer and editor of dictionaries. He met my mother when they bumped into each other on a mountain—or that’s what she always tells us—in Colorado. She was working in the Western History Division of the Denver Public Library. I always thought they probably met when he went to the library to research words. Maybe he asked her to look something up. Anyway, he moved to Chicago to take a job at the University of Chicago Press—I think H. L. Mencken recommended him for the job; Mencken had quoted my father in two of his books on language—and he and my mother got married. That was in 1947.”

I can hear Stanley saying, “Wow! A librarian and a lexicographer! No wonder you love words.”

“Yeah, do you remember the red Thorndike-Barnhart school dictionaries? Did y’all use those?”

Stanley nodded.
“He worked on those. And the World Book Encyclopedia Dictionary. And the Dictionary of Americanisms on Historical Principles. It was supposed to be sort of an Oxford English Dictionary for Americanisms—words that are unique to the United States, or whose American usage is unique. But his great love was Canadian English. He searched for Canadianisms, words or usages unique to Canada. He had just found out he’d been awarded a grant to do research in Canada for a year, and we were all going to go with him. But he died of a heart attack that same week. I was nine. So we moved to Oklahoma instead. And that’s all I remember.”

“That’s all I remember.” My inability to remember more than fragments troubled me. My memory had always been exceptional. Read once, I could remember, years later, an obscure fact, where I had read it, in what book, and where the paragraph was located on the page. This ability served me well during my fifteen years as a newspaper reference librarian. Once, I could remember, years later, a face encountered in an entirely different context: a classmate from Gainesville, Texas, instantly recognized on the street in San Francisco. I remembered our long-ago telephone numbers—TERminal 9-5399 and EMerson 8-1881—and the birthdays of friends with whom I had long ago lost touch. But I couldn’t remember my father.

I called my brother, who was then living in Mesilla, New Mexico, to ask if he remembered Daddy. Charlie was seven when he died.

“I don’t remember the guy,” Charlie said.

His words shattered me: our father—“the guy”—like he was talking about the pizza delivery guy. He didn’t have even shards of memory. He didn’t remember wrapping up against winter in warm coats, mufflers, and mittens and going into the night with Daddy to take the bus to Kankakee to watch its boys’ basketball team, the Fighting Kays, wallop the Argo Fighting Argonauts; didn’t remember playing in the dirt with plastic dinosaurs or cutting worms
in two to see if they’d grow new tails while Daddy weeded his flower beds or dug in his vegetable garden. But I’m getting ahead of my story. Then, even I didn’t remember all of these things.

Daddy died, leaving not just a vast hole in our lives, but mysteries about his life: He had died before we became curious about what he had been like as a little boy, before we understood time and history, before we realized he could have told us firsthand about the Depression and World War II and maybe even World War I, before we understood that the universe didn’t revolve around us, that other people had interesting lives and stories too. I knew about his unhappy years in foster homes, but I wondered what he had been doing in the almost twenty-year blank space in his life story between running away from home at around eighteen and marrying our mother at thirty-six. I knew he was self-educated, but, still, I wanted to know how a man with only a high-school education became a respected lexicographer who pioneered the field of Canadianisms. Now that I am entering academia, I know how unlikely that would be today.

After my father died, a mythology was born. It served the purpose of filling the gaping holes in our knowledge without forcing us to find the real answers to the mysteries. As teenagers, my brother and I invented elaborate stories to answer our questions. Knowing that Daddy had run away—all the way across the country—from New England to California, we fitted his story into our fascination with wanderers. For a time, I became convinced Daddy had been a hobo, riding the rails and camping in hobo jungles during the Depression years when countless thousands of men did just that.

After school, Docka Stubblefield and I would walk down the nearby railroad tracks, she carrying a guitar, me a harmonica, singing folksongs that invoked lonesome whippoorwills and whining train whistles, travelers hundreds of miles from home, missed trains bearing the news of
a lover who left. Maybe someday I would hop a freight, not just sing about it, although I wasn’t at all sure what was involved. One year I co-hosted a hobo party in a vacant lot. We cooked hobo stew that we served in tin cans with bandannas for napkins. I wore the red-plaid flannel shirt that Mama had sewn as a present for Daddy. When I learned of hobo signs that conveyed messages to the next hoboes passing through a locale, I felt it was a clue: hoboes, wanderers, language.

In those days, I carried around a battered paperback of On the Road. It was both a reference book and, I admit it, along with my black-and-white City Lights paperback of Howl, a prop. After each rereading, I imagined my father as a Sal Paradise prototype. He had hit the highway more than a decade before Jack Kerouac headed west. He was restless, too. Maybe he hadn’t set out to discover the soul of America, but he had discovered crucial elements of its soul in its language, its words. When I wanted to know what his life had been like, I had only to open my guidebook.

But our most frequent story was that Daddy was a gypsy. We bolstered our theory by learning from one of H. L. Mencken’s American Language supplements that some gypsies named Kamlo and Kamescro, which meant lover, having migrated from England by way of India, had anglicized their names to Lovel. At the rock concerts that were ubiquitous in those years, I always dressed like my imagined gypsy, in vibrantly colored full, flouncing skirts and ruffled blouses, with dangling jewelry on every possible body part: ears, neck, waist, wrists, ankles. I told my pen pal, Ivar, that my nickname was “Gyp,” short for “Gypsy.” Since Ivar lived in Norway, he would never find out that my only nicknames were Bon Bon and Pud. Besides, I was trying on identities: for a few weeks I had been Alice until Alice Newman became my friend and two Alices was too confusing; I subscribed to magazines as Shoshanna; maybe Gyp would become my name.

My brother and I turned mere speculation into authoritative fact. As we crafted our fantasies,
only dimly did we remember: Daddy wasn’t born a Lovell. But it wouldn’t have mattered. We were writing legends. Our father was a hobo, a beat hipster, a gypsy. After all, he had picked a gypsy name, Lavengro II—*word master*—as one of his pseudonyms for items about words he contributed to a *Chicago Tribune* column, “Line o’ Type or Two.” I see now that the questions we were answering were not about our father’s past but about our futures. We aspired to become vagabonds and adventurers, to go a-roving, to set out for ports unknown. We wanted to sail the seas on a capital ship for an ocean trip. We wrote our own family stories, invented our own heritage: the lives we wanted to live were written in our blood. We couldn’t deny them.

I didn’t want to lose my father as completely as my brother had lost him, a loss that felt unbearable, and so I tried hard to remember. When I squeezed my eyes shut and let my thoughts wander, memories began to light, at first like a lone butterfly on the bark of an oak tree; later, swarming like the flock of migrating Monarch butterflies my parents once saw on Oakwood Avenue, covering the oaks like a million Christmas tree lights.

I remembered walking up the hill toward home from Willow Springs School. Daddy had just won first prize at the Halloween Carnival for his scarecrow costume: a Huck Finn hat, straw poking from the sleeves of his red-plaid flannel shirt and trouser bottoms. Mama was dressed as a bear, suffocating under a burlap sack, its ends tied to form ears. I don’t remember Charlie’s costume, but I was a moth. Daddy had cut out cardboard wings, drawing intricate veins and “eyes” with India ink.

Another October night we stood in our front yard, craning our necks to watch the manmade star Sputnik blink-blink-blink past. I didn’t remember what Daddy predicted that night—“One day, a man will walk on the moon”—almost four years before President Kennedy
committed the United States to doing that, but later I found a letter to my grandmother I had
written the next day, using curvaceous quotation marks and commas to set off the direct quotation,
whose historic significance I recognized even at the age of six.

On my ninth birthday, Daddy baked me a banana cake with yellow frosting decorated with
a bunny presenting an envelope: “Happy Birthday, Bonnie.” For my present, he put together a
desk and a chair, ordered from the Sears, Roebuck catalog, just for me, following the directions on
what was described as an “exploded” diagram, screwing in wooden knobs, nailing and gluing and
shellacking. He carefully underlined the word “exploded” in red pencil and filed away the desk-
assembly instructions with notes about this usage of “exploded” in a file folder that I found when
cleaning out my mother’s house. That night he was yelling. I don’t remember why. Maybe
exasperation over the exploded instructions. Maybe he hammered his thumb one too many times.
Mama was in the kitchen; the house was warm and aglow with light. He bundled up and headed
out into the dark, snowy November night to walk off his anger, slamming the door behind him.
My birthday was tomorrow; he had made a desk and a chair just for me. When he disappeared into
the dark, it felt like he might never come back. But of course he would come back. He would
come back and bake me a banana cake decorated with a bunny. He would always come back to the
family he helped create, the family he had dreamed of as a lonely, unloved foster child, the family
he had always wanted to be a part of. He would never leave us, never ever, forever.

My father’s birth certificate, if such a document ever existed, certainly said something other
than “Charles Julien Lovell.” It would have named a baby boy “Steckwich,” the last name he
whispered to my mother after his first heart attack, six years earlier, on what he believed might be
his deathbed. I wondered if it had been a confession, something he had kept concealed, a source of
shame, or just something he thought she should know, something Charlie and I might want to know someday, something he had put far behind him—always meaning to tell her, but waiting until he feared it might be too late. For years, I heard Steckwich, a sturdy English name, like Norwich or Ipswich or Sandwich, the sort of name a girl might well hear if she were the sort of girl who cast herself in the heroine’s role in the English novels she devoured like bonbons. Only later, when I started running through possible spellings, trying combinations of letters and sounds, did I realize that, instead of the familiar ch, the name might contain strange, foreign combinations of letters, cz’s perhaps. I realized it must be Polish.

“Of course,” my mother said.

Later that year, a museum conference took Charlie to Portland, Maine. At the Cumberland County Courthouse, a clerk, given the names “Alice Budd” and “Somebody Steckwich,” spelling uncertain, and the date, “circa 1911,” unearthed a single birth certificate: Stanley Valentine Steckiewicz, born February 10, 1910. His father—Casimir J. Steckiewicz; his father’s birthplace—Russia.

Russia! The finding staggered us. Suddenly our quest acquired global dimensions, connecting us to world history. For almost as long as I had lived, the Soviet Union had been at the other end of the intercontinental ballistic missiles pointed our way. Through my mother’s mother, Josephine Carroll, we were Scots-Irish; through my mother’s father, Henry Hefley, we were French-German from Alsace-Lorraine. Through my father’s mother, Alice Budd, we were surely English. All of our forebears connected us to the known world; now, we were connected to Russia, still largely unknown and mysterious almost a decade after breakup of the Soviet Union. We were Russian; we had a Russian grandfather. Our history expanded across an ocean, across continents, across time and space. I had always felt American, with my Scots-Irish-French-German-English
forebears amalgamated in the melting pot that was said to be America, but my father was a first-genera
tion American, a Russki, a Polack. His father was a more recent immigrant than my Carroll-
Hefley-Budd ancestors; he would speak English with an accent, if he spoke it at all. He would
follow unusual customs, eat unusual foods. Now I remembered: he was of a different religion.
Maybe he was Catholic. Or Russian Orthodox. Or Jewish.

We had grown up in a world where the Soviet Union had sworn to bury us, but I had
always felt a kinship with the people of that vast, forested country. When one of the big photo
magazines of the era, Life or Look, ran a double-truck black-and-white photograph of a room full
of Soviet children, I studied their faces. They looked like me and my classmates at Willow Springs
School, with their solemn faces and shy smiles, the little girls in plaid dresses and hair ribbons like
mine. They were children I would have wanted to play with, be pen pals with.

Or if we weren’t Russian, we were Polish. Numerous Polish kings were named Casimir,
like my grandfather, or Kazimierz; the son of King Casimir IV even became Saint Casimir. Surely
a man named Casimir Steckiewicz was Russian only because Russia ruled over Poland when he
was born. We imagined the Steckiewicz castle moldering in Poland, awaiting the return of its
rightful heirs to their ancestral home. When I related this fantasy to Charlie’s mother-in-law, she
didn’t laugh: an American friend of hers had discovered she was the heir of a castle in the former
Czechoslovakia.

Unearthing only one birth certificate added another mystery: Whom did it belong to? It
could be my father’s. But, then again, it could be his brother’s. I wondered which of them had
been named Stanley Valentine. The birth date didn’t jibe with what we knew as his birth date,
December 3, but maybe he hadn’t known his birthday. Maybe he had picked a date, just like he
picked a name. My maternal grandmother’s birthday was December 3; maybe he thought it would
be congenial to share her birthday. My mother suspected my father of being older than he admitted; as it was, there was an almost thirteen-year age gap between them. Perhaps he thought she would be reluctant to marry someone even older. If this were his birth certificate, it would make him almost fifteen years older.

But if Stanley Valentine was his brother and his mother gave birth to him in February of 1910, she still could have given birth to my father in December of 1911. Maybe my father wasn’t the oldest, as I had believed. Maybe I was wrong about that.

And if the birth certificate of Stanley Valentine Steckiewicz, born in Portland, Maine, didn’t belong to my father, I wondered just what his name really was and when and where he was really born.

As our questions multiplied, more than ever, my brother and I wanted to know. Although we both wanted to undertake this quest, we both had full lives, Charles as director of the University Art Gallery at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces, me as a graduate student at the University of North Texas in Denton. And so, beyond our efforts to spark memories, once again we put off the search for later, as if later we would have more time, as if we had forever. Once again we expanded the mythology surrounding my father. But gnawing away under our stories was the knowledge that our legends were lies; as children of the Sixties and Seventies who had grown up chafing against the lies of Vietnam and Watergate, we wanted the truth, even though, as a graduate student in a post-modern world, I was learning again one of the lessons of the Sixties: there are many truths. I remembered quoting in my history thesis Ray Mungo, formerly of the Liberation News Service, who pointed out that facts and truth are not necessarily the same thing.
For years, far in the back of my mind, on the list of a thousand and one things I wanted to do someday, I had meant to try to solve the mysteries, to answer my questions. For years, I thought I had all the time in the world. Even after Stanley’s unexpected comment and my brother’s discovery of the birth certificate, we let more years slip away, contenting ourselves with mythologizing, confining our search to trying to capture elusive memories like lightning bugs in a pickle jar. We didn’t make any moves to get closer to the full story. Until now.

We don’t have forever. We are middle-aged; if we weren’t baby boomers, we might even admit to being old. “Fifty is the decade when your friends start dying.” My friend Norma told me that when I turned fifty. She was right. Friends have died; have lost lengths of colon and lumps in their breasts, lungs and lives; have fought and are fighting cancer. It’s no longer our parents who are dying; our generation is dying. “Everybody knows they’re going to die, but nobody believes it,” Morrie Schwartz said. I believe it. I can see my life arcing across the sky like a missile, only now it’s heading rapidly downward toward its inevitable conclusion, picking up speed as it goes. Once, my life seemed infinite, even though I knew, of course, it wasn’t. Now, I can see its ending written in the sky. Finally, memories and mythology are no longer enough. I see my mother’s memory failing at eighty-five, and I know memories are not secure, were never secure, as I had once supposed. I want to know my father—Daddy—the man whom I look like, the man who shaped my life, by his absence more than his presence. I want to know about the life of this man about whom I know so little because he died before I was curious about his life before me. I was trained as a newspaper librarian and a historian. Here was my chance to put my research experience into practice. I would investigate my own father’s history; I would find, if it were possible, the real Charles Julien Lovell. I wondered if I would be able, all these years later, to find my father.
Chapter 2

Strawberry Fields Forever

Let me take you down where I’m going to—
Strawberry Fields. Nothing is real.
—John Lennon and Paul McCartney

One by one, I turn the leaves from a book of lavishly illustrated fairy tales: my childhood. From each page, a symphony of sensory details swells and swirls, transporting me to a world I long ago lost. I see our small, shingled cottage, a fairy-tale cottage if ever there was one, painted vivid pink and trimmed in pastel green, snug in a valley, sheltered by the branches of towering oak and maple trees. This was home, where I spent the first ten years of my life: The Strawberry Patch.

Mama and Daddy—except they weren’t Mama and Daddy in 1949; they were Dixie and Charles, “Gosling” and “Ubique”—bought the tree-kissed lot on South Oakwood Avenue, then an unpaved country lane in the village of Willow Springs, Illinois, because of its location: one block from the northern edge of the Palos Woods of the Cook County Forest Preserve District. Their love of nature had brought my parents together. “We bumped into each other on a mountain,” Mama always told us. That was our origin story, the tale that led to our creation and the beginning of the world. As a young woman, my mother had organized “sunrise breakfasts” in the countryside immediately north of the edge of her southern Oklahoma hometown. She and her chums would bicycle to a favorite spot and cook breakfast over a campfire, enjoying the spectacle of the sun rising over the eastern horizon, listening to the morning birdsong, and glorying in escaping for an hour or so the confines of small-town life. At the University of Oklahoma, she had been avidly interested in botany and geology, participating in field trips to the ancient Arbuckle Mountains located between the university, in Norman, and Ardmore, where
she grew up. After graduating in 1946, with a degree in letters, she had moved to Colorado. “I wanted to climb mountains,” she said. All her life she had dreamed of mountains, and in the mountains, she would meet my father.

My father was a naturalist; as a young man living in Pasadena, California, he had discovered three new species of wildflowers. Over the years, he had climbed mountains and camped out from Mexico to Canada. His hero was the naturalist John Muir for whom my parents would name my brother, Charles Muir. “Climb the mountains and get their glad tidings,” Muir wrote, and they did. Like Muir, they saw God in nature. As newlyweds, they lived in a cramped efficiency apartment on Blackstone Avenue near the University of Chicago, where my father worked at the University of Chicago Press and my mother at the Billings Hospital library; on weekends, they would escape the stifling city and make excursions to outlying areas: the Wisconsin Dells, Pelican Lake, the Indiana sand dunes. On one of those excursions, they discovered Willow Springs and what we always called the “forest preserves,” and it became a favorite day trip. They would take the bus from Chicago, bringing a picnic lunch, and spend the day tramping in the woods, observing the birds, insects, butterflies, trees, and wildflowers, and how they changed with every season. Daddy would bring along his 35mm camera to record interesting flora and fauna. The forest was their church, and their woodland excursions were its sermons. Their reverence for nature and our proximity to the woods would help shape my childhood.

On the wall of my writing room hangs a darkened-with-age oil painting: a small thatched cottage, in subtle shades of brown and purple, smoke rising from its chimney, surrounded by tall pines, snow-capped peaks behind it, painted by an artist from war-torn eastern Europe. The
painting has hung in every one of my homes, ever since my first apartment on Hillcrest Avenue in Dallas when I was twenty. Before that, it held pride of place in every one of my family’s homes, starting with the apartment my parents lived in as newlyweds. It represents home to me. A Chicago department store had advertised receipt of a shipment of oil paintings by European artists impoverished and disrupted by the war, which had ended only two years before. Mama and Daddy had spent hours pondering the selections, deciding just which scene they wanted as the focal point of their apartment. In the end, they selected the oil of the little house in the woods. I imagine that when they looked at the cottage they imagined the cottage in the woods they would build one day, where they would raise the seven children they wanted. And so when they found the parcel of land in Willow Springs, they set about building their own little house in the woods.

The house plans were from a pattern, much like the Butterick and Simplicity patterns I would years later select for custom-made dresses. They hired men to raise the shell and do the electrical work; then, Daddy, with the help of friends, did the finish work, wallpapering the small rooms with the cheery, colorful wallpaper Mama had chosen from big sample books: yellow floral for the living room; light blue with peach flowers for their bedroom, and strawberry-vine-covered for the kitchen, a fitting motif for a home christened after the small, fragrant wild strawberries that sprang up in abundance in the summer. Several years later, Mama contributed a piece to an employee magazine about “My Most Memorable Thanksgiving”: it was 1949; she and Daddy were camping out on their lot under the canopy of trees and stars, the house still a dream, their feast a mulligan stew cooked over a blazing bonfire. They had already lost one baby, a boy, who died at birth the year before, and I wouldn’t be conceived for three more
months, but here was happiness, something for which to give thanksgiving: in this lot would rise
their very own cottage, almost in the woods.

Originally, the cottage was covered in gray shingles, trimmed with white and with yellow
shutters, a house I instantly recognized on my first visit to New England; the quintessential gray
clapboard New England cottage, a cottage that echoed my father’s New England past, bleak,
windswep, and gray—and yet as familiar as Indian pudding or the Saturday pot of baked beans
and brown bread. But after a few years, when its shutters needed re-painting, my father, at my
mother’s behest, painted the house the pink and pastel green that turned it into a fairy-tale
cottage.

Willow Springs contained other storybook houses. It was an old town, incorporated as
Spring Forest in 1892, but with white settlement in the area dating as far back as the late 1830s.
An abundance of Victorian houses adorned the town with their turrets and gables and curlicues
suggesting castles and wedding cakes. Right next door, to the south, was a two-story red
clapboard house trimmed with white jigsaw work. It wasn’t Victorian, exactly; it seemed
foreign—exotic—as indeed it was. The Rašimas family who lived there was Lithuanian and so
was the white jigsaw-work trim, bespeaking forests and witches and gingerbread cottages in the
woods. Their cousins’ two-story house, up on the hill on Nolton Avenue, was even more
magical, painted pink like ours but decorated with millwork in a fantasia of colors, brought to
life not by a mere architect but by an artist. These were nothing like the gray or brown or green
shingled houses or the sturdy stone-block houses or even the white frame houses that were usual
in the village; nor were they like the modern brick split-level houses on newly developed blocks
or in the new subdivision. These houses promised mysteries and magic.
Another mysterious house was the turreted, gabled three-story house behind an iron gate high up the hill on Charleton Avenue; every day when taking the shortcut to school I passed the house and every day I wondered about it. The house had been, my classmates said, a Civil War hospital; now the bodies of all the soldiers who died there haunted it. I imagined I could feel the past breathing from its pores. Two spinster schoolteachers lived there; my classmates said they were witches. Only witches would live in a haunted house. One Halloween, emboldened by a dare, I braved the immense lawn and knocked on their door, trying to slow the panicked beating of my heart, remaining ready to run at the slightest hint of danger. One of the witches, wearing an old sweater, her gray hair in a bun, answered the door. I could see the other witch—perhaps they were sisters—standing in the doorway.

“Trick or treat,” I said, my heart pounding.

The one who answered the door told me to wait and disappeared into the back of the house, returning after what seemed like an eternity with the reward for my bravery: a hotdog, steaming hot, dressed with mustard and relish. They weren’t witches at all; they were only old women living alone in an old house. Years later, I wondered if they were having hotdogs for supper. I knew they weren’t used to having trick-or-treaters so they probably hadn’t bought candy. The following May Day, I once again crossed the immense lawn and left a May basket, woven of construction paper and stuffed with posies, on their front doorknob.

From our house, to the southwest as the crow flies, lay the forest primeval, our Garden of Eden, Arden, Walden, Hundred-Acre Wood, where we picnicked and played Pooh-sticks, climbed trees and collected arrowheads, fished and kept a lookout out for heffalumps. Even as babies, Charlie and I accompanied Mama and Daddy on their woodland rambles. They would
walk up to the end of Oakwood Avenue, turn east for a few yards down West Eighty-seventh Street, and disappear south into the woods along the well-worn Old Country Lane. In snapshots, a fat pink baby lying on a quilt spread on the forest floor kicks her curled toes with glee; behind her, apple blossoms paint the sky. That baby is me. A little boy, my brother, Charlie, long blonde curly locks covered with a sunhat, tongue sticking from his mouth like a snake’s, crawls toward the camera. A toddler, bonnet over her bowl haircut, bandage over her right eyebrow, small khaki knapsack on her back, carrying a tin canteen, imitates her little brother, crawling like a baby, tongue stuck out. Me again. The townspeople thought Mama and Daddy were awful: “Making those poor little children walk all that distance—and carrying those heavy loads.” But we were woodland sprites; the forest was our natural habitat. We hiked and explored, examined bugs, chewed on tufts of wild prairie grasses; we broke apart the cattails lining Maple Lake, blowing their fluff puffs through the air.

Winter in Willow Springs is white, cold, and crisp. In a snapshot, Daddy holds securely in his arms an eight-day-old bundle swaddled in pink bunting, cheeks pinkened by the cold. In those years, winter, as designated by the weather rather than the calendar, was northern Illinois’s longest season, stretching from the first snow in November, always before my birthday, until the last snow melted, usually sometime in April. We would bundle up in snowsuits and galoshes, hats and mittens, and step out into a world transformed by snow. Daddy would show us how to identify the tracks of the birds that wintered in northern Illinois and of the foxes and chipmunks and other animals whose claws left hieroglyphics on the snow’s pristine white surface. Black-capped chickadees were my favorite birds of winter. We would fly down ice-packed Eighty-seventh Street where a perfect hill bordered the forest preserve, holding tight to our sled or
toboggan, and we would skate on the frozen-solid canal. At Christmas, I went caroling with the young people from my church, trudging up and down the hilly streets, stopping afterward at the preacher’s house for steaming mugs of hot chocolate and spiced nuts in front of the fire.

Every winter, a certain dog appeared, coming from the direction of Prospect Avenue, and frolicked with us in the snow, his body twisting as he leaped on his great legs to catch the snowballs we tossed for him. He was large, exuberant, brown, and Marmadukian. We never saw him at any other time of year, so we dubbed him “Snowball Hound.” The appearance of Snowball Hound was part of life’s inevitable, inalterable rhythms: night followed day; spring followed winter, which followed autumn, which followed summer, which followed spring, world without end, amen. Sometimes I might overhear something or see something that suggested otherwise: mug shots of Barbara and Patricia Grimes, the sisters who had disappeared right after Christmas from a Chicago movie house after seeing Elvis Presley in *Love Me Tender*; a map of where their nude bodies had been discovered early in the new year, dumped right off German Church Road in our forest preserve. A classmate, while we filed into the hallway and knelt close to the wall in an air raid drill, claimed a bomber had flown over Chicago with an H-bomb in an open bomb bay. Stark black headlines and black-and-white photos telling of the early December fire at Our Lady of the Angels school in Chicago, where 92 students in uniforms, students who might have been me, burned to a crisp, if they didn’t jump to their deaths. But those headlines, those proclamations by classmates, receded into the background, and spring followed winter.

Spring is my favorite of all the seasons. As I walk to school, I am observant, eager to be the first to spot a red-breasted robin returned from its winter migration to the south. The robins are a sure sign of spring, as are the about-to-emerge skunk cabbages. In a grove in the woods,
Daddy kneels in the snow and digs through sodden leaves to reveal the odiferous plants. Later in that same grove, hooded Jack-in-the-pulpits and mayapples with their umbrella-like leaves will emerge. In our front yard, crocuses are the first flowers to appear, peeking their golden and purple heads through the white blanket of snow. Yellow buds emerge from forsythia branches, scenting the air with their spicy perfume. I can hear the delicate trickle of snow beginning to melt and can smell the world coming back to life. As I shed the heavy coat and mittens and tam and muffler and flannel-lined jeans that confined me all winter, I shed not just clothes but burdens, although what those burdens might be, I couldn’t say. I feel light, as if I could be lifted by the breeze that carries aloft our fanciful, hand-decorated kites, as if I could float away.

Soon, a bed under a tree in our yard bursts with a gaudy array of tulips—tulips of every description—plain tulips (if a tulip can ever be plain), parrot tulips, fringed tulips, red tulips, red-and-white tulips, red-and-yellow tulips, purple tulips, purple and white tulips, and even some tulips so purple they’re black—the famous black tulip. As the days lengthen and the soil warms, other flowers emerge, purple and tri-color violets with their heart-shaped leaves, so tiny I must kneel and touch my nose almost to the earth to inhale their delicate fragrance, as I must with my favorite lilies of the valley with their white bell-shaped flowers. Masses of lavender phlox border the house. Some of the plants remind me of the cats I so love: I imagine that the purple and yellow pansies I planted under a tall tree in the side yard have faces like the Persian kittens looking down at me from my bedroom wall; the limbs of the pussy willow shrub to the back of the house are lined with soft velvet kitten paws.

Up and down village streets, lilacs are blooming, lush and lavish, scenting the air with their intoxicating smell, and I gather an armful to bring home. In the forest preserve, apple blossoms burst forth in fragrant glory, their fragile pale pink and white blooms looking like tiny
ballerina tutus, their perfume the essence of spring. Years later, when I was a newspaper
librarian, in the spring I would go to Columbus, Ohio, for a computer users group meeting; some
years it would coincide with apple blossom time. I would walk the streets of downtown
Columbus, inhaling deep gulps of my childhood. “I think of those years as the apple blossom
years,” my mother told me one day recently.

Summer promises long, languid days. Even though school won’t let out for another week
or so, the season unofficially begins on Memorial Day, May 30. Every year, beginning in first
grade, I march with Brownie Troop 328 in the American Legion parade, wearing my white socks
and gloves and Brownie uniform and beanie, but wishing I could be a baton twirler and wear a
skimpy satin outfit with tasseled white boots. As the days lengthen, time seems to stretch out
forever, like taffy you stretch and pull until it becomes as glossy as silk. I walk to the dime store
to buy movie magazines with Jean Peterson over the now-paved streets, whose black surface
bubbles up in the heat leaving tarry goo stuck to the bottom of my Keds.

By summer, the backyard is ripe with vegetables: tomatoes, cucumbers, squash, melons
with twining, flowering vines, and corn “as high as an elephant’s eye.” Sometimes, we take pails
to the forest and pick wild berries and crabapples that Daddy transforms into jewel-hued jams,
jellies, and preserves, sealing them under hot paraffin in Mason jars. In 1948, his jellies had
taken eight blue ribbons at the Cook County Fair at Soldier Field in Chicago. Or we hunt for
flints and arrowheads, which we find in abundance, the area having been a central gathering
place for the Potawatomi, Illinois, and Miami tribes. At night, we sit on the front steps, the thrum
of cicadas and locusts providing the soundtrack of summer. Lightning bugs sparkle in the black
night, flashing on and off. Occasionally, I catch them in a mayonnaise jar with holes pierced in
the lid. Some summers, we catch the Santa Fe Texas Chief at Dearborn Station and travel to Ardmore and our grandparents’ house, lulled into a meditative state by the clackety-clack of the iron wheels rolling over the steel tracks and the melodious voices of the black conductors calling out the stops: “Streator,” “Chillicothe,” Galesburg,” Fort Madison,” “Marceline,” “Topeka,” and finally, “Pauls Valley,” “Ardmore.” Traveling to the South further stretches time; as we step off the train, we step backward into time, into the rhythm of a small, sleepy southern town, where every afternoon, after a big, home-cooked dinner, ladies nap from two to four while the coolers hum. Back home, on the Fourth of July, I sit on the front steps as night falls, lazily circling a lighted punk through the air with one hand and a sparkler with the other. I use the punk to light the black snakes that burn and hiss and curl on the flagstone walk, while in the distance, Roman candles and cherry bombs and bottle rockets sizzle and dazzle and then fade away. So, eventually, does summer.

Autumn unofficially begins with the first day at Willow Springs School, a new cotton plaid dress with white collar and cuffs, new pencils, a new notebook and book bag, and a new teacher. The leaves of the oaks and maples begin to turn color—from the greens of spring and summer to burnished red, orange, yellow, and amber and then brown, falling to the ground as they die. Underfoot, the fallen leaves make a satisfying crunch when I step on them. After he rakes our yard, Daddy fills a large barrel with leaves, which he will transform into rich, earthy humus for his flower and vegetable beds. But before the leaves can transform themselves into nourishment for plants, they provide cushioning for our own version of a ride at Kiddyland, the local amusement park. Charlie and I roll the barrel to the top of the hill fronting our lot and take turns stuffing ourselves into the barrel, protected by leaves. One of us gives the other a push, and
down the hill the barrel rolls, faster, faster, faster, until—crash!—it slams into the large oak closest to the picture window. The rider crawls out and pushes the barrel back up the hill for the next person’s turn. On our walks, alerted by their honking, we scan the sky for the large V’s of geese heading south for the winter. Daddy’s pet name for Mama is “Gosling”; the other picture on our living room wall is an Oriental print of geese in flight.

It must have been autumn when Queenie disappeared. Queenie was the butterscotch and white dog, part collie, with a tail that curled over her back, who had come to live with us. She belonged to neighbors down the street, but in those years, people as often as not let their dogs roam free; Queenie roamed so often to our yard and accompanied us so often on our forest expeditions, that eventually it made more sense for her to live with us, and so she became our dog. In a snapshot, I have my arm folded over Queenie’s sturdy back, looking into her brown eyes, both of us smiling with what can only be contentment. I look like I am about eighteen months old and about the same height as Queenie. She, like Nana in *Peter Pan*, was a nursemaid of a dog who looked after the children in her care. Perhaps she comforted me when I was only four and my father was in the hospital after his first, almost fatal, heart attack. Perhaps, without my father to hold onto, I held tight to my sturdy, loyal dog in whose eyes I detected perfect understanding.

Then, one day Queenie didn’t come home. Here is another memory, as indelible as India ink, as unforgettable as a movie seen so many times I know its lines by heart: the four of us, bundled up, holding hands, walking up and down the hilly streets of Willow Springs calling, “Queenie! Queenie! Queenie! Where *are* you, Queenie? Queenie, come home! Come home, Queenie!” The night is pitch; sleet pelts us; its ice-cold needles pierce our faces, stinging our foreheads. My head is bursting; I am in pain and the orange children’s aspirin I swallow can’t
cure the worst of that pain. We searched the village; we searched the forest; Daddy searched all
the area animal shelters. We never found Queenie; she never came home. And so I learned: dogs
vanish without a trace. I learned how, in one minute—and you don’t know when that minute will
be, the world can change forever. One minute you are safe, secure, dog at your side; the next, the
world is torn asunder; you are alone and, hope and pray all you want, Queenie will never come
back, never ever.

It was certainly autumn when Daddy had his first heart attack, the foreshadowing, five
years before the second, final attack. I hear the Byrds singing the words from Ecclesiastes: “To
every thing, turn, turn, turn, there is a season, turn, turn, turn. . . . A time to be born, a time to die
/ A time to plant, a time to reap.” The autumn I turned four, Daddy was setting out an
extravaganza of bulbs when he clutched his hands to his heart and keeled over in the tulip bed.
Where was I? I must have been at home; I may have been nearby. Maybe I was digging worms
and cutting them in two to see if they would grow new heads and tails while Daddy made holes
to poke the bulbs into. I wonder how much I knew inside my small four-year-old self. I wonder if
that’s when I first took fear inside of me, swallowed it whole, and made it my constant, unspoken
companion. The bulbs Daddy planted thrived; every spring, they burst from the ground, ablaze
with color, vibrant with life, as did Daddy himself for a little more than five years.

The village of Willow Springs seems like it might have burst from the pages of a fairy
tale. It was, after all, a village, not a town, not a city, and villages, like forests, are the stuff of
fairy tales. Willow Springs, with its terrain of hills and ravines and forests, sits on a moraine
carved by ancient glaciers. Even its name suggests the serene beauty of weeping willow trees and
gurgling springs. The Potawatomi, one of the tribes that hunted in the area, called it “the place of healing waters.” Besides being rich in natural beauty, the village was rich in stories.

Among my favorite reading was a series of books written and illustrated by Lois Lenski about children who lived in very different regions of the United States in those years before television and mass culture homogenized American life: *Strawberry Girl, Texas Tomboy, Coal Camp Girl, Shoo-fly Girl, Boom Town Boy, Houseboat Girl*. I was going to be an authoress when I grew up, like another of my favorites, Louisa May Alcott, and I imagined the storybooks I would write someday about children like my classmates. Why, one of my classmates, Betty Jo, was a “houseboat girl” herself, and one day after school I was invited to visit her houseboat on the Des Plaines River. Vickii Beliel’s family lived in a trailer house. Johnny Weidel only came to school in Willow Springs part of the year; the other part of the year he lived in Laredo, Texas. His yard had huge wagon wheels on either side of the walk, just like the ones on the covered wagons on *Wagon Train*. In Greece, devastated by first a world war and then a civil war, Joyce Pappas’s mother had paid the doctor two cartons of cigarettes to deliver Joyce. For special occasions, Kathy Jesse’s mother fried rosettes, a delicate, crisp Scandinavian pastry shaped like a flower and sprinkled with powdered sugar. Leonore Berglund’s mother covered all of the living room furniture with heavy plastic, which stuck to our sweaty legs. Bridget Doogan had a pet monkey that she carried around on her shoulder. Helen Kalina, who lived across the street, thought the name of the Hawaiian volcano Mauna Loa was so beautiful that she named her daughter after it, although she spelled it wrong. Christine Awana Baker was actually Hawaiian. And Winona had an Indian first name. All of these stories existed, right in my tiny village of only 1,300 people.
The last names of my neighbors and classmates inscribed some of the history of Willow Springs and its residents: Berglund and Peterson; Gallo, Stancato, Kapella, Tassi, Toteno, and LaRocca; Pappas; DeGroot; Engstrom; Montplaisir; McCain, McSweeney, Lee, Curlee, and Doogan. (The prolific Doogans populated an entire block of Maple Avenue known to everyone as Dooganville). But most of the last names—Dombrauskas—Lithuanian; Gluszek, Malinowski, Nowicki, and Pankow, all Polish—told of the Eastern European heritage that gave Willow Springs much of its flavor. I can see the women in their babushkas, heavy black coats, thick lisle stockings, and galoshes, waiting for the bus on Archer Avenue at the foot of the hill. Some of the families had immigrated one or more generations ago; others, more recently. On our block, to our right lived three Lithuanian families, the Rašimases, a family whose name I no longer remember, and the Kubaitises. To our left lived the Vojaks, who were Bohemian, from what was then called Czechoslovakia. The most fascinating name—it contained only consonants!—belonged to another Bohemian family, the Vlks. Around the corner lived the Tomašunases, Lithuanian, although by the time I left Willow Springs, they had officially become the very American Thomases.

One day, Mrs. Pyter, the first-grade teacher, introduced a tall, quiet girl, with long braids, named Elizabeth, and her brother, named Jan, pronounced Yon. They were DP’s, or displaced persons, Czechs whose family and country had been devastated by the war. They were to join our class, and they spoke not a word of English. I could see the fear in Elizabeth’s eyes, surrounded by a sea of children speaking an impenetrable tongue. She looked like she wanted to cry. They didn’t stay long in our class or school; I don’t know where they next landed as their family tried to right what had been ripped asunder.
Our next-door neighbors to the south, the Rašimas family—Boleslavas and Marcija and their four daughters—were also DP’s, uprooted after World War II from their home in Lithuania, first by the Germans and then the Soviets, and sent to camps in Germany. Aušrele, Agnes, Bridget, and Cecilia Rašimas (only Aušrele then went by her Lithuanian name; now all but Bridget do) were beautiful, fair-skinned girls with large blue-gray eyes and long, thick golden-brown braids who always wore floral dirndl skirts. Much later, I learned they hated those skirts and old-fashioned braids, for which some children made fun of them. Inside their house, sheaves of wheat were crossed on the dining-room wall over a table where they ate mysterious meals accompanied by heavy, dark bread. Mrs. Rašimas knew how to identify mushrooms, and she and my father would go on mushroom-hunting expeditions in the woods, where she taught him which mushrooms were safe, which poisonous.

Cecilia, who was two years older than I, was an artist. She was always sketching, usually pictures of the glamorous, flame-haired comic-strip reporter Brenda Starr. She shared her favorite Lithuanian children’s book, in which a little bear walks through the forest. His paws crunch the fallen leaves, making the sound, “Šliumpu-pumpu, šliumpu-pumpu.”

Because I wanted to learn to speak Lithuanian, Cecilia and her sisters, who sometimes babysat for us, taught me useful phrases. The one I remember learning, although I remember only the English translation: ”My brother is running down the street naked.” I repeated it over and over. Finally, I confessed what it meant, and Charlie pummeled me with his fists, as I clutched my sides with laughter.

Sometimes I pretended I was Lithuanian. I had never thought about what I was, other than an American, which seemed so ordinary when faced with exotic masses, redolent of incense, chanted by priests wearing surplice and vestments in a language nobody else spoke, and
dark, dense bread, and life stories of disruption, upheaval, chaos. We had an English name; we
attended a small, white Presbyterian church with a steeple, the kind on postcards of quaint New
England villages; we ate soft, white Sunbeam bread, with a blond little girl, who looked like
Sally in the Dick and Jane stories, on its wrapper.

One of my favorite children’s stories was the Russian story of Baba Yaga, the witch who
lives on the edge of a forest in a house sitting on chicken legs that she can raise and lower at will.
It did not seem at all unlikely that such a house might exist, hidden in the forest preserve just
beyond the 300 block of South Oakwood Avenue.

My other favorite stories were The Adventures of Boofus and Peter Pepper, a long-
running series of stories that Daddy invented for Charlie and me. They always started something
like this:

Once upon a time, in a cozy cottage on the edge of a large forest, lived a family of bears
that was named the Bear family: Papa Bear, Mama Bear, Betsy Bear, and Buster Bear,
and their talking black dog, Boofus, and their green parrot, Peter Pepper, who could, of
course, also talk.

Charlie and I understood that we—Daddy, Mama, Charlie, and me—were really the Bear
family, and that Queenie was Boofus. The only thing our family lacked was a parrot. Betsy and
Buster were always involved in adventures, with complications, but in the end everything always
turned out all right. After Daddy died, I always meant to write down the stories I remembered. I
never did. And so, today, I remember only one:

Once upon a time, the Soviet Union sent a cosmonaut—his name was Yuri—into orbit in
outer space. Both the Soviets and the Americans were monitoring the spacecraft as it hurtled
through space. (This was, after all, at the height of the Space Race between the United States and
the Soviet Union.) Suddenly, while soaring over northern Illinois, enemy territory, Yuri’s spacecraft disappeared from radar screens. The American military and Soviet spies leaped into action, racing each other to be first to find the crashed space capsule. It was more than a matter of national pride; it might determine the outcome of the Cold War; it might mean war or peace.

Meanwhile, while the Americans and the Soviet spies were fanning out all over Chicagoland, Yuri was wandering, dazed, through the forest preserves. His spacecraft had crashed, right in Boomerang Slough in the Bears’ woods, but Yuri managed to eject safely and was now using his compass as he tried to get his bearings. Boofus, with Peter Pepper perched on his back, had been berrying in the woods that day. They were gobbling blackberries when they heard a loud sonic boom, followed by a thunderous crash.

“Woof! Woof!” Boofus said, looking to the sky.

Peter Pepper flitted over Boofus’s neck and listened intently. “It sounds like it’s coming from over there,” he said, craning his round head, and off they went.

About here, the plot becomes murky in my memory. Boofus and Peter Pepper alerted Betsy and Buster, who brought the cosmonaut home to Papa and Mama Bear, along the way introducing him to Coca-Cola. Somehow, the Bears ended up taking Yuri on their family vacation to Disneyland, a plot twist perhaps sparked by Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev not being permitted to visit Disneyland on a U.S. visit as he had hoped. In any case, war was averted, Boofus and Peter Pepper were hailed as heroes and given a ticker-tape parade down LaSalle Street, and Buster and Betsy gained a pen pal in the Soviet Union, a real Russian cosmonaut.

These narratives shaped my vision of how the world would be: I would have adventures, with complications, but with the help of my family and my animal friends, all would end well.
But forests and fairy tales sometimes hold terrors. Murderers dump the nude bodies of young girls in the forest preserves. Wolves and witches devour children in fairy tales. One night, I dreamed of a wolf. I still remember how he emerged from the woods, as if in a slow-motion Cinerama movie, ambled to our house, and waited outside my bedroom window for me to come out, sticking his gray snout against the glass, baring his large, jagged, yellow teeth. The next day I was scared to go outside, and I even checked all the windows to make sure they were securely locked.

I wonder now who was the wolf I so feared, the wolf that dwelled deep in my subconscious, coming to me in my dreams, letting me know he would be waiting, patiently waiting, always waiting. I could lock the windows, but eventually I would have to come outside and he would be waiting. I wonder if he was my father’s fatal heart attack, waiting to happen, a fate I must have known lurked, as children do, from the age of four when my father keeled over in the yard while planting tulips. If I stayed at home with the windows closed, maybe I could stave it off, save my own life and my father’s too.
Chapter 3
Lavengro, Word Master

. . . Learn’d philologists, who chase
A panting syllable through time and space;
Start it at home, and hunt it in the dark,
To Gaul, to Greece, and into Noah’s Ark.
—William Cowper

Besides the woods, my father loved words, finding in the dense tangles of their histories a source of endless fascination worthy of study, and he contrived to craft a life that allowed him to explore his passions. By the time my memories begin, he worked at home, having parted ways with the University of Chicago Press in a disagreement over the conditions of his return to work while convalescing after his first heart attack. From then on, he worked as a “lexical consultant,” contracting his lexicographical services to Clarence Barnhart for whom he worked on the red *Thorndike-Barnhart* school dictionaries, a proposed but never published *University Dictionary*, and the *World Book Dictionary*, and continued his independent research into the history of words. My father’s specialties were Americanisms and Canadianisms, the distinctive words or distinctive usages found in the English of the new world. His pursuit of the earliest recorded uses of words in American English had gained him a foothold in the field of lexicography, and his pursuit of the earliest recorded uses of words in Canadian English would lay the foundation for the historical dictionary he envisioned.

And so our little house was, besides being home, a workshop. Words, their histories and meanings, were the raw materials; “citation slips,” the semi-finished materials. These were “slips” of paper, cut from newsprint or recycled letters by a paper-cutter to the size of 4x6-inch index cards, on which, in those pre-personal computer days, lexicographers recorded the stories of words, their definitions, histories, examples of their evolving usage, and the evidentiary
sources. Daddy sat at a long blue metal table, the kind set up for extra room when all the kinfolk come for dinner, its surface piled with newspapers, magazines, files, and the sheets he chopped into citation slips. Lining the table’s edges were squares containing facts about every state of the union (Illinois, state capital: Springfield; state tree: white oak; state bird: cardinal; state flower: violet) and every president (Abraham Lincoln; 16th President, 1861–1865; born February 12, 1809; birthplace, Kentucky; vice presidents, Hannibal Hamlin, 1861–1865; Andrew Johnson, 1865), facts I committed to memory.

When I spotted in a bookstore the biography of James Murray, the first editor of the Oxford English Dictionary, its title caught my eye: Caught in the Web of Words: James Murray and the Oxford English Dictionary. I thought of my father. Daddy had been hard of hearing since childhood, ever since a foster family was too tightfisted to take him to the doctor when he cried in pain from an earache, instead cursing him to shut up. As a result, he lost much of his hearing. He had a hearing aid but, when caught in the web of words, didn’t always wear it. The prolific inventor Thomas Edison, also hard of hearing from childhood, is said to have called his poor hearing a blessing; it let him concentrate on his work uninterrupted, resulting in his 1,093 patents. My father felt the same. Once I locked Charlie in my parents’ bedroom closet. I don’t remember why—usually I was a protective older sister—maybe just to see what would happen. Charlie cried and cried for someone to let him out, but Mama was at work and I, his tormentor, was the only one who could hear his plaintive wails. Daddy, head bent, pencil in hand, hearing aid tossed in a box on the table, worked on, engrossed in his words. Finally, curiosity satisfied and no doubt feeling guilty for such meanness, I unlocked the closet and freed my whimpering brother.
Daddy’s fingers moved rapidly back and forth, up and down, over the keys of his old black Royal portable typewriter, the very model used by Rachel Carson, Dashiell Hammett, and Ernest Hemingway. Despite being the Quiet DeLuxe model, its keys clackety-clacked, a sound as resonant and reassuring as my father’s snore. My father must have bought the typewriter in Pasadena, either before the war, when it first went on the market, or after the war, when the Royal Typewriter Company converted from wartime weapons production back to the manufacture of typewriters. It was the typewriter on which he began his freelance writing career and his lifelong correspondence with H. L. Mencken, which led ultimately to his career as a lexicographer, what the eminent lexicographer Samuel Johnson himself had termed “a harmless drudge, that busies himself in tracing the original, and detailing the signification of words.” Over the years, when things were tight, he hocked the trusty black typewriter, always managing to redeem it.

I taught myself to hunt and peck on that typewriter. He would let me type citation slips, which I did slowly and painstakingly. After he replaced the sturdy old, sticky-keyed portable with a sleek, modern two-tone Smith-Corona, he passed it along to my grandfather, whose shaky handwriting was illegible. While I was in college, my grandfather passed it along to me. I have held on to that typewriter for some forty years, through too many moves to count. I’ve held onto it although it no longer works, serving only as décor—a relic perched high atop an armoire, a link to history, a prod to memory. I’ve held onto it just as I’ve held onto so many things—books, clothes, including sometimes men—that I haven’t wanted to lose, as if holding tight would keep them from disintegrating, becoming foxed or moth-eaten, keep history from unfolding, the world from rupturing, men from leaving, Daddy from dying.
Behind him, tall gray metal industrial shelves held row upon row of shoeboxes, the best for the purpose being Hush Puppies boxes, which were more rigid than most. Even more shoeboxes stuffed full of slips filled the space under my parents’ bed. In lexicography circles, the volume of my father’s citation slips was legendary. When he joined the Dictionary of Americanisms staff at the University of Chicago, he carted with him from California slips weighing sixty pounds. When he officially began work on the Dictionary of Canadianisms on Historical Principles, he already had collected 50,000 slips.

Occasionally, my tabby cat, Alaska, named for the newest state, slept upside down in a box of slips, one brown tiger-striped leg sticking up in the air like a pork chop, head dangling over the edge. Sharing room on the shelves with the boxes of citation slips were rows and rows and rows of books. David Domelsmith, a childhood friend, remembers being impressed by all the books. Most of them were reference works used to check facts—Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations, Roget’s Thesaurus, Richard B. Morris’s Encyclopedia of American History, a red-spined world atlas, the Encyclopedia Canadiana—and of course dictionaries aplenty, including specialized ones like Eric Partridge’s Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English, in which, when he disagreed with the dictionary’s etymology or definition, Daddy would write in the margin in red pencil in his small, neat hand, “Baloney!” or “Phooey!”

Among the volumes on the shelves were a series of volumes bound in deep wine, with gold lettering and a gold curlicue design with heart-shaped leaves on the spine and an elaborate embossed monogram on the cover. These were the yearbooks of The American Peoples Encyclopedia, distributed by Sears, Roebuck, to which Daddy contributed an annual article about language, reporting on the year’s developments, books, conferences, buzzwords, slang, and neologisms, like sputnik and beatnik, that had entered the language. I loved handling the
yearbooks, which looked like they belonged in the library of the stately home of a British lord, a library with so many books you needed a ladder to reach the top shelf. Every year, I would study the new volume from cover to cover, reading about the people and events of the year past; I would read and reread the “Language” entry, proud of my father’s name at the bottom: CHARLES J. LOVELL.

A historical lexicographer must delve into many caverns to find printed examples of how words are used, so besides reference books, our shelves held other books that might yield examples. In the last years of his life, Daddy concentrated on Canadianisms and the books left on the shelves after his death reflected that. There were Ploughman of the Moon: An Adventure into Memory, the first volume of the memoirs of Robert Service, the Bard of the Yukon, and an autographed copy of Not by Bread Alone, the 1946 book by Vilhjalmur Stefansson, the Canadian Arctic explorer and anthropologist. Stefansson had corresponded with Daddy about pemmican, a sort of jerky made from buffalo or venison or moose mixed up with grease and wild cherries or other berries. Daddy underlined in red or blue pencil words he was tracing, making cryptic notations in the margins.

And besides books, there were stacks and stacks of newspapers. Newspapers are the single richest source for examples of word use illustrating how the meanings of words change and how different words are used for the same thing in different regions. Wherever he traveled, Daddy made a point to read the local newspapers, never knowing what new word or new use of an old word he would find. He passed the habit of careful reading of newspapers on to me; I became a newspaper librarian. While a temporary summer employee engaged in updating the photo files at the Dallas Morning News, I discovered a job I had never heard of—“marker.” A marker got paid to read the entirety of the newspaper, all day every day, and decide under what
subject classifications each story should be filed for quick retrieval. I could scarcely believe it.

Becoming a marker became my aim and when I finally was promoted, I thought I had landed in heaven. Even though I haven’t been a marker for many years—computerized databases have made markers more or less obsolete—no matter where I am, I still read the newspaper just as avidly.

Even before landing my perfect job, I loved the atmosphere of the newspaper reference department. When I first walked into the large space on the third floor of the Dallas Morning News building, I felt instantly at home. Besides having stacks of newspapers piled on seemingly every surface, its aisles were laden with reference books and fine old volumes from the personal library of George Bannerman Dealey, who had been the paper’s owner and publisher until 1946. I arrived, fortuitously, at what would be my second home for almost fifteen years, during the summer of 1978 when the department was being transformed from a “morgue”-cum-gentleman’s library to a modern, up-to-date newspaper research library. That meant the collection of outdated reference books and classic books bearing G. B. Dealey’s bookplates were being “weeded” to make room for current reference books of the sort most useful to reporters and editors. I arrived the very week employees were invited to take home books that were being withdrawn. I couldn’t believe my good fortune! On every aisle were books that that had belonged to someone who treasured books and knowledge, books I coveted—among them Boswell’s Life of Johnson about the great lexicographer whose landmark Dictionary of the English Language was published in 1755. I loaded two sturdy cardboard boxes with books; I could have filled twenty, but it was my first week and I didn’t want to seem greedy. Even after the old books were gone, enough books and newspapers remained to provide a sense of refuge. Going to work every night was going home to childhood with its shelves of reference books and their aura of permanence.
In his book about lexicographers, *Harmless Drudges: Wizards of Language—Ancient, Medieval and Modern*, its title taken from Johnson’s definition, Israel Shenker wrote of Clarence Barnhart, Daddy’s employer, “[He] can hardly wait—seven days a week—to get going. Daily he rises at six to spend the next four hours—more on Sunday—netting words of novelty and interest from a morning newspaper. Journals of right and left satisfy his thirst for opinion and knowledge of linguistic extremes.” He could have been describing my father. My father too spent hours every day scouring papers and magazines and books “netting words of novelty and interest.”

Some days when Daddy needed to go into Chicago to net words, he would take me with him. Unlike his usual trousers and flannel shirt, he would don a handsome suit and I, my Sunday best, which in those years a trip downtown called for. He clutched in one hand his brown leather briefcase; in the other, my small hand, and we would walk down the hill to Archer Avenue, where we would wait at Apolis’s Rexall Drugstore for the Bluebird bus that would take us downtown. One of our stops might be the Chicago Public Library. We ascended its great stairs as if ascending into paradise. Above us was its majestic domed ceiling; around us, white marble glistened. At the age of about seven or eight, I stood on tiptoes to reach the polished wooden counter and signed, in my curvaceous penmanship, my very first library card, a small piece of flimsy paperboard allowing access to unimaginable riches. Daddy would deposit me in the children’s room, where I would select my books, surreptitiously holding my nose to the open pages and breathing in the smell of paper and buckram and glue, hoping the librarians wouldn’t notice, although they must have loved that smell too. If his day’s work took him to the Newberry Library, I waited in the marble lobby with the guard, reading while Daddy disappeared into the room containing microfilm readers on which he scrolled through the microfilmed pages of old newspapers.
Of all the books I acquired in the giveaway, the one that meant the most was H. L. Mencken’s *The American Language: An Inquiry into the Development of English in the United States, Supplement One*, published in 1945. Although my family owned a copy of *Supplement Two*, published three years later, we didn’t possess *Supplement One*, which included in its index the entry “Lovell, Charles J., 366, 580 n.” I turned to each page. The first mention appeared in a note appended to Mencken’s discussion of suffixes. Daddy had submitted a quote from the city street lighting engineer found in the *Los Angeles Record* in 1936: “I have reported the light outage at Ninth and Los Angeles streets.” The second item was a euphemism: garbage-men in Pasadena worked for the *table waste disposal department*. As I pondered the text, I was struck by foreshadowing, words connecting the pages of the book—and therefore Daddy’s life and Daddy’s past—to our lives later, the lives we would live after Daddy.

When he first read the pages surrounding his name in Mencken’s *Supplement One*, he couldn’t have known what was coming: he would soon receive a letter from a woman whom he would marry; he would die; his widow and two children would go on to live lives that don’t include him, but include instead things formed by two of the suffixes, *-age* and *–mobile*, found in Mencken’s list of words: *teacherage* and *bookmobile*. We moved to rural Fox, Oklahoma, where, for one spring, Mother taught second grade in the consolidated school, and where, in the fall, we were scheduled to move into the *teacherage*, a row of small frame white clapboard cottages across from the school built as homes for the teachers. But before we had to (for my mother didn’t think much of the tiny shotgun houses), we moved to Ardmore where she became the *bookmobile* librarian for the newly established Chickasaw Multi-county Library, traveling daily to small rural towns like Thackerville that hungered for books. By the time Mencken’s *American
Language, Supplement Two, appeared in 1948, my father was credited as being one of the contributors upon whom Mencken “leaned heavily,” and his name in the index was followed by eighteen references.

Mencken had begun his own interest in words as a young police reporter in Baltimore around the turn of the twentieth century. His fascination, specifically with how American English and speech diverged from British English, led to occasional newspaper columns and magazine articles on words. The public responded, sending him more words and observations, and his study, at first casual, became methodical, resulting ultimately in the 1919 publication of his groundbreaking work, The American Language: An Inquiry into the Development of English in the United States, when my father was eleven years old. In the completely rewritten and revised 1921 edition, Mencken invited interested readers to send corrections and contributions to his publisher or to his home at 1524 Hollins Street, Baltimore.

My father first noticed words in New Bedford, Massachusetts, the linguistically rich city where he grew up. When I finally visited New Bedford in the summer of 2007, the ATM machine where I replenished my cash supply asked in what language I’d like my transaction: English, Portuguese, Polish, Russian, Spanish, French, Chinese, or Korean. Perhaps my father first became interested in language when immersing himself in the local flora. Studying plants’ Latin names would have provided a short course in words’ linguistic roots, just as learning their regional names would have provided a short course in folklore. On the New Bedford streets, he would have heard many languages; certainly he would have heard Portuguese and French as spoken by French-Canadians, immigrant groups that provided the labor that made New Bedford rich. The Portuguese had come to New Bedford in great numbers—from Portugal, the Azores, Cape Verde, and Madeira—during the city’s heyday as a center of whaling. The French-
Canadians came along with the rise of the cotton mills. In his own home, he must have heard at least some Russian or Polish. The hodgepodge of languages contributed to a unique English as spoken only in New Bedford. And Daddy noticed the unique expressions and pronunciations. Somewhere, whether in New Bedford or Pasadena, he discovered Mencken’s *American Language* and made note of the fact that Mencken was especially interested in hearing more about languages other than English as spoken in the United States and “the grammar and syntax of the vulgar speech,” *vulgar* meaning “common, everyday speech” rather than “coarse or crude speech,” although it might also be that. My father could provide evidence of both, and so he became one of Mencken’s many correspondents on the state of American English. In *Supplement Two*, Mencken cited my father’s observation about the pronunciation of English words that had been borrowed from Portuguese and French-Canadian in New Bedford and gave examples of the convoluted “grammar and syntax of the vulgar speech” of the children of immigrants, speech which Mencken called “magnificent”: “You must have been brang up in a pigpen.” And “He helt on to Watkins and broughten him down.” Daddy was one of those children of immigrants, although no one would have guessed it by the new last name he had adopted somewhere along the way, Lovell. Mencken wrote that Boston speech had been described as “one-third Harvard, one-third hick, and one-third mick.” And although New Bedford is hardly Boston, with a name like Charles J. Lovell, my father was now only one letter removed from the Lowells, the Boston Brahmins who were so high and mighty they talked only to God.

My favorite parts of *Supplement Two* were the section on “Given Names” in the chapter “Proper Names in America,” and the section on “Cant and Argot” in the chapter “American Slang.” I collected unusual girls’ names, for characters in books I might write, for a stage name, maybe even for my future children. I studied the lists of theatrical and movie terms, the latter
vetted by Anita Loos, who had written one of my favorite books, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, inspired by the blondes always swarming around Mencken. My father had items in both sections.

I hadn’t noticed before, or if I did, it didn’t faze me, but my own name, Bonnie (“Often used in combination, e.g., Bonnie Mae.”), was on a list of names, mostly from the South, that Mencken seems to feel are “bizarre” and “grotesque.” He singled out Oklahoma as the epicenter of the “epidemic.” But my Oklahoma-born mother didn’t name me—her choice was “Julie Carroll.” My father’s choice won out—“Bonnie” for the daughter of his Pasadena friends and mentors, Dr. Ben and Mary Dysart, and “Alice” for his mother, Alice Budd. I myself noticed how different girls’ given names were when we moved south. In Willow Springs, although there had been a LaDeane and Mana Lowa, five of my classmates were named Kathy. But in Oklahoma, I went to school with girls named Ardeth, Bobby, Harolyn, Joveta, Kenna, LaQuita, Mikelann, Mohnda, Rae Ann, Renita, Tommie, and Vonda, and plenty of girls with double names with “Rae” as the second name. Later, in Dallas, I knew Lady, Loemma, and Loye Dell. By my observations, I fancied that I myself was a student of American given names. My father had contributed Isaphene, Algeline, Levantia, and Philena to the “unusual name” list, although the names were neither southern nor recent, having been noted in 1841 as being students at a female seminary in New York State. In the section on “Cant and Argot,” he contributed to a list of baseball terms and also advanced his theory about the origin of the word *hobo*, having tracked it back earlier than the *Dictionary of American English*. He believed the word originated in the Seattle-Tacoma area and suggested it might have its origin in Chinese or an Indian language.

Although the citations attributed to my father in *Supplement Two* contained a couple of observations dating from his New Bedford years, the rest of his contributions were based not on personal observation but on research. His interest in language had moved beyond that of
innocent bystander to that of “assiduous delver into early American language records,” as Mencken put it. Living in Pasadena, he had discovered the impressive Huntington Library in nearby San Marino and began drawing on its rich resources. Perhaps while there, he saw *Blinking Sam*, the 1775 portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds of Samuel Johnson, eyes focused with great intensity on a book. Along the way, this self-educated man taught himself to become a lexicographer, discovering that newspapers surpassed books as sources, discovering that he netted more usable words by checking every tenth paper rather than every paper for a week. He designed forms to make his work more methodical and to ensure his records fulfilled scholarly lexicographical requirements. His indefatigable research took him as far back in American history as the revolutionary period. He contributed evidence about such phenomena as the abandonment of capital letters for proper nouns, for example, in the names of political parties and religious denominations, and even Christianity, seemingly a result of democratizing forces, and the trend at about the same time to combine place names, forming such clunky hybrids as Newbedford, Newengland, and Rhodeisland, followed by trend in the 1830s and 1840s to hyphenate names like New-York. He also produced evidence about state nicknames. Louisiana, the Pelican State, was once called the Sugar State as far back as 1855, and Mississippi, the Magnolia State, the Border-eagle State as far back as 1846. Webfoot was a nickname for an Oregonian as far back as 1853.

In California, my father had done some freelance writing. One of his commissions was to write a fictionalized biography of James Warren Nye, the first governor of Nevada. He wanted the dialogue to be authentic, and so he began checking *A Dictionary of American English on Historical Principles* for possible anachronisms. At the same time, he began reading newspapers published between 1830 and 1880, researching the abolition movement, the foundation of the
Republican Party, and the Civil War and realized he was finding earlier examples of hundreds of words. This pointed up one of the DAE’s shortcomings—it had relied too heavily on books for words rather than newspapers. A new dictionary of Americanisms would remedy that.

Mencken knew he would likely never produce a third supplement, although, having laid plans to make his notes available to scholars after his “departure for parts unknown,” he still invited letters to his home. His foreboding was right. Before the year was out, Mencken, who had been born the same year as my father’s father, suffered a stroke that cruelly left him without the thing that had given his life meaning: language.

Through the suggestion of and encouragement of Mencken my father ended up with his first professional lexicographical employment. My father told Mencken his idea about producing a dictionary of Americanisms; Mencken told him such a project was already underway at the University of Chicago and advised him to combine forces with its editor, Alabama-born and Harvard-educated Mitford M. Mathews. Mathews wrote my father, saying, “Come over into Macedonia and help us.” It wasn’t an easy decision. He called it a “bombshell.” My father had recently embarked on another project, a guide to the trails of the national parks in the Canadian Rockies. Now he was being asked to choose between the woods and words. Yet he decided he must answer the call.

And so, in November of 1946, he left Pasadena, his home base of twenty years, to join Mathews as his research and editorial assistant in the Dictionary Department of the University of Chicago Press, where Mathews headed work on *A Dictionary of Americanisms on Historical Principles*, an extension of the Press’s earlier *Dictionary of American English on Historical Principles*. The DAE had been envisioned as the American answer to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and its editor, the distinguished British lexicographer, Sir William Craigie, came to
Chicago from the *OED*, where he had been its third editor, for which he had been knighted. Now the *Dictionary of Americanisms*, under the direction of Craigie’s former assistant, was going to take up where the *DAE* had left off. My father arrived in Chicago with, as Mathews wrote, a “veritable avalanche of some sixty pounds of ‘slips,’ including thousands of antedatings of the *DAE* . . . .”

My father had a vision of what a good dictionary should be. Besides being authoritative, it should be readable. He wrote to the Canada Council, “I am trying, by injecting drama and the sparkle of humour, and by portraying the foibles of humanity, to prove that an historical dictionary need not be a mere dry-as-dust tome, of interest only to eggheads, but can be as readable as any novel.” The way to accomplish that was by finding good quotations and replacing good ones with better ones. Sometimes he slipped in quotations with personal relevance. So many of the words found in the *Dictionary of Americanisms* connected to our lives, then and later:

**Dixie**, n. 1. That portion of the U.S. south of Mason and Dixon’s line, the southern states. 1859 EMMETT *Dixie’s Land*, Away! away! Away down South in Dixie. 2. The title of a song, esp. popular in the South, composed in 1859 by Daniel D. Emmett. 1948 *Dly. Ardmoreite* (Ardmore, Okla.) 18 July The band played ‘Dixie’ as the nominees came in.

My father is the one who tracked down the earliest notice of “Bryants’ Minstrels, the star troupe, in their inimitable Soiree d’Ethiope. Burlesque Iris-talian Opera. Dixie’s Land, another new Plantation Festival,” appearing in Mechanics’ Hall at 472 Broadway in New York City, tickets two bits. All that digging to only advance the date of the earliest citation by a matter of five months. I imagined he was inspired on this particular word because of Mama, whose name is Dixie. And it must have seemed fitting to use a quotation from Dixie’s hometown newspaper, the *Daily Ardmoreite*, as one of the examples.
**hobo, n.** [Origin unknown.] A migratory worker, a tramp.

1889 Ellensburgh (Wash.) Capital 28 Nov. The tramp has changed his name, or rather had it changed for him, and now he is a ‘Hobo.’

I knew my father hadn’t actually been a hobo, as I once liked to think, but he could not have known that one day his children would be fascinated by hoboes and tramps, by whatever name, and that his son would one day live and go to school in Ellensburg, from whence he tracked the earliest instance of *hobo*.

**iron man.** A man of superior endurance, used esp. of baseball players. *Slang.*


I had been unaware of this entry until I went to Pasadena and searched the *Los Angeles Times* electronic archives, not expecting to find anything but confirming stories I vaguely remembered that my father had been a runner.

**strawberry patch,** a small area on which strawberries are cultivated, also as a place-name.

1950 Chi. Tribune 11 March No stay-at-homes we, the master and mistress of Strawberry Patch!

The example was from an item he wrote that appeared in the *Chicago* Tribune. I wondered if he had written it specifically to get a good example and if doing so was considered kosher. He wrote about tramps into the woods on two recent Saturdays. On the first, squirrels, deer mice, juncos, cottontails, and a fox left tracks in the snow, as did a hawk that had nabbed a mouse; on the second, sightings of a redbird, robins, and bluebirds said winter’s days were numbered. I thought about those glorious excursions. I was there too, between the lines, although they didn’t know that for certain yet, my mother being newly pregnant.

In the preface, Mathews wrote that my father “has been able, along with his other duties, to supply the project with a surprisingly large amount of further material. Almost from the outset, he has been able to read the copy ahead of the copy-editor and to make many corrections
in the definitions, besides augmenting the copy at spots where it was weakest.” Furthermore, my father compiled the more than thirty-page bibliography containing some four thousand sources. My father thanked, among others, one Miss D. C. Gosling, of the Western History Department, Denver Public Library, Colorado, and his father-in-law, my grandfather, J. Henry Hefley, Ardmore, Oklahoma. The security of regular employment had allowed my father to marry “Miss D. C. Gosling,” “Gosling” being his pet name for my mother. The winter of 1950–1951 was a momentous one for my father—the dictionary in which he had played such an important part was born and so was I.

Although the dictionary was published and so was officially finished, Daddy continued to use it as a work in progress, perhaps thinking there might one day be a revised edition. He penciled in the margins, in red, blue, green and graphite, updates on words, earlier appearances in print, better examples, corrections, notations that words were “Canadian!” He also used the two-volume set as a scrapbook of his clippings from around that time; he proved a regular PR man for the dictionary, writing regular letters to the long-running Chicago Tribune “A Line o’ Type or Two” column about words and his latest findings and generally drumming up interest in the project. He submitted brief items about the origins of such terms as Saint Nicholas and Santa Claus, chicken à la King, “in the doghouse,” “Go West, young man,” “bite the dust,” and “rule the roost.” When asked by a reader about whether the dictionary would include “atomic bomb,” he noted that, “happily,” it wouldn’t have to, as it was an H. G. Wells’ coinage, first appearing in print in England in 1914. Some of his letters prompted lively exchanges among readers. His suggestion that readers write poems about the lowly skunk cabbage, so neglected by poets, received some inspired responses. His appearances in the column led to fan mail, invitations to speak and, when he was in the hospital, get-well cards and flowers. He usually wrote under the
pseudonym Lavengro II, lavengro being a Romani, or Gypsy, word meaning “word master” that he adopted from the title of George Borrow’s 1851 book, Lavengro: The Scholar, the Gypsy, the Priest. He must have felt a kinship to Borrow, whose own father was a soldier and who, like my father, traveled widely and was a linguist who knew French, German, Danish, Welsh, Irish, Latin, Greek, and even Romani.

I found another clipping from that time period. Stuck between pages 626 and 627 of the American Language, Supplement Two, was a carefully clipped full color editorial cartoon, from the Chicago Daily Tribune, dated Thursday, May 3, 1951, almost perfectly preserved. My father must have placed it there fifty-eight years ago, when I was barely six months old. Drawn by Carey Orr and titled “Office Worker’s Dream on a Warm May Day,” the cartoon shows a worried-looking little man wearing an editor’s eyeshade hunched over a desk in a cramped, colorless office, a stack of paper in front of him, pencil clenched in hand, more paper tossed on the floor, wastebasket overflowing, artificial light overhead, a clock reminding him a long day stretches in front of him. He seems entirely unaware of what’s outside even though a window makes his entire small space visible to viewers in the outside world, as if he’s an animal in a zoo or a prisoner in a cell. Outside, grinning and pointing, as if at a rare species, is an old man with thick white beard, rustic cap, smoking a corncob pipe, wearing overalls and boots and carrying a walking stick, looking much like the naturalist John Burroughs or a precursor to R. Crumb’s Mr. Natural. A slogan on the bib of his overalls says, “The Great Outdoors.” Behind him the sky is blue and clear; a wedge of geese is flying north. Surrounding him, like in early Disney movies, in glorious color are every manner of creature in peaceful coexistence—a butterfly, a deer, a fox, a squirrel munching on an acorn, two rabbits, a possum, a pheasant, a heron, a blue jay, a cardinal, a ruby-throated hummingbird, a robin, a flicker, a meadowlark, and a red-headed woodpecker,
rat-a-tat-tatting away on the office worker’s cage. As the great outdoorsman points to the beleaguered editor working on deadline, he says, “And in this cage, friends, is the hibernatin’ Homo sapiens—the wingless worry-bird—the human mole.” In clipping the cartoon, my father was proclaiming his identification with Mr. Natural, taking a stand with nature above research and above words. He loved words, but he loved the woods more. In May of 1951, he was commuting seventeen miles into Chicago every day to work in his office in Wieboldt Hall. But on weekends and long summer nights, he had the forest preserve.

In the field of Americanisms, my father had joined forces with Mathews. But he helped pioneer the field of Canadianisms. During his California years, he used to work for a while, save his money, and then quit and head for the mountains, often in Canada. He developed a love for the country and the warm, friendly people he met and, as always, found its distinctive words fascinating, and so in the 1940s he began collecting Canadianisms. Previously, linguists had considered American and Canadian English as much the same, a North American English, distinct from British English and different only to degree. But a wave of nationalism led others in Canada to become interested in asserting a Canadian English, independent of both British and American influence, distinctive because of the influence of Canada’s French speakers and indigenous peoples and its geography, resulting in the formation of the Canadian Linguistic Association. At the organization’s first meeting in 1954 in Winnipeg, Manitoba, my father proposed a Canadian dictionary, following it up with an article about “Lexicographical Challenges of Canadian English” that appeared in the first issue of its journal. For the next several years he continued to write articles and speak at conferences, always pushing for a Canadian dictionary and offering suggestions about how the work might proceed. Finally, at the
1957 conference, ten linguists formed a dictionary committee, and so the Canadian English dictionary movement built up steam.

The committee members encouraged my father to seek a fellowship from the Canada Council so that he could conduct research in Canada, since he had exhausted Canadian resources available in Chicago. In his application letter to Albert W. Trueman, the Council’s director, he made an impassioned plea for the historical significance of the project, arguing that a dictionary based on sound research would illuminate Canada’s history and growth as a nation, that “a well-planned dictionary on historical principles should indeed form the quintessence of Canadian history.” In his argument, he used the word “our” in speaking of Canada—“our great nation.” Perhaps he was seeking to defuse potential criticism about hiring an American to edit a Canadian dictionary. When the *DAE* brought over Sir William Craigie as its editor, the *Chicago Tribune* headline, “Midway Signs Limey Prof. to Dope Yank Talk,” summed up the feeling of some Americans. Distinguished lexicographer or not, Craigie was British. But more than a rhetorical device, the word “our” spoke to his deep feelings about Canada. In its mountains was where he hoped his ashes would one day be strewn.

In March of 1960, he received the word he had been waiting for. He had been granted $8,000, plus a travel allowance, plus a smaller travel allowance for his wife and family to accompany him. We were going to Canada! He began making plans. We would move to Ottawa or Toronto, where he would do most of his research, and from there he would travel to provincial, university, and city libraries, and historical societies and private libraries. I took to school the Canada Council brochure to show my teacher, Miss Kott, and the principal, Miss Ikenn.
My father had boasted in his application letter, when reassuring Dr. Trueman about his health, that he had not needed to take a nitroglycerin tablet since 1958, that he hiked seven miles at a time, rode roller coasters, played softball, and yelled and jumped at basketball games. But less than two months after writing the optimistic letter, days after learning he had won the grant, a second heart attack killed him.

His publishing company sent Patrick Drysdale, a young lexicographer, to acquire his massive accumulation of citation slips, and so Paddy drove from Toronto with his wife, Olwen, and baby in a rented station wagon, to Willow Springs. Drysdale was somewhat embarrassed at the nature of his assignment, meaning he would have to intrude on a family’s grief, but found my mother “gracious and very helpful, wanting only to be sure that her husband’s material would be well used.” He was further worried about explaining what he was doing crossing the border with fifty-three shoeboxes full of slips of paper, and so he and Olwen spent the night at a motel south of the border, timing their crossing for the early dawn hours, thinking customs officials would be less alert then, which proved to be the case.

The dictionary came out in 1967, timed to coincide with the centennial of confederation, edited by Walter Avis, Charles Crate, Patrick Drysdale, Douglas Leechman, and M. H. Scargill. My father was credited as its editor until 1960.

The massive accumulation of my father’s citation slips that Paddy Drysdale spirited off to Canada formed the basis of the Lexicographical Centre for Canadian English. And his work continues. More than forty years after the dictionary he envisioned was published, a second edition is underway at the University of British Columbia, under the direction of a young Austrian lexicographer, Stefan Dollinger, aided greatly in the colossal task of compiling volumes of minutiae—new words, overlooked words, antedated examples, better examples, better
definitions—by the computerization of lexicography. It amazes me to think of what my father accomplished with only his powers of observation and analysis, aided by energy, diligence, single-minded determination, a photographic memory, and a sense of mission—to tell the story of Canadian English.
Chapter 4

On The Road

Afoot and light-hearted, I take to the open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me, leading wherever I choose.
—Walt Whitman

The traveler must be born again on the road.
—Henry David Thoreau

Twined within the name “Lavengro II,” my father’s alter ego, were inseparable twin identities—“word master” and “gypsy.” As I spun fantasies about my father’s life, his adopted name’s gypsy provenance weighed more heavily in my imagination: Daddy was a gypsy, a vagabond, a rover, a rambler; footloose, fancy-free; a tramp, holding fast as on a train racing West, feasting on mulligan stew in hobo jungles, hiding from the railroad bulls like Jack London, whose popular adventure stories he was sure to have read as a boy. London’s book, The Road, about his own experiences hoboing during the depression of the 1890s was published the year Daddy was born. Daddy was a hobo, his bindle containing his worldly goods slung over his shoulder, stopping before back gates to read the arcane hobo sign language left by another ’bo before deciding whether to knock at the back door or try another house, leaving his own message on a fencepost for the next ’bo to pass this way. He was a poor wayfaring stranger and a happy wanderer. One Halloween, at the Willow Springs School carnival, he even costumed himself as the Happy Wanderer, in lederhosen, jaunty green Alpine hat with feather, hiking boots, walking stick, a knapsack on his back, looking as though at any moment he would burst into glorious song:

Oh, may I go a-wandering
Until the day I die!
Oh, may I always laugh and sing,
Beneath God's clear blue sky!
Val-deri, val-dera.

My knapsack on my back.

David Smith told his parents, Mama and Daddy’s closest friends, that my father looked just like the picture in his school songbook, and Ann and Rex told him that everything was real; that once upon a time Daddy had been the happy wanderer.

But, unless you count tramps through the woods at the end of Oakwood Avenue, Daddy didn’t go a-wandering until the day he died. By the time I was born, he was settled, a man with a wife, a new family, a professional job, and a long-term mortgage. He might leave every May for a linguistics conference in Toronto, but he would always come back to us, suitcase stuffed with maple syrup and candy leaves spun of maple sugar, souvenirs of Canada; he would always come home. I wouldn’t then have imagined him as a gypsy. He was Daddy. He baked our daily bread, fixed our breakfasts and suppers, packed our lunches, rode the rides with us at Kiddyland, crafted ornaments to decorate our Christmas trees. He was Daddy who was always there, warm in the middle of the bed in his flannel shirt, chanting nonsense verses and inventing stories, there when we came home from school, there when he tucked us in at night, always where he should be, tethered to his family and his home by a long cord of love. I wouldn’t then have imagined him capable of leaving, never to return, leaving without even turning to wave goodbye. The father I knew was rooted, like the giant oak tree in front of our picture window, spreading his arms to shelter us; he was the glowing hearth at the center of our lives. He was nothing like a gypsy.
I have only one clear memory of Daddy going away. We are in Cicero at Midway Airport, Mama, Charlie, and me, along with the Smiths, who have driven us to the airport in their green Studebaker, before us, a Trans-Canada airplane, red maple leaf emblazoned on its side. As Daddy climbs the steps to board the plane, he turns back and gives a jaunty wave. He is off to Toronto to give a talk at the Canadian Linguistics Association conference where he will once again promote his project: a Canadian dictionary based on historical principles. This is the only time I remember Daddy leaving us, although he did so almost every May for several years. Usually, we left him, boarding a train for Ardmore at Dearborn Station in Chicago or at Union Station in Joliet, waving wildly from the window of the train as Daddy walked along the platform looking up through the windows trying to spot his family, smiling broadly, waving back. While the train traveled west and then south, he would return to our cottage, holding down the fort until his adventuring family returned.

But, based on three facts and a multitude of reasons, I latched on to a fantasy of my father’s life before—before me, before Mama, before history, before time. My first piece of evidence: when he was about nineteen, my father had run away from home. He hadn’t contented himself with running from New Bedford, Massachusetts, to Providence, Rhode Island, or Portland, Maine, or Boston, the closest big cities, cities big enough for him to have lost himself, if that was what he was trying to do—or to find himself. Instead, he ran and ran and ran, clear to the far end of the continent, to land’s end, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific; he ran three thousand miles, from old, staid, settled, provincial New England to the West and the golden promised land of California, where many a man before him had shed old identities and crafted new ones. That he had done so spoke, I thought, of a spirit of adventure, wanderlust, of gypsy blood.
My second: a yellowed clipping of a letter he had written, published in the Chicago Tribune and headlined “Eat Crow? It’s Good!” He submitted this item not as Lavengro II, “word master,” but as “Ubique,” his nickname, and he said he was writing as a naturalist to dispute the “alleged unpalatability of this much maligned bird.” His saga continued: “Often forced in my wanderings to live off the country, it has been my varied fortune to subsist upon foods unfamiliar to most civilized palates.” He itemized the viands that had made up some of his menus: rock tripe, skunk, porcupine, prairie dog, horse, goat, grizzly, chipmunk, desert tortoise, black snake, rattlesnake, owl, meadow lark, and crow. Prairie dogs, when stewed or fricasseed, were “as mouth-watering a dish as any epicure could wish.” In autumn, porcupines were especially tasty; their livers “an especial delicacy.” Skunk tastes like chicken. But, oh, those “summer-fat crows.” He proceeded to give cooking instructions. The item, although brief, contained solid clues: three places my father had traveled: British Columbia on a nineteen-day trail trip; Maine, where he ate “leathery” chipmunks; and Texas, where he ate none-too-savory owls. This, I imagined, was how gypsies lived, off the bounty of the land, not needing stores, or money, or civilization. He was not simply a gypsy; he was a proto-hippie.

My third bit of evidence was the color slides, rows and rows ensconced in metal cases. “The slides! Show the slides!” I squirmed with anticipation while Daddy pulled open the metal legs of the screen and unrolled its shimmering white surface with its faintly metallic smell. Far from being bored with the thought of seeing the slides again, I was always eager to see our short family history and Daddy’s mountaineering past illuminate the room, turning us into the stars of our own silent movies. Mama reached behind her and turned off the lights; the show began.

Click. Daddy, in his warm winter overcoat and plaid billed hat is holding up an eight-day-old baby, swaddled in layers of pink, in front of the tall oak tree nearest the house.
“That’s Bonnie Boop, the day we brought her home from the hospital,” Mama said.

_Click_. I am a toddler, straight bangs peering from under my bonnet, bundled in a blue snowsuit, bending over and poking a stick into Maple Lake.

Pictures of Maple Lake prompted the story about the time young Bobby Kalina, who lived across the street, surreptitiously followed Mama and Daddy on a campout. Daddy spotted Bobby, realized he was spying, nabbed him, and dunked him headfirst in Maple Lake.

Next came the featured attraction: the Canadian Rocky Mountains. Far-off Lake Louise, Moraine Lake, and the town of Banff, Alberta, seemed as real to me as nearby Maple Lake, Long John Slough, and Willow Springs. Daddy photographed majestic snow-peaked mountains and glacier-carved moraines and tiny Alpine flowers, ptarmigans partially concealed by their camouflage coloring, chipmunks, hoary marmots, and bear trails, marked by a ladder of fallen trees. Daddy shot many of the photographs on annual summer hikes with the Skyline Hikers of the Canadian Rockies; they met in Banff and hiked the mountain trails from a base camp, a different one each year. At night they gathered around a campfire and sang; later, they burrowed in sleeping bags inside teepees. On his red flannel shirt, Daddy had sewn patches of the mountaineering groups to which he belonged: the Alpine Club of Canada, El Club de Exploraciones de México, and the Skyline Hikers of the Canadian Rockies. The insignia of the Skyline Hikers consisted of a hiking boot, laced only to the ankles, and in the background the Rockies, a walking stick and row of hikers silhouetted against the mountain peaks. It might have been the insignia of the Happy Wanderer.

All of these added up in my mind to mean Gypsy.
One Christmas break, I house-sat for my brother and his wife, Norah, then living in Taos, while they had guest artist residencies in Venice. “Oh, by the way, there’s something you’ll want to read,” Charlie said. He rummaged around in his desk drawers, pulled out a manila folder, and tossed it on the coffee table. The file lay there for more than a week before I got around to opening it. Its tab was labeled “Charles J. Lovell”; inside was a carbon copy of a typed twenty-four-page letter my father had written January 11, 1960, to Dr. A. W. Trueman, the director of the Canada Council. Charlie had found it among Mother’s things and had confiscated it as his own private possession. I understood that narcissistic belief well—that we best understood Daddy, that we were his spiritual inheritors, and so we were most entitled to inherit the kingdom—or the artifacts of his life, anyway. The letter had evidently accompanied Daddy’s application for a non-resident fellowship to work on the Canadian dictionary. Besides being a sales pitch for the scholarly merits of his research, the letter contained something of more personal interest, an abbreviated autobiography. As I fanned out the pages, I began hyperventilating. Here was what I had been searching for: my father’s life story in his own words.

My eyes raced down the lines, lines Daddy had typed himself, across pages Daddy had touched himself, pages he had rolled around the typewriter’s platen, pages on which he had left his fingerprints and his voice, a voice that spoke to me across time, building a structure for my nebulous memories, adding details, recreating the little boy, the teenager, the young man I hadn’t known but so desperately wanted to. And here too was the story of his life on the road.

In seventh grade, Charles Julien Steckiewich was happy. He was living with a family who planned to adopt him. And then on Good Friday, he returned home to find all of his
possessions on the front porch. He was sent to spend the night with his best friend. The next day a constable escorted him “to the huge yellow house where I was to spend the most miserable years of my existence.” The house was owned by the Howlands, “Uncle Nat” and “Aunt Elma,” she, the stingy old woman of the cut-down-underwear story I remembered. Here was my proof that such wretched people had existed, that my memory held true.

In their fourteen-room house, my father did all the sweeping and scrubbing and dishwashing, tended the rows of vegetables, and awakened every day at four thirty to walk ten blocks to fetch their daily milk from a farmer. He wasn’t allowed a pillow to sleep on nor to eat with them at the dinner table nor butter for his bread. It was Uncle Nat who had snarled at him to “shut up” when he was crying with pain from an abscess in his neck. It was Uncle Nat and Aunt Elma whose negligence caused him to lose his hearing, whose parsimony made him pay for his own tonsillectomy, who pulled him out of school in a fury over his being vaccinated against their wishes after the sixth week of eighth grade, marking the end of his formal schooling.

Yet it was also Uncle Nat and Aunt Elma who, after forbidding him to return to Sunday school after learning his teacher had mentioned Jack Dempsey, gave him Sundays off, after his chores were done. It was on those free Sunday afternoons that he was able to “roam the countryside for many miles” and that he began his study of botany and the Greek and Latin roots of words. The Howlands sent him to work for a carpenter, as an unpaid apprentice. Later, he went to work at a nursery, earning ten dollars for working sixty hours, or around one hundred and twenty-five dollars in today’s dollars. The nursery was thirty miles distant and he must have lived in, as he wrote that he was expected to travel to visit the Howlands every other Sunday.

He learned about Coolidge Rare Plant Gardens, not the Elysian Fields I had remembered, in Pasadena, California, from a trade journal he read at the nursery. It had the benefits of an
“interesting name” and, as I had surmised, distance: across the continent. From thirty miles away, the Howlands could compel him to visit them on alternate Sundays, but never from three thousand miles. His workaday uniform was knickers; he owned only one good suit with long trousers and it hung at the Howlands’. Running away would require his good suit. One rainy Sunday, after his fortnightly visit, he threw himself into a puddle and claimed he had tripped running for the streetcar. They permitted him to change into his good suit and so, properly attired, he began his travels.

It was 1927. The Depression hadn’t yet begun, although New Bedford was already in the economic doldrums. He didn’t hitchhike or ride the rails; he took the bus. He arrived in Missouri in the spring, in time to be stranded by the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927. In San Antonio, Texas, he ran out of money. But even without money, he didn’t hitchhike or ride the rails; he walked. “Stubborn New England pride” wouldn’t let him do otherwise. Like his hero John Muir, who had walked a thousand miles from Indiana to Florida, taking the "wildest, leafiest, and least trodden way I could find," Daddy walked the 1,351 miles to Los Angeles. Was it on that trip that he ate “dark meated Texas owls”? Somewhere on that trip he transformed himself into Charles Julien Lovell, erasing his Steckiewicz past, ensuring he’d become unfindable, not that anyone would look for the ungrateful wretch.

Upon reaching Los Angeles, he stayed at a mission until he had earned enough money to buy decent clothes, his good suit no longer good for all it had been through. Early one Monday morning, he walked the twelve miles to Coolidge Rare Plant Gardens. Mr. Coolidge, a cousin of President Calvin Coolidge, must have been impressed by the eager young man who had walked all the way from Los Angeles, indeed had come all the way from Massachusetts, to work for his
firm. He hired him on the spot. But then the Depression came and Mr. Coolidge had to let him go.

Through the 1930s, my father worked odd jobs, lived in rented rooms and residential hotels, did some freelance writing—detective stories, humor, nature stories—until the war came along and he went to work in an airplane factory. Always, he would work a while, save his money, and then head for the mountains. Somewhere along the way his interest in words turned into scholarly research. In the spring of 1943, he had a contract to ghostwrite a biography of James Warren Nye, the first governor of the newly created Nevada Territory. He used the assignment as an excuse to conduct research at the Library of Congress, as interested in researching word history as in researching Governor Nye’s history. Before returning to California, he swung by New Bedford to revisit his childhood tormentors. Here he solved the mystery of why his adoption by the family who loved him but abandoned him had fallen through: A son, Charles Gifford, opened the door. Mrs. Gifford had become pregnant unexpectedly, ten years after her daughter had been born, and so, without a word of explanation, she let policemen take my father away. Perhaps that discovery gave closure to a cruel chapter of his life. He returned to California, continuing to make summer sojourns in the Canadian Rockies, which sustained him spiritually. He quoted Muir:

> Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature’s peace will flow into you as sunshine into trees; the winds will blow their strength into you and the storms their energy; and cares will drop off as autumn leaves.

What I read contradicted my theory of Daddy-as-gypsy. It was true he had traveled widely, but rather than traveling from restlessness, he sought stability; he sought roots and to plant himself in a place—in Pasadena and in the Canadian Rockies.
Daddy wrote the letter to Mr. Trueman, telling his life story, and two months and six days later, he was dead. His story ended and ours took an unexpected plot twist. We left home; we became gypsies, moving from one small Oklahoma town to another, becoming outsiders, sojourners, wayfarers, until we settled, finally, in Dallas where Charlie and I stayed long enough to grow up, long enough to settle on our own identities as gypsies and adventurers.

It was always understood that one day our whole family would go on a Skyline Hike; that had been the plan for the summer of our year in Canada. After my father and mother married, they took the train to Banff so she could experience the majesty of his beloved Canadian Rockies with his “family” of Skyline Hikers, for I believe that without a real family, he tried throughout his life to create his own families, and the Skyline Hikers were among these. Certainly, they were one of the most influential. Naturally, he wanted his real family to meet his hiking family. But with his death, that plan of a family hiking vacation ended and the Skyline Hike took on the aspect of a pilgrimage one was obliged to make at least once. The summer he was fourteen, my brother went hiking in the Colorado Rocky Mountains, but despite my mother’s continued urging, he never managed to climb with the Skyline Hikers. But the summer I was nineteen, I did.

I saved my wages from clerking on the housewares aisle at the Woolworth’s at Preston Center, and went. The dragon in charge of housewares was a huge farmwoman with a constant snarl, named, like my father’s bête noire, Elma. I knew my father had worked for a while, living frugally and saving his money so he could quit his job and head into the mountains in the summer. I was following in his footsteps.
I remember my father’s hiking boots, their leather well worn, and our well-worn sleeping bags, smelling faintly of mildew from the nights spent sleeping on the sand dunes on the shore of Lake Michigan, and our olive-drab Army-Navy surplus canvas knapsacks. I bought a pair of boots at the Sears on South Lamar Street. Real hiking boots were impossible to find in land-locked Dallas in those days, or at least I didn’t manage to find any; my boots were not hiking boots, but the orangey work boots of telephone linemen and construction workers. I loved them. Except to work, I wore them everywhere with everything, even miniskirts, decades before such a look became hip, in order to break them in before the hike. I would wear them until they became as burnished as my father’s boots had been. Also at Sears, I bought a navy blue sleeping bag lined in navy-and-red-plaid flannel and a bright red knapsack, bold colors for my bold adventure. Finally, after bored hours in algebra and biology classes daydreaming and idly planning imaginary trips to London and Liverpool, Paris and Pasadena, I was going on the road. I was going on the fabled Skyline Hike and my first adventure. I really was a gypsy.

I picked up my paycheck on Friday, the day before the Fourth of July. After cashing it at Hillcrest State Bank and buying my first American Express traveler’s checks, the hallmark of a sophisticated traveler, I called my white-haired boss, Mr. Heatherley, and dropped my bombshell: “I won’t be in on Monday. I’m quitting.” I could hear the exasperation in his spluttering reply. On Sunday, I boarded the train to Chicago, where I caught the number 62 bus to the corner of Archer and Kedzie avenues, and walked to the duplex—what Chicagoans call a two-flat—where my former Willow Springs neighbor Christine Thomas lived with her husband, Bill Eckhardt, on the bottom floor. I crashed on their floor, sleeping for the first time in my sleeping bag. I was on the road, living like a gypsy.
In Chicago, I was discovering a taste for the exotic, which whetted my appetite for more: poppy-seed coffeecake from the Polish bakery on the corner; belly dancers at Diana’s Opaa restaurant on South Halsted Street in Greektown; a rich, meaty stew washed down with a thick, yogurty beverage, served by an Afghani man in a long robe and a headpiece in an Afghani restaurant. We didn’t have Polish bakeries or Afghani restaurants in Dallas, and although we had a Greek restaurant with belly dancers, I had never dined there. My world expanded: one day I’d see Warsaw and Athens and Kabul. But, for now, Chicago held enough richness. Never once did I venture the seventeen miles to Willow Springs and my past. I was instead embarking on my future.

Over a jug of red wine, accompanied by the Band singing “Whispering Pines,” Christine and Bill decided to drive me as far as Toronto in their bright blue Volkswagen Beetle. We took turns driving. I had never driven a stick shift before, and I shivered as huge trucks rattled past leaving the Bug shuddering in their wakes. I was to take the bus from Toronto to Banff to meet the Skyline Hikers, but in Toronto, Christine and Bill decided we should see Montréal. At houses with signs in their front windows announcing in French a room to let, I practiced my schoolgirl French: Bonjour, Madame. Avez-vous une chambre pour louer? The stern-faced Canadienne drew her shawl closed, shook her head no, and shut the door in our surprised faces. No one in the French districts would rent their vacant rooms to three young American hippies. We slept one night in a youth hostel on Île Ste-Hélène, in an old armory, its cavernous space filled with young people sleeping on iron cots or on the concrete floor, curled up in blankets or stuffed into sleeping bags, their clothes forming pillows. The next day we picnicked on French bread, fresh butter, and cherries. Never had I tasted a more perfect meal: the bread, crisp outside and chewy inside, the butter tasting as though it was fresh from the churn, the cherries at their peak. As
happened often in those years, we met some people who invited us to spend the night at their communal house. We sat around a long table as the house’s inhabitants passed hand-tossed pottery bowl after hand-tossed pottery bowl of vegetarian food, including the inevitable brown rice, culminating in a honey-sweetened fruit compote, prepared, served, cleaned up by the women.

Our hosts were English speakers, but posters indicated they sympathized with the French separatists of Parti Québécois, or maybe even the radical Front de libération du Québec. Everywhere that summer, posters proclaimed “Oui!,” the PQ slogan, in that season of frenzied separatist activity. Previous years had seen hundreds of bombings; the year before, the FLQ had bombed the Montréal Stock Exchange. Only a few months later, FLQ members would kidnap the British trade representative and the Canadian minister of immigration and labor, Pierre Laporte, who once supported separatism but had moved too far to the center to suit FLQ. The discovery of Laporte’s strangled body in the trunk of a car sparked the October Crisis: Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau invoked the War Measures Act, suspending civil liberties, while government troops swooped in on FLQ cells. All this roiled under the surface that summer; even an outsider passing through could feel the air crackle with tension.

Bill had to return to Chicago and college, so Christine and I hitchhiked back to Toronto, where I would board the bus to Banff and she, to Chicago. The roads that summer were as thick with young people as a love-in or rock festival. Hitchhiking seemed more like a social occasion than a potentially dangerous activity for two young women traveling together. Nonetheless, in letters and postcards home, I refrained from mentioning our mode of transport.

In Banff, I had reserved a room at the rustic, lodge-like YWCA, across from the Bow River, surrounded by a backdrop of mountains—the very mountains in which I would be hiking.
I arrived a day early so I could explore the town, walking the picturesque streets, with their animal names: Rabbit, Badger, Caribou, Marmot, Wolverine, and Grizzly. The next day, I met the campers at the trailhead. Being on a strict budget, I was vexed when I turned out to be the only hiker who hadn’t paid the modest fee to be transported to the base camp. It wasn’t simply my need for thrift; it was my belief we were roughing it. Being driven in a big yellow school bus seemed contrary to the trip’s mission, but I forked over the fee and the bus deposited us and our gear at the trailhead.

That year, the hike centered on Yoho National Park and Lake O’Hara. Every morning, we awakened early to breakfasts befitting lumberjacks—one morning the cooks fried Dolly Varden trout that the day before had been swimming in Lake O’Hara. The hikes were all-day affairs, and we carried sack lunches. At night, after dinner, we sang songs around the campfire, just as my father had done, and later crawled into sleeping bags in teepees. (I was further vexed to learn that many of the hikers had brought along air mattresses to protect their backs from nature.) Most of the hikers were much older or much younger than I, so I palled around with a teenage boy close to Charlie’s age. One night during the Perseid meteor shower, we lay on our backs on blankets, looking straight up as star after star streaked through the navy-blue sky, trailing luminous streams of stardust. “Look! There goes one!” “Over there!” “Another one! Look!” The world that night seemed limitless: we were tiny specks on million-year old mountains watching the fireflies of creation dart and dazzle as they sped through the infinite sky.

Charlie was having his own adventures on the road that summer. He and his best friend, Duncan Campbell, hitchhiked to Seattle, where they planned to enroll in Shoreline Community College, chosen strictly because of its location, north of Seattle, and its name, which promised
barefoot walks on a sandy shore as seagulls swooped in. Like me, he was emulating the father of our imaginations, the hobo who rode the rails across the U.S.A. Charlie and Duncan hitchhiked and rode the rails all the way from Dallas to Seattle. It wouldn’t be so remarkable for two teenaged boys, but Duncan was on crutches, the result of a car accident some months before. One morning, they woke up in the boxcar they had scrambled into in the dark to find themselves covered in white powder. Their hair, their clothes, their skin, the walls, the floor, everything was thick with white dust that made them cough and sneeze. They became convinced they had taken refuge in a car transporting toxic chemicals, probably biological warfare agents (the war in Vietnam was raging); as the train rolled along, their panic mounted as they imagined slow, fearsome deaths from cancer induced by a cruel chemical. When the train finally stopped, they rushed to shove open the heavy metal doors and escape their death trap. They lurched, blinking, into daylight, where they were stricken with relief and irony when they realized that they were covered with white flour. It might kill them, but only if they ate it and a lot more slowly.

At one late afternoon stop, Charlie, who could move faster, being unencumbered by crutches, went into town to get some food, leaving Duncan behind. The train’s engine started; its whistle blew; it was about to head out. Duncan grew frantic. The train couldn’t leave without Charlie. So Duncan, who had utmost faith in the goodness of people, hobbled along the platform until he found the engineer and asked him to please wait. The train waited.

One night, a bunch of real hoboes climbed off the train at a stop and went to local gardens on a raiding mission, returning laden with potatoes, carrots, peppers, onions, and other vegetables. They built a fire on the boxcar and were enjoying a fine hobo stew when the train jolted to a stop. The engineer came pounding on the door of the car. Enraged, he shouted, “Are you idiots?! Don’t you know there’s dynamite two cars down!”
The Skyline Hike had ended, and I took the bus from Banff to Vancouver, where I stopped for a night, and then headed south to Seattle, where I was to meet Charlie and Duncan. On the bus from Vancouver, I held hands and nuzzled with a film-school student who was returning to San Francisco. In those days, everything seemed possible. You never knew when or where you’d meet the man who would change your life. But if not, when his bus pulled out of the gate, I at least had someone to crash with in San Francisco, when I got that way, which, of course, I would, and if he ever came to Dallas, he had my number. I checked into the Seattle YWCA and set out to find Charlie. He had told me, “Meet me at the Singing Fountain.” When I asked for an exact address, he said, with vague assurance, “Anyone can tell you where it is.”

Because our itineraries were nebulous, when we arrived in Seattle, we were to go there every day, at 6 a.m. and 6 p.m. Eventually, our paths would cross. Young people reading this will find it hard to imagine the trials we endured before cell phones, but that is precisely what made it an adventure. We were on our own, we couldn’t be found; we were living by our wits, and the whole thing was wonderful, exhilarating, liberating.

The one thing I knew for sure about the Singing Fountain was that it was located near the site of the 1962 World’s Fair, so it had to be near the Space Needle, that flying saucer in the sky symbolizing the spirit of the early-1960s’ love of space and the future. At 605 feet, the Space Needle was the tallest structure west of the Mississippi River when built; it was impossible to miss. From anywhere, you could look up and head in the right direction. As I neared the Space Needle, I began asking people on the street.

“The Singing Fountain? Never heard of it,” they said.
Finally, a man suggested, “Maybe it’s that fountain.” He pointed up the way. “It has music piped in. Maybe that’s the Singing Fountain.”

Since there didn’t seem to be too many other options, I allowed as how that must be it, and so I waited. I never made it at 6 a.m. and I felt safe in thinking Charlie wouldn’t either when he arrived—what kind of a nutty plan was that?—but every day shortly before 6 p.m., I headed to the Singing Fountain and waited. The fountain was in a park, where the hippies hung out, played guitars, sang, passed joints, and made out. I sat on a low ledge overlooking the sidewalk and scanned the crowds, squinting as tall, thin, longhaired young men who might be Charlie walked my way. One early evening as I waited, a group of guys in the leather jackets and distinctive colors of a motorcycle gang began fighting. I saw a glint of silver; in a flash, a man plunged a knife into another man’s stomach. Frantic, I ran toward a policeman whose dark blue uniform I could see in the distance.

“Come quick,” I said, and described what I had seen.

“Oh, the longhairs are killing each other,” he said, shrugging, and went on his way.

An involuntary shiver swept over me. The policeman had plunged a knife into my innocence. It really was “us” versus “them.” I hadn’t wanted to believe that oversimplification; despite evidence to the contrary—the Kent State shootings took place three months before—I still wanted to believe that people were good. Now here was evidence arguing for the other side—maybe some policemen really were pigs.

That night, I called my mother from a phone booth. “If Charlie calls, tell him I’m leaving so don’t bother to meet me.”

“Hasn’t he met you yet?” she asked. “He’s been in Seattle for a week.”
If he’d shown up right then, I might have plunged a knife into his stomach, but never mind; I was taking the first bus out in the morning. Before I left, I bought a newspaper and scoured it for news of the stabbing. I wanted to find out if the man had died. But there was nothing, not even a brief. A stabbed hippie wasn’t worth writing about.

Over the next few summers, I traveled back and forth between Dallas and California—San Francisco, West Hollywood, Laguna Beach, once following the border and crossing into Mexico at every crossing from Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, to Mexicali, Baja, detouring to visit every Spanish mission and mission ruin between Ysleta in El Paso and San Francisco de Solano in Sonoma. I never went to Pasadena or tried to call Daddy’s old friends, the Dysarts, for whose daughter, Bonnie, I was named. For graduating from college, my mother bought me a beautiful suede suitcase from Argentina to support my plans to travel, and I got a passport. But the suitcase and the passport jinxed me. For many years, I hardly traveled at all, except on vacations from work and then mostly domestically. But Charlie lived the gypsy life, having adventures, hitchhiking across Europe and England, where in Cornwall he met Jude, who became the mother of his daughter, Jessa; Mexico, and South America, living for a time in Lima, where he played guitar in a band at El Dragón, still a popular nightclub, and in Río de Janeiro, where he became friends with an older house painter named Michael Haynes, who was reticent about his past, for good reasons it seemed. He turned out to be Ronnie Biggs, one of the Great English Train Robbers, a story that had fascinated Charlie as a boy. Even after he became older and more settled, his graduate schooling and career took him far afield—Ellensburg and Tacoma, Washington; Yuma, Arizona; Greenville and Greensboro, North Carolina; Las Cruces and Taos, New Mexico; and finally, New Orleans, Louisiana—while my moves have all been within one city from neighborhood to neighborhood—in Dallas from University Park to Oak Lawn to Junius.
Heights to Lakewood Heights—and finally, thirty-eight miles north to Denton, Texas, with a momentary glitch, barely a nanosecond in geologic time, in Monterrey, Nuevo León, Mexico.

As I think about the road and what it has meant to all of us, I see that we all had different roads. Charlie and I were leaving home, seeking adventure, able to do so because we had a safety net—a secure home base behind us. My father was both escaping a home scarcely deserving of the name and seeking a home, and he had to take to the long and winding open road to find it. He found adventure along the way, ate porcupine and grizzly bear, but that was incidental to his true quest. On the road, he was born again as Charles Julien Lovell. Not only was his name new, but so was his life—a life he created for himself, restricted at times by poverty and circumstances, but no longer restricted by the cruelties of his harsh New England upbringing. Out of rootlessness, he put down deep and sturdy roots.
Chapter 5

Willy-nilly

We are a family of archivists. We all entered occupations that involve preserving, organizing, and retrieving material—words, books, facts, news, history, photographs, art—so it may seem strange that much of our own family photo archives is stuffed willy-nilly into an old Christmas-card box. I have always loved leafing through the photographs, though years might pass between viewings. When I began to rekindle memories of my father, I turned first to that small repository of family history and lost memories. I took the box, edged in red, adorned with an ornament saying “Noel,” from the cubbyhole of the old Philco radio-phonograph player where my grandparents once stored long-playing record albums, seated myself on the sofa in my mother’s cheerful living room, and removed the lid. I began with a cluster of black-and-white scalloped-edged photographs Daddy had carried with him, all the way from New England to California, Canada, and finally, Chicago, the only visible ties to a past he managed to escape, but surely could never forget. One at a time, I picked up the pictures, studying each carefully, looking for evidence, looking for clues:

Daddy is a little boy with glossy dark hair and a beaming grin, dressed like Buster Brown, with a large square white collar and huge floppy bowtie. Next to him stands a small, bewildered-looking girl wearing an old-fashioned dress, tied with a satin sash, a giant bow atop her head. She must be his sister. I think her name must be Alice like her mother’s. They look like illustrations from turn-of-the-twentieth-century storybooks found in musty antiquarian bookstores.
Daddy, wearing a sailor suit, sits cross-legged in the sand, a pail and spade in front of him, with three little girls, one, the girl who I think must be his sister.

Daddy and the little girl are wading in the Atlantic Ocean. Even in the ocean in her bathing outfit, the little girl sports a giant bow in her hair. Daddy’s stomach pooches out in his old-fashioned bathing costume that comes clear down to his knees. He’s looking off into the horizon as though he can see forever.

Daddy is bundled up in a winter coat and leggings, his feet pointed inward, pigeon-toed, just like I was when I was little. The little girl, wearing a huge white fur hat, hands stuffed in a matching fur muff, is ensconced on a sled with elaborate curled runners. The background is draped with snow.

Daddy, older, wearing overalls, their legs rolled up to his knees, sits on the steps of a beach house. The little girl, with her big bow, shields her eyes, but Daddy squints directly into the sun, bare feet touching the sand. Two women with dark hair, dark complexions, and prominent features sit on the steps, one woman’s arm draped over my father’s shoulder.

In another picture, taken the same day, a man is sitting on the steps with the children. Everyone is smiling.
Who are the women and the man? I wondered. I asked my mother. “They’re some kind of relatives,” she said. But, some months later, when I asked the same question, hoping for more detail, her answer was different: “I have no idea.” They are mysteries, like so much of my father’s life.

I had never before thought about the story the photographs told, but now as I pondered them, I realized they contradicted what I believed to be the narrative of my father’s childhood: My father was an orphan, living in brutal foster homes, treated abysmally, starved of affection. I pictured a small boy wearing rags and, under the rags, undergarments cut from the unmentionables of a stingy old woman, stuck in the scullery, never allowed out for swimming, sledding, photos, or hugs. But these photographs hinted at something else; they suggested, if not wealth, at least comfort. The children were dressed like storybook children, with costumes appropriate for participating in the activities of the leisure class: the seashore in summer, sledding in the winter. If my father was not well loved, he was at least well dressed.

I picked up another batch of photographs and moved ahead in time:

A handsome man with light hair, wearing a woolen jacket, wide nineteen-forties tie, and cuffed tweed trousers, stands in a flower garden, in front of a picket fence. He’s my father’s brother. We thought he looked like Prince Philip. We cut a photo of Prince Philip from a Sunday magazine supplement to compare the pictures. The resemblance was striking, we believed. Whenever we showed anyone the photo of my father’s brother, we proffered the photo of Prince Philip for corroboration. Not knowing our true lineage, it seemed entirely possible we might be Mountbattens. After all, Prince Philip’s mother was also an Alice.

Someone with beautiful penmanship has written on the back of the photo, “Taken Sept. 6, 1942.” I had never thought about the date more than idly before, but now it puzzled me. The date
is only a few years before my father met my mother in 1946. That means that, as late as 1942, he knew his brother’s whereabouts. I didn’t understand why we never knew my uncle’s name and address unless he had died young too, perhaps in the war. I wondered if he had children, and, if he did, where they are. Do they know about their uncle, my father? Do they ever wonder about Charlie and me, if we exist? Maybe they have a companion photograph to this one taken September 6, 1942. I think of the books I read as a child and the movie *The Parent Trap*, where because of a matching set of photographs long-lost sisters are brought together. I want to find the people with the matching photographs. I want to close the broken circle.

Daddy, an adult, drawn in caricature by “Pancho” in 1944, lies bare-chested on a gurney, a tourniquet binding his arm as his blood fills a tank marked “5 gallons.” A curvy blonde nurse’s eyes bulge with astonishment. “Charlie Lovell—The One-Man Blood-Bank,” the caption reads.

I think the caricature ran in a newspaper or magazine, but I’m not sure what makes me think so—maybe because it looks like the glossy photographs of illustrations that I pulled off the wire machine when working as a copy girl at the *Dallas Times Herald* or that I filed at the *Dallas Morning News* library. “Pancho” was Frank Willmarth, who for many years had a studio on Olvera Street in the old Mexican marketplace of Los Angeles. He sketched many of the caricatures of movie stars and other celebrities that lined the walls of the famous Hollywood Brown Derby restaurant. Last year, a “Pancho” sketch of Cecil B. DeMille sold at an auction for $776.75. Willmarth was too old to serve in the military during World War II, and had a family besides, so he donated his time and talent to the Red Cross doing caricatures. Daddy couldn’t serve either, because of his hearing, so he made it a mission to donate blood as often as possible, setting a record for contributions. Probably “Pancho,” who had captured Mae West and Ronald

I moved to my mother’s cluttered dresser top where three framed photographs of my father rested against a large mirror. I examined the photos in chronological order, as if studying them in order would lend order to my quest.

In a glossy 5x7 black-and-white photo, like the autographed publicity stills movie stars used to send adoring fans, Daddy sports a mustache. His thick, dark hair, with its widow’s peak, is brushed back and parted on one side. My father signed the photo, “With all my love to the greatest girl in the world.”

Charlie and I thought Daddy looked like Clark Gable. But Mama insisted, no, Glenn Ford. I preferred to imagine a dashing swashbuckler sweeping my mother (and maybe other women before her—they didn’t marry until he was almost forty) off her feet, not a gentle, sensitive cowboy, which was how I thought of Glenn Ford. But years later, watching Glenn Ford in an old Western, I decided Mama was right. After that, I would look for Glenn Ford movies on TV and study his characters avidly, searching for clues as to how my father might have behaved in various circumstances: as an honest detective, an idealistic schoolteacher, a small-time hood, a bereaved widower with a son. I particularly sought out Glenn Ford’s more recent movies. I wanted to see how my father might have looked had he been allowed to grow old.

In the second photo, Daddy, wearing a suit with a lapel pin from one of his hiking clubs, stands in front of the open Hotpoint refrigerator, holding a box, once full of raisins, now full of cocoons of Prometheus moths. He collected the cocoons, storing them in the refrigerator until they were ready to emerge and he could study them. Sometimes in the
forest preserve, he would hoist my mother above his shoulders like an extension ladder so she could reach a cocoon on a high limb otherwise out of range.

In the last photo, Daddy is wearing a red-and-white-striped chef’s apron. Mama designed and made it. I still wear it; it has held up very well almost sixty years later. He is holding a platter of food he prepared for a *Chicago Tribune* photo spread in the women’s section where the food editor Mary Meade, a pseudonym for Ruth Ellen Church, proclaimed my father “Cook of the Month.” The headline read, “A Mere Man Makes It!” He shared with readers his recipes for Apple Cocoa Spice Cake; Chocolate Funny-cake Pie, a Pennsylvania Dutch recipe discovered while researching words; Bonnie’s Gumdrop Cookies, full of orange gumdrops and topped with orange icing, named for me; and New Mexican Rollups, quasi-tamales made, I am sorry to say, with Spam, an attempt to recreate something once sampled in New Mexico. “You were probably made of Spam,” my mother says. Spam was cheap so they ate a lot of it in those days. They wouldn’t be eating much of it that month; he won $100 for his Apple Cocoa Spice Cake recipe. I am in my high chair laughing with glee, my chubby sixteen-month-old hands reaching out to grab everything Daddy is passing out: food, words, love.

All three photos are ripe with expectancy: My father inscribed his formal photograph, “With all my love,” to the woman he hoped to marry, my mother, “the greatest girl in the world.” In their cocoons, the moth larvae are undergoing a metamorphosis before bursting into the world. And I am reaching out, hands spread open, for more, more, more.
I returned to the Christmas-card box, where newer pictures rested toward the bottom. I pulled out several fading Kodak color snapshots taken during a spring excursion to the forest preserve:

Green dappled light filters through the leaves of the embracing trees as if painted by Monet. Mama and Daddy have their arms around each other in a big bear hug, smooching like teenagers. I am wearing a pink-and-white checked apron over my Brownie uniform, my hair in pigtails under my brown beanie. I was supposed to sew the apron for a Brownie project, but I am no seamstress so Mama ended up finishing it for me. I’m holding an apple blossom branch. Charlie is shinnying up a tree like a monkey. In all the pictures, the green is dappled pale pink with apple blossoms, the apple blossoms that cause my mother to recall those as “the apple blossom years.”

I asked my mother about Daddy’s parents, wanting to check my memories against hers, and I was stunned by what she told me: Daddy wasn’t an orphan. All these years I have told people, I have believed, “My father was an orphan. His parents died when he was little.” But his father didn’t die, at least not then. After his mother died, his father abandoned his children. My mother didn’t know why; maybe he couldn’t manage caring for three children without a wife; maybe he couldn’t afford them; maybe he didn’t want them; maybe he didn’t want my father, my daddy, my Daddy-Boy. When he was nine, Daddy saw his father for the last time. If he knew what happened to his father after that, he never passed that along, or if my mother once knew, she has forgotten. I had woven into my father’s creation myth my own explication: being orphaned is the most tragic childhood imaginable. But now I know; the real story, being abandoned, unwanted, is even more tragic.
As we talked about my father’s early life, my mother stunned me again: Daddy never graduated from high school. She wasn’t sure how far he had gone in school, but he definitely had not graduated from high school. All these years on the “father’s educational level” question on college financial aid applications, I had been marking “completed high school.” I knew my father had been self-educated, but I assumed that meant he continued educating himself after finishing high school. The next year, filling out the form, I changed my answer to “not known,” and marveled at his achievements. “He was a brilliant man,” my mother said.

More clues waited to be discovered under our very own noses. At the back of the closet in the sunny yellow back bedroom at my mother’s house, an olive-drab Army surplus trunk, battered by years and moves, piled with the accumulation of a quarter century in a back bedroom closet, held some of what was left of my father, what didn’t go with Paddy Drysdale to Canada and the dictionary publishers after he died. Once, there was a second trunk, but its contents became hopelessly mildewed and my mother threw it away. That’s what I remember. Or maybe North American Van Lines lost it when we moved the almost 900 miles from Willow Springs, Illinois, to Ardmore, Oklahoma. That’s what Mother remembers. Or maybe there were once three trunks; maybe both of our memories are right. This trunk has always been hard to get to, hard to open, so I have rarely opened it. One weekend, I dug it out from under the boxes and suitcases that covered it and pried open its heavy latches.

Inside I found huge black scrapbook sheets, measuring 30x30 inches, on which Daddy glued some of the story of his life in the years I think of as forgotten. Now I realize how silly that sounds—to my father, they were not forgotten years. They are only unknown years, years before my mother, years before I was born and history began.
The pages are organized by activity. One page deals with the war years. Here is his letter to report to the draft board in Alhambra, California, on October 19, 1942. Here are postcards from blood banks about blood drives. These must be the drives at which he donated—in Pasadena, South Pasadena, San Francisco, Banff, Alberta. Here’s my father, wearing a shop apron at Fletcher Aviation in Pasadena, a bristly mustache topping his broad smile, demonstrates “Parkerizing,” which involves using a pulley contraption to dip parts for Republic Thunderbolts and North American Mustangs into a steaming vat of rust-proofing solution. The planes are bound for bombing raids over Tokyo.

Several pages contain black-and-white snapshots taken with the Skyline Trail Riders of the Canadian Rockies and the Sky Line Trail Hikers at Baker Creek, Ptarmigan Lake, Skoki, Lake Louise, Lake O’Hara, Lake McArthur, and Odaray Trail in the summer of 1945. A bear stares straight ahead as though posing for the camera; my father’s handwriting records, “My first bear.” I wonder if he ever had a second, or maybe even a third, bear. On a picture of my father, unidentified handwriting writes, “Ubique Ubiquing.” I thought Ubique was my mother’s pet name for him, as Gosling was his for her, but evidently the nickname pre-dated my mother. “He gave it to himself,” she said, when I asked about the nickname’s origin. “It’s because you never knew where he was going to turn up; he might be anywhere or everywhere. He loved to go places.”

On another black page, Daddy had carefully pasted request slips collected from libraries where he traveled to do research, ranging all over California to Minnesota, New York, and Washington, D.C., and the Library of Congress. The only one from New England is from a library in Worcester, Massachusetts. Out of all the cities in Massachusetts, I wondered why
would he have gone only to Worcester. Did his brother or sister live there? Was that where the photograph of Prince Philip was taken September 6, 1942? It was a clue I’d have to pursue.

Another page makes me think of the mirror scene from The Lady from Shanghai. Picture after picture after picture, thirty pictures, filling up an entire 30x30-inch page, of my father, clipped from newspapers all over the country—fillers—all headlined “Cheerful Giver.”

No “grouchy blood donor” is Charles J. Lovell, whose mystery thriller, The Crime of the Grouchy Blood Donor, is being published shortly. One of America’s leading donors, the young Pasadena, Calif., writer and humorist gave fifty pints to the Red Cross during the war.

The blurb went on to tell about a hike my father had planned from Tecate Lookout on the Mexican border to Hope, British Columbia. But I wondered about the mystery thriller. Published shortly? By whom? Or was that just PR? Mother swears we once had the manuscript but it’s gone now, mildewed or lost by movers. Why oh why was it lost forever? I feel bereft. I have lost so much. All I have are questions.

Loose in the trunk was the title page of another book, HOLY SMOKES! or, DOUBLE TROUBLE: A Novel of Love, Diplomacy, Politics, Advertising, Invention, Communism, Philosophy, Space Travel and Radioactive Fallout in the Atomic Era. Random House rejected it. Based on the title alone, I would have rejected it too. Daddy frugally cut up the rejection letter to use the back for a citation slip.

Some of the things I remembered weren’t there: A letter from President Franklin D. Roosevelt, commending Charles J. Lovell on his prodigious donation of blood to help the war effort. A letter from H. L. Mencken. Were those letters in the mildewed trunk? Or did I invent them? But here I trust my memories. Without the letters, I would have had no basis for invention.
I wouldn’t, as a child—and that is when these memories began, have known to imagine letters from President Roosevelt or H. L. Mencken, whose *American Language Supplements* I didn’t began studying until later. They are lost, lost forever.

The letter I remembered from Katherine Anne Porter was there, wishing she could go on a hike of the Pacific Crest Trail, from Mexico to Canada, that my father was organizing. Only it wasn’t from the author Katherine Anne Porter at all; it was from Technical Sergeant Katherine A. Porter.

Missing from the trunk was a manila file folder containing a letter Daddy wrote me when I was three. He was in the hospital recuperating from his first heart attack. He wrote in pencil on notebook paper. Most of the page was taken up by a sketch of a large black woman in a crisp nurse’s uniform and cap sitting at his bedside. *She’s my nurse. She’s helping Daddy-boy get well so he can come home to you, he wrote. Some people look down on her because she’s a different color, he wrote. But she’s a human being just like we are, and she is a good, kind person, and we should love everybody, no matter what color they are.* He signed it, *Daddy-boy XOXOX.* The last time I opened the trunk, I took the envelope home for safekeeping. Where on earth did I put it? I hated that I had been so careless with the artifacts that are all I have left of my father.

Over and over I ask my mother the same questions, an oral historian’s trick. Repeating a question gets an interviewee to reveal more, to reveal things they don’t know that they know, or that they don’t want to tell you. When I ask where he got the name Lovell, she usually claims not to know. But the last time I asked, she said, “It’s because he loved everybody: Love-all.” But I think of his life, between shedding Steckewich and donning Lovell, as loveless. Love must have seemed like something for other people.
Just as with the photos stuffed in the Christmas card box, their only order being the order in which someone last looked at them, so my research began willy-nilly. I have a master’s degree in history; I have worked as an oral historian and, for fifteen years, as a newspaper librarian. I am well versed in ferreting out facts, finding information, approaching research in a methodical, systematic manner. But I approached my own research project randomly. I found my first lead in the virtual paper trail representing my father’s life not because I was actively seeking it. My friend Kay and I were playing around on the World Wide Web, trying to find an old friend who had disappeared from our lives, and stumbled across the Social Security Death Index database. We didn’t find our lost friend listed, but while noodling around, we looked for my father. Scrolling down page after page of dead Charles Lovells, I quickly scanned the rows of names, looking for years of death and places of death.

Finally, on the last screen, there was, evidently, my father. There was no middle initial, no place of death, and no “last residence” given, but the month of death, March 1960, was right, and the place the Social Security card was issued—California—fit what I knew. But the year of birth offered a surprise. He was indeed born December 3, but instead of 1911, in 1907, four years earlier. Either there had been a clerical error or my father had lied about his age.

I printed the page telling me how to request a copy of the actual Social Security card, but it cost $27, which I didn’t have, so I set it aside and promptly forgot about it. Finally, I lost the printout. The sporadic, haphazard way I began my search shows that I hadn’t yet committed to the project. I was swamped by other obligations; I knew the quest could become all-consuming, and so I hedged. I hadn’t yet felt the weight of time pressing on my neck, the urgency to press on.
Eventually, I redid the Social Security Death Index search. This time I mailed the letter requesting a copy of my father’s Social Security application with a check for $27, and received in the mail my first document: a photographic copy of my father’s Social Security card request, made in 1936, the first year of the New Deal’s Social Security Administration. In my father’s handwriting, he gave his name as Charles J. Lovell, but included in parentheses his original last name, Steckewich, adding the presumably authentic Polish spelling, Steckiewicz. This was a clue: He wasn’t hiding his Steckiewicz past, as I had suspected. And sure enough, he gave his birth date as December 3, 1907. The Social Security Death Index had not made a clerical error. My mother suspected he downplayed his age so she wouldn’t be scared off by the difference in ages between them; when they met, she was 22 to his 39. A difference of only thirteen years must have sounded more acceptable than one of seventeen years. And so, my father who baked us cherry pies in honor of George “I cannot tell a lie” Washington’s birthday, lied.

The document contained another clue: He was born, not in Portland, but in Fort McKinley, Maine. I rushed to my ragged road atlas and searched its index. No such place. I Googled Fort McKinley, which I learned was a coastal fortification for Portland, on Great Diamond Island. Its heyday was during the Spanish-American War. This document, with its tantalizing new clues, tipped the scales. I submitted to what felt inevitable, and when I did, a burst of energy and excitement ensued. It was as though the idea of a quest had been simmering in a large stockpot on the back of the stove. Occasionally I would toss in chunks of potato, a carrot here, a turnip there, and finally the rich stew came to a boil. And so I began my research.

difference does it make who your father was?” For a journalist, his lack of curiosity about his own origins seemed perverse. If he didn’t understand, I was sure I couldn’t make him see why it felt so urgent. Later, Jack’s girlfriend filled me in: his father had abandoned him and his mother and sister. When he did try to track down his father, he learned something he didn’t want to know: his father had been knifed to death in a bar brawl. I thought of Casimir Steckiewicz. Maybe I was getting a glimpse into how my own father would have felt about finding his father, the man who abandoned him, who left his childhood to cruel fate. But I wanted to know. I did care; it did matter. I wanted to understand, as much as it was possible so many years later, how my father had come to be the man he became, a man of boundless curiosity, widespread interests, and vast knowledge, who seemingly could do anything. I wanted to know how the abandoned little boy became Daddy-Boy, how he became the eminent lexicographer Charles J. Lovell.

When I finally sat down at the Emily Fowler Library computer to begin my research, I was annoyed at myself for waiting so long. The first steps were so easy; so much of what I wondered was right there, available through the wonders of the World Wide Web. Maybe that was what it took, waiting, for some of the work to be done for me, to obviate the need for legwork and the expense of travel. But, still, federal censuses had been available online for several years. I had known that and yet had made no move to begin my search. But it didn’t matter; I was starting now.

I logged on and homed in on U.S. Census records. I started with 1910. I found my father’s family right away, as though they had been sitting around a kitchen table waiting for me. The spelling of the last name was not exact and changed from record to record, but I knew that might be the case. Casimir J. Steckiewicz anglicized his name, or the census enumerator had
done it for him. Charles J. Stackewich wife, Alice H., and their two sons, Charles J., Jr., two, and Stanley Vialentin, one month old, at 142 Florence Street, New Bedford, Bristol County, Massachusetts.

The summer of 2000, I had served as a census enumerator. As a historian, I understood the historical value of the information I was collecting. Besides native-born Americans, I spoke to immigrants from South Korea, India, Mongolia, and inhabitants of a falling-down apartment building, immigrants from Mexico, who had recreated the plaza of a Mexican pueblo in their secluded patio. Now I was gaining firsthand knowledge of the personal value of that detailed information recorded by Henry W. Smith in New Bedford’s Third Ward, Nineteenth Precinct, on April 16, 1910.

Charles J. Stackewich, the grandfather I never knew, never even knew about, was born in Russia thirty years before. The abbreviation Pol in parentheses confirmed my suspicion that he was Russian only because Russia had seized Poland. Both of his parents had also been born in Russia. The abbreviation Pol in parentheses and the word German out to the side of their nationality shed light on their ethnicity or language. Casimir immigrated to the United States in 1902 and became a naturalized citizen. He was a shoemaker who owned his own shop. He could speak English and could read and write. His wife, age twenty-five, was born in New York. They had been married three years and had two children, both living, so their daughter had not yet been born. Her father was born in New York, her mother in Maine.

To one side, at 140 Florence Street, lived an Englishman, Joseph Noble, a barber, and his American wife, Rubie, and their three sons, Edward, Elmore, and George, the youngest a year older than my father. On the other side, at 146, lived a Canadian, William Wilson, who worked as a cement mixer, his wife, Elizabeth, and their three surviving sons, Gordon, Elmer, who
worked on a milk cart, and Herman. I was getting a feeling for the neighborhood where the
family lived.

Eagerly, I clicked to open and search the 1920 census. But by 1920, the family had
disintegrated. Public documents confirmed the upheaval of which I had known. Nowhere in the
1920 federal census could I find any of the Stackewich clan, no matter how I spelled the name.
The mother, I knew, had died; the father had disappeared. The children were lost under the
names of unknown caretakers.

I turned next to city directories. I knew from my years as a newspaper librarian how
invaluable they are in tracing people. New England, like the South, has a passion for genealogy
and the past, so many city directories have been digitized, making them searchable from as far
away as Denton, Texas. I knew from Stanley Valentine Steckiewicz’s birth certificate that the
family had lived in Portland, Maine, on February 10, 1910. The 1910 census record was dated
April 18 of that year, so sometime during the two months between his birth and the visit from the
census taker, the family had settled in New Bedford, Massachusetts. I began with the 1910
Portland city directory. Bull’s-eye! Charles J. Steckewich, as the city directory gave his last
name, occupation, private in the U.S. Army, lived in the rear of 95 India Street, the address given
on Stanley’s birth certificate. In the 1913 New Bedford, Massachusetts, city directory, I once
again found Charles J. Steckewich. By then he was a shoemaker who owned two shops, more
than any other New Bedford shoemaker, at 249 Cedar Street and 408 Summer Street, and lived at
125 Willis Street. But then, in 1914, Charles J. Steckewich was listed as “removed from the
city.” Removed? Alarms went off in my head. I expected legal action, scandal, mayhem, murder,
jail time, an answer to the why that plagued me: Why had he abandoned my father? But when I
turned to the key in the front of the city directory, I learned that removed only meant moved. But
I had no idea where he could have moved. It was frustrating to lose him just when I had found him.

Having reached a dead end, I turned back to the census records. In the 1930 federal census, the last open to the public, my father appeared, under his new name, Charles J. Lovell. He was living in Pasadena, California, rooming with a family that owned a radio, one of the questions that year. He worked in a nursery. Elysian Fields, I thought!

I began receiving replies from the requests for vital records I sent out as my funds allowed. No marriage certificate for Alice Budd and Casimir Steckiewicz or Charles Steckewich turned up, either in Maine or Massachusetts, but neither did a death certificate for Casimir Steckiewicz or Charles J. Steckewich, Sr., or a birth certificate for my father or his sister. The only record that kept turning was the birth certificate for my father’s brother, the same one my brother had dug up years before.

But finally a long envelope arrived from the New Bedford City Clerk’s Office containing an abstract of the death certificate of Alice Budd Steckewich. She died March 22, 1911, at the age of twenty-seven. Cause of death: edema of the larynx. My father was three; his brother had just turned one. Her daughter must have been an infant. I remembered all the headstones at the old Odd Fellows cemetery across the street from my house, with so many mothers’ death dates the same as, or within a few days of, the death dates on the tiny infant headstones nearby. I wondered if her fatal illness was related to her pregnancy or her daughter’s birth.

I couldn’t stop staring at the document. Over and over, I read the words: Edema of the larynx. I felt sick. Those babies. My poor father. Poor Alice. Edema of the larynx, I learned, is an excruciating way to die. Your larynx swells up, your throat constricts, and you suffocate. It might be caused by that handful of peanuts you ate at the ballgame or that oyster stew you
cooked for supper with the fresh oysters Casimir brought home from the seafood market, or it might be some tendency you inherited from your grandfather Budd or your grandmother Butterfield. It can kill you so fast there’s nothing anyone can do except watch you die, or it can kill you slowly, squeezing all the breath from you, second by second, extending the torture that will end in death. For weeks, I felt a lump in the front of my own throat whenever I swallowed. It felt like I had swallowed, without water, two aspirins that refused to go down. It was a real, not imaginary lump that I began to imagine was some rare cancer. And I was overcome with a sadness I couldn’t seem to shake. I couldn’t stop thinking about Alice Budd, aged twenty-seven. I thought about when I was twenty-seven. That was the year before I married, the year before I went to work at the *Dallas Morning News*, the whole world ahead of me. What if I had died then, instead, and not lived my life? It felt unbearable to imagine her death and impossible to imagine her as a grandmother, she who had never been even middle-aged, much less old. I felt deprived, never having known her, my other grandmother. I wondered what she looked like. I look like my father, but I didn’t know if he resemble the Steckewiches or the Budds.

When I told my mother about the death certificate, she stunned me with something new: She thought Casimir Steckewich had remarried and that my father’s sister may have been a stepsister. So she wouldn’t have been Alice. Once again, I had to rearrange what I thought I knew to fit changing facts.

I began calling or writing the few American Steckiewicz I found in telephone-directory searches on the World Wide Web. Frances and Irene Steckiewicz were two sisters, then in their nineties, who lived in Pelham, New Hampshire. Their father, Paul Steckiewicz, had immigrated to the United States in 1904 to keep out of the Russian army.
“It’s very interesting,” Frances kept repeating, as I told her my story, but she was unaware of any relation named Casimir or Charles. Some of their Steckiewiczes had shortened their names to Steck. After I talked to her, I began noticing their family turn up in all my searches; I can’t help but believe we are distant cousins.

I wrote to an Alice Steckiewicz I discovered in Fayetteville, New York, thinking perhaps Alice may have become a family name, but Steckiewicz is Alice’s married name, and her then husband, Roy, didn’t know anything about “that stuff.” He was in his eighties and in poor health. He speaks Polish, and he thinks his father came from Warsaw, but that’s all he knows or cares to know. His family didn’t talk about “those things.” Alice was kind enough to call to tell me this. Once his family came to the New World, they made new lives. They didn’t look back. They had fled the old country that threatened their freedom for the promise of a new one. It was a very American story. Casimir Steckiewicz had done the same, just as my father, the child of an immigrant, fled a past that threatened to contain him. He would doubtless not have wanted to look back. I think of Jack’s question, “Why do you care?” and wonder again why I want to look back. But I press on, driven by curiosity.

As Alice and I talked, she relayed my questions to Roy and some visiting relatives, translating my questions into Polish and their answers into English. I felt like I was outside, on a darkened porch on the other side of a window, peering in at a lighted room at a lively family gathering, where everyone was speaking a language I couldn’t understand. Alice told me she would pass my address on to her nephew, who is interested in “that sort of thing.” Sure enough, I received a letter from John Woodman. Unfortunately, it was not him, but his first wife, now dead, who had researched the Steckiewicz family. He thought she gave her family papers to a museum somewhere, but he wasn’t sure what she might have done with facts about his family.
that she had unearthed. Again, we didn’t seem to be directly connected; maybe distantly. After a few e-mails, he began signing himself “Janek” and adding postscripts in Polish, contributing to my feeling of being an observer, pressing my nose against the glass, where inside, a large family sits around a table, laughing and telling stories in Polish, eating pierogi and bigos and drinking Polish beer.

Somehow, I let several months pass before resuming online research. Automatically, I typed in the search term I always start with: Steckiewicz. This time I hit pay dirt: the index entry to the marriage certificate of Casimir J. Steckiewicz and Alice H. Budd. I had written city, county, and state vital statistics offices in three states trying to find such a document, with no luck, yet now here was an abstract of that very record. Genealogists and archivists and librarians are working valiantly to make the actual documents accessible, bringing things that once only would have been findable in the bowels of New England courthouses to my computer screen with the click of a mouse. My father’s parents were married in 1907. If they observed the proprieties, they must have married early in the year, since my father was born December 7.

Alice Budd married, and four years later she was dead, setting in motion a tragedy that would play itself out through my father’s life.

But I couldn’t think about that now, or I would never go on. I turned back to the computer screen and in another database typed in Steckiewicz. Another direct hit. I had tried, unsuccessfully, to get Casimir Steckiewicz’s military records from the National Archives; now a newly uploaded record popped up: Casimir J. Steckewich filed an application for a military pension on March 3, 1910, in Maine. He had served in the Twenty-third Company, U.S. Coast Guard Artillery. On his application was the word “invalid.” I couldn’t fathom what it might mean: Was the application not valid? Or was Casimir Steckiewicz an invalid? And if he was an
invalid, I wondered how I could discover what had happened and if the condition was permanent
or temporary.

As I wrote this chapter, ever the lexicographer’s daughter, I looked up *willy-nilly* in the
dictionary. I wanted to know if it is correctly one word, or two, or hyphenated, and I discovered a
definition I hadn’t known. I had been using the word in the sense of “haphazardly,” but there’s
an older meaning: “by compulsion: without choice.” Indeed, my research has been willy-nilly in
every sense of the word, one willy-nilly overtaking another as I pursue Casimir Steckiewicz and
Alice Budd and my father through time and space.

Something else pushes me on—a desire to know before it’s too late, before it doesn’t
matter to anyone anymore. I don’t have children. Once or twice, briefly, I passionately wanted a
child, but I see now it was more a question of passion, of biological imperative, than a true desire
to raise and nurture a child. When Stephanie Mills, the Mills College valedictorian in 1969,
shocked America when she pledged in her commencement address never to bring children into
an overpopulated world, I was cheered by her boldness. Her concern was the planet; feminists
had different motivations for saying childlessness was a valid option. Feminists said I had a
choice, that I didn’t have to live the constricted life prescribed by mid-century American society,
a life defined and hemmed in by certain maternity, and I believed them. I believed that the choice
was mine. And yet I chose by deferring the choice until it was gone; I chose by not choosing. I
always thought I would have forever to decide, just as I always thought I would have forever to
search for my father’s past. Our family photographs tossed higgledy-piggledy in the Christmas
card box are making me think about this.

More than anything I want to see a photograph of my unknown grandmother, Alice Budd.
I paw through boxes of old photographs in antique stores and junk stores, looking at people in
their old-timey outfits, people once important to somebody, now abandoned, unidentified faces on photographs. My heart quickens when, rooting through boxes, I discover a batch of photographs from New England. What serendipity to have Alice Budd’s photograph fall into my hands! I tell myself coincidences abound. When I visited the home of my brother’s in-laws in New York, while scanning the living room, I was amazed to see, on their piano, an old photograph from a studio in Ellenville, New York. It seems that, out of all the towns in all the world, his wife’s stepmother’s family hails from the same small Catskill Mountain town as Alice Budd. But the dusty boxes of photos are a reminder, a warning: someday all of our family photographs could end up abandoned and unidentified, in junk stores in boxes draped with cobwebs where strangers will paw through them. My cousins on my mother’s side would have no reason to care about what may be a dead limb of a family tree that isn’t even their family tree. My only niece, Jessa, lives in England, and she never knew any of the people involved or even the stories of our father. I suppose I should tell her, but she is so far, far away. I’m not even sure she would care. But maybe she will. She did ask my mother, before she had her own two children, if there were family names she should consider. Quite by chance, she gave her daughter, as a middle name, the first name of her great-great-grandmother, Sophia, years before we knew of the existence of Sophia Butterfield Budd, Alice Budd’s mother. I fear our treasured archives reverting to meaningless photographs in boxes in dusty junk stores. I can’t stand that, yet I feel powerless to prevent it. I blame myself for not having anyone who will preserve our family history because I failed to have children. I made a choice and now nobody, once I am gone, will care about my family’s life on Earth. But, then again, I know that having children would not guarantee pride of place for our family photos on some future mantelpiece. My
children might have died young; they might have cared nothing about history, even their own family’s.

When we were cleaning out my grandparents’ house in Ardmore before the new owner took possession, I found a charming scrapbook my Aunt Jamie kept as a teenager. It contained yellowed newspaper clippings—about high school sorority activities, football games, and weddings Jamie had attended or been part of—snapshots, dried corsages, even a pressed cigarette package that belonged to one of her many beaux. I handed it to Jamie, thinking she’d be thrilled. I would have loved to have just such a documentary record of my own high school years. She flipped through it, smiling, but then tossed it in the discard pile. I try not to regret things, but oh how I regret not retrieving her scrapbook from the trash heap, not so much for its small part in Hefley family history, but for its social and cultural history, its portrait of a popular American teenaged girl in the mid-nineteen-forties. But I had not yet trained as a historian, and so I stuffed it in the black plastic trash sack with all the other flotsam and tied it shut. Now it scares me to think that one of Alice Budd’s relatives might have felt that way about her pictures. After all, I can imagine them thinking, she died so long ago; there’s no one left to remember her.
Chapter 6

Dreams of Days That Were

Strange to me now are the forms I meet
When I visit the dear old town;
But the native air is pure and sweet, . . .
And with joy that is almost pain
My heart goes back to wander there,
And among the dreams of the days that were,
I find my lost youth again.

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

As a girl, I loved the card game Authors. Not playing it—admiring its illustrations. Before I wanted to be an actress, I wanted to be an author—or more precisely, an authoress—like Louisa May Alcott, the lone female adorning the deck. I didn't know it, but my father had prophesied—or ordained—that career in the handmade cards announcing my birth. A drawing of a rosy-cheeked infant with a rosebud mouth—me—looking like the Gerber baby—was pasted on the announcement of my birth from the Chicago Tribune and emblazoned with the words, “Breaking into Print,” his proclamation that someday his daughter’s picture might grace a deck of cards. Every card bore the visage of a Famous Author. None were of recent vintage; most had been popular in the previous century; only Mark Twain was still living when my father was born. Most of the authors sported long locks and impressive facial hair (predisposing me I suspect to love the boys with flowing hair of the Sixties). Most memorable, his flowing white hair, mustache, and beard suggesting none other than Santa Claus, lacking only the red velvet suit, was Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Even his distinguished-sounding three-part name proclaimed “Famous Author.” A critic of the times asked, "Who, except wretched schoolchildren, now reads Longfellow?” But schoolchildren—and not wretched ones—did still read him. I could recite chunks of his poems. Even today, I can declaim their stirring opening lines: “Under a spreading chestnut tree . . .” “Listen my children and you shall hear . . .” “By the shores of Gitche Gumee . . .” “This is the forest primeval.” Longfellow’s dramatic narratives fed my fever for performance.
My favorite Longfellow poem was “The Children's Hour.” I turned to it often in the slim, navy-blue volume, *One Hundred and One Famous Poems*. But instead of Henry Longfellow, I pictured Daddy at work in Longfellow’s study and myself as grave Alice descending the broad hall stair in the lamplight. So clearly can I see the image in my mind's eye—the study, with rich, heavy Victorian furnishings, the girls in long white dresses with blue satin ribbons—I felt sure the poem had been illustrated, but when I opened the worn volume, the poem’s only illustration was a thumbnail portrait of its author and his voluminous hair. My imagination and Longfellow's words had ignited to paint the vivid picture.

Longfellow was born in Portland, Maine, in 1807, and spent his first three decades in “the dear old town.” Two centuries later, I alighted in Portland, in the summer of 2007. The city was in the midst of a celebration of his bicentennial. Longfellow was everywhere. I toured the Wadsworth-Longfellow House where Longfellow grew up. It was already a museum when Charles and Alice Steckewich lived in Portland, having been donated to the Maine Historical society by Longfellow’s last surviving sister, Anne Longfellow Pierce, upon her death in 1901. I remembered—or thought I did—another piece of the picture: Alice Budd had been a good student. Maybe she had loved poetry. Certainly Longfellow's poems remained immensely popular in those years. I imagined my grandmother, in her long dress and fine hat, touring this very house one hundred years ago.

A century before, in 1907, my father had been born in Portland, at its Fort McKinley military installation; this was his centennial year, although nobody was celebrating. A century! I had once been fascinated by the concept of centuries. People were alive in the twentieth century who had been born in the nineteenth! And it was possible, if a person was born at just the right time and lived long enough, to be alive in *three* centuries! A century—the idea felt ponderous, like my father was a monument, carved in stone, larger than life, historic. It felt eerie walking streets his mother and father had walked, seeing buildings they had seen, for Portland is an old city, settled for the first time in 1633, although most of its red-brick buildings had been built since the Great Fire of 1866 destroyed much of the town, leaving a third of its population homeless. I squinted my eyes and the twenty-first century disappeared. I was in Portland, 1907.
The Inn at St. John, my small Victorian hotel, would have been only ten years old when Charles Steckewich brought his bride, Alice, to Portland, where he had been attached as a mechanic to the U.S. Coastal Artillery at Fort McKinley across Casco Bay since 1904. Although at the western end of the city, it’s not two miles from their small rear apartment near the wharves. Perhaps they passed the hotel in a carriage on the way to their new home, perhaps they honeymooned there, perhaps they conceived my father there, for he was born nine months after the wedding.

I arrived late on a pleasantly cool Saturday afternoon in August. After signing the guest register, I climbed three steep, narrow flights to my room, with its old-fashioned burgundy floral wallpaper and white iron bed. I was in Portland, where my father's story began! Down the hall, I immersed myself in a steaming bath, sorely needed after three days and nights on crowded buses. After dressing, I crossed the street to a pizzeria where I feasted on a light “suppah” (I could hear my father's voice, his dropped final “r's”) of exquisitely creamy, buttery haddock “chowdah” with oyster crackers. Afterward, I strolled the neighborhood, which was crowded with fans of the Portland Sea Dogs, the Boston Red Sox's farm team, swarming on their way to nearby Hadlock Field.

The next day I had an appointment to tour Great Diamond Island, the site of Fort McKinley. I leaned back on the high iron bed studying a city map in a tourist brochure, trying to get the lay of the land. And then I saw it, just blocks from where I would catch the Casco Bay ferry: India Street. All I had to do was walk down Congress Street headed east in the general direction of downtown and I would hit it. Early Sunday, I set out, stopping at a small restaurant I discovered on the way, Hot Suppa!, which became my staging ground. Every morning over seven-grain porridge or corned beef hash or buckwheat pancakes—always with lots of hot coffee and cream, I read the *Portland Press* and planned my strategy of the day. On this Sunday, I pulled out a more detailed map of Portland ripped from the hotel room's telephone book and marked churches near India Street. On Congress Street, St. Paul’s Episcopal Church and the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception; on Federal Street, the Italian Catholic Church; on Newbury, a synagogue. If the churches were old—and I guessed from what I had seen of Portland, they would be—the Steckewich family could have worshiped at one of them. “Of a different religion.” I
remembered those haunting words. What exactly, I wondered, did “different” mean? Catholic? Jewish? From what little I knew of Polish history, it might have been either. Or perhaps Eastern Orthodox. I thought I remembered that Daddy had been raised Congregationalist, that quintessentially New England religion. I felt sure Alice had been Protestant because of another story: some years later Daddy’s grandfather had converted to Catholicism. He had given my father a bicycle and when my father refused to convert too, he took the bicycle away. But his grandfather—Alice's father—had not originally been Catholic. Presumably “different” meant Other: Other than Protestant. Different. Disowned. On an index card, I recorded the church addresses in the order I would reach them. At each one, I would look for dates carved in cornerstones or marked on marquees. Breakfast finished, I resumed walking.

Number 95 India Street, rear, was the family’s address in 1910. From the street numbers that I passed, I could tell that the block of India Street containing 95 would be to my right, toward the bay and the oldest part of town. As I grew closer, my excitement mounted. Finally, I saw the green street sign: India Street. My heart raced. I turned right. The neighborhood was old. Unlike in Dallas, the old hadn't been torn down to make way for the new and improved, to eliminate the palimpsest of the past. I searched for street numbers. Ninety-five would be on my left. I was close. The numbers grew smaller. As I approached the end of the block, in the very last lot I saw what I had feared the most—a vacant lot. I willed myself not to panic, to not assume the worst, to keep looking at numbers, to hold onto hope. Then, there it was in front of me: 95. The three most significant houses of my life have been demolished, but the house my father lived in as an infant and toddler existed still. It was a two-story red brick building with dark-green trim, housing a real estate office downstairs and psychologists' offices upstairs. Because of the vacant lot next door that had caused such a surge of fear, I was able to walk around the building, trying to memorize it, trying to find clues, doors—doors I could open that would make the past accessible. On the ground floor was a rear door—the door that would have opened to the Steckewiches' small back apartment. I could see the small family, Casimir, Alice, Charles, and baby Stanley, only for some reason, they look like the Corleone family—Vito, Mama in her long white dress, Sonny in his sailor suit, and baby Fredo, sitting on the front steps of their tenement apartment watching the festivities as their
immigrant Italian neighborhood celebrates the feast of San Gennaro. A huge banner stretches across Federal Street, India Street’s cross street, announcing the upcoming St. Peter's Italian Street Festival and Bazaar, celebrating the feasts of the assumption and San Rocco, which I will just miss.

Next door to the left, to the immediate north of their apartment, at 99 India Street, is an old fire station, Ladder 5, built in 1867, in the aftermath of the Great Fire the year before. Little boys love to watch fire engines dashing to fires, dream of growing up to dash off to fires themselves, clutching the side of the red truck as it races away. A dim memory flickered: Daddy used to fight forest fires. No more than that, just a fragment, an ash, a tease. I remembered the night a house burned down in Willow Springs. Everybody ran outside to see in what direction the wailing sirens were heading, and then watching the orange-red flames consume the house. I wondered if Daddy remembered his childhood, remembered hearing the clanging fire bells, rushing outside to watch the horse-drawn fire wagons race off, going to visit the Dalmatians next door.

To the rear, on a hill covering more than five acres lies the old Eastern Cemetery, where some of Portland's oldest names are buried. It was first established in 1637 when the settlement that became Portland was only four years old. Between Ladder No. 5 and the Church of the Messiah, on the corner of Congress and India streets, which in those years dominated the block, was the North School whose clock tower could be seen for blocks.

India Street runs north and south for five blocks between the two busiest commercial streets of Portland, Commercial Street, which lines the bay to the south, and Congress Street to the north. Once, India Street had been at the bustling heart of Portland, its name suggesting the romance of far-off ports of call and exotic foreign lands. The apartment was centrally located, in the vital center of a vital city, a strikingly diverse neighborhood, according to city directories, reflecting its status as a haven for recent immigrants. The names of the residents and proprietors of neighborhood businesses suggest Irish, the largest immigrant group to Portland, but also Italian, Scandinavian, and Eastern European origins.

From city directories and Sanborn fire insurance maps, I learn that their landlady, Mrs. Patrick Graney, lived in the main apartment of their side of the duplex; Alfred J. Marco lived in apartment A. On
the other side of the duplex, number 93, lived George Murdock and Philip Greenwood; in apartment 93A, Charles Erner. Across the street lived a dentist. Three blocks south, at the corner of India and Fore streets stood the new Grand Trunk Railway Depot railway station built in 1903 on the site of the first settlement of Portland in 1632, which itself was built on the site of the earlier Fort Loyall, established in 1630. Rail lines radiated out behind the imposing station that linked the two large grain elevators that dominated the area to the wharves behind it. The line’s trains ran between Montréal and Portland, bringing Canadian visitors and Canadian grain to the port city, which was the closest port to Europe and which was navigable during months when Canadian ports were iced in. Steamships went to coastal ports to the south as well as to Glasgow, London, and Bremen.

Another block down, Fore Street intersects with Hancock, where Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s birthplace once stood. In 2007, it was a construction site, but in 1910 was featured prominently on Portland postcards. If Alice Steckewich ventured from her apartment to take her sons for outings in the fresh air, she might have walked past Longfellow’s birthplace; she might have recited “Listen my children and you shall hear” to her boys; she might have said to her oldest son, “One day you will be a writer like Henry Wadsworth Longfellow”; she might have anointed him like he anointed me. It might have made her feel lucky to be living so close to where such a famous literary figure was born, as if some of the place, the luck might rub off on her boys. I can see her, looking like a Gibson girl, hair piled atop her head, pushing a perambulator, stopping and gazing at the large, impressive house.

Casimir—or he was Charles now—could walk the five blocks to the Casco Bay Lines ferry that would transport him to Great Diamond Island and Fort McKinley. I can see him striding down India Street to the dock where he would catch the ferry. As he strode down India Street, he would pass a stable, variety stores, a dye-house, boardinghouses, a small hotel, grocery stores, fruit stands, cigar shops, druggists, a bakery, restaurants, a lunch room, barbers, a junk dealer, a coal and wood dealer, a shoe repair shop, a clothing store, and pool and billiard halls, before arriving in a block where numerous steamship lines had their offices—Thomson Line Steamers, Dominion Line Steamers, Bristol Line Steamers, Leyland Line Steamers—as well as the Grand Trunk Telegraph office, the Grand Trunk
Yardmaster’s office, the U.S. Bureau of Animal Industry Inspectors’ Department, and the U.S. Custom House. In 1910, Portland already boasted 58,000 residents, almost as many as today’s 63,000.

Also in 1910, Jack Feeney, was a teenager in Munjoy Hill, the Irish neighborhood abutting India Street. Feeney worked as a deckhand on the Casco Bay Lines—he might well have worked on one of the ferries Casimir rode every day—but would soon move to Hollywood and be reborn as film director John Ford. But I would have to come back to India Street later. It was time to catch the 1:15 p.m. ferry, still run by the Casco Bay Lines, to Great Diamond Island.

The ferry pushed off from the wharf, headed across Casco Bay, moving away from the present and back through time. The early August afternoon was beautiful, clear and crisp, with a slight wind. The water in the bay sparkled like the diamonds that gave Little Diamond Island and Great Diamond islands their names. At the turn of the twentieth century, Fort McKinley, Portland’s harbor fortification, was a thriving military installation, which saw its heyday during the Spanish-American War. Before then, the island's natural beauty attracted landscape artists and writers, such as Longfellow and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Now, many of its military buildings have been restored to make posh summer homes for wealthy summer residents. Judith Lee, the curator of the Fort McKinley Museum, who lives on the island part of the year, met me at the pier with a golf cart for a guided tour of the old fort.

As we whizzed past the red brick Queen Anne buildings, Judy pointed out the officers’ quarters and the enlisted men's barracks, built around a central parade ground, now restored to their past architectural grandeur. Children of privilege in their crisp summer whites hung off their porches and played on vast manicured lawns. I could imagine dashing officers in dapper dress uniforms strolling down the green, saluting and being saluted by rows of men in uniform, by Casimir Steckewich.

Judy was rattling off facts—faster than I could absorb them—about the bowling alley and gun emplacements. And then, to our left, an old, tumbledown structure, covered with overgrowth, its shattered and boarded-up windows obscured by vines, its stairs broken, appeared. It looked as though bats might fly from its rafters at any moment. It would make the perfect setting for a horror movie.

“This is the hospital,” Judy said.
The hospital! I hadn't dreamed it still existed! If my father was right about having been born at Fort McKinley, this is where he was born. A thrill swept over me.

“Is it OK if I get out and walk around?” I asked.

“Of course,” Judy said.

I stepped gingerly from the golf cart and slowly approached the hospital. I wanted to climb the rickety, broken stairs, shove open the door, go inside, but I didn’t dare—I was conscious of being a guest. I knew that the stairs were unsafe and there was likely a liability issue involved. I flashed back to Willow Springs and the abandoned house behind the school. On several occasions, I had sneaked inside and prowled around, fascinated by the things left behind, the residue of someone's past, the mystery of what was left behind, forgotten. I felt the same way now. I wanted to push open the door, or clamber through an open window, climb the wide staircase, roam through the rooms, look for rusted iron beds, abandoned medical records, gnawed on by squirrels and raccoons, shat on by bats. I wondered if my father’s birth certificate had been lost in what was left behind when the fort was abandoned after World War II. I tried to imagine the hospital circa 1907—gleaming floors, white iron beds, nurses in crisp white starched uniforms, the fort’s medical doctor attending patients. I snapped picture after picture with my disposable camera, wanting aides-mémoires because now I knew how fragile, precarious memory is. I didn’t want to leave, but I didn't want to be greedy of Judy's time and so I backed away. One hundred years ago, Alice Budd gave birth to a baby, her first child, here. The baby was my father. And here I was.

But I had questions. The Steckewiches lived across the bay in town, not on the base. I asked Judith about the hospital. Could wives of soldiers use the hospital? Were babies born here on a military base?

Yes, she explained. The dependents of soldiers stationed at Fort McKinley did use the hospital. Soldiers who didn’t live on the island would take the ferry to work. Only a smattering of the hospital’s records are known to exist and none for 1907. But that doesn't mean they won't turn up one day.

The hospital is on Maine’s list of most endangered historic buildings due to the state of its deterioration, but Judy felt confident the funds would be found to restore it.
Returning to Portland on the ferry, I reflected in awe at the discoveries of the day—I had seen my father’s probable birthplace and the apartment where he was a baby and toddler.

I returned to India Street more than once during my week in Portland. I was obsessed with the building where the Steckewiches had lived. I was hanging around taking pictures, too shy to knock and go inside, when a man came out of the realty office on the first floor, and I told him who I was and why I was stalking his building.

“Well, come on inside,” he said, and held open the door. He led me to the back to the set of small rooms that would have been their apartment. I tried to imagine the layout of the rooms and which had been the kitchen. I remembered the tiny old-fashioned toy cookstove I had gotten one Christmas. My other grandmother had once cooked on just such a wood-burning stove and I thought Alice must have too. Would there have been indoor plumbing yet? Or would she have had to empty the family’s chamber pots? I knew that in Tennessee, my great-grandparents had an outhouse, but this was in a city. I tried to imagine where she might empty them. I remembered Forever Amber, the contents of slop pots being hurled into the street. I tried to imagine my little daddy crawling across the wooden floor, later practicing walking, pulling himself up. I wondered what games children played then. He was crawling somewhere on this floor when Casimir—or Charles now—Steckewich stepped on his tiny hand, crushing it, crippling it. How could that happen? Did Casimir trip? Was it an accident? Did he drink? Did he trip in a drunken stupor? Maybe the Budds had been right about their son-in-law, right to warn Alice away, disowned her. A handsome foreign soldier—a “turbulent” immigrant as the Portland mayor termed them—with a sexy accent—you can’t possibly know if he will be a good husband, a good father, when all you see is the passion in his eyes meeting the passion in yours. I sighed. I would never know. Not unless, miraculously, I found some unknown relative who knew the missing part of my father’s story. Now, the rooms held stacks of boxes holding stationery and office supplies. I became aware of office noises in the front and so I thanked the man who has welcomed me in and said good-bye. As with the hospital, it was more than I had dreamed of—not only to find the actual building—still standing—but to go inside to the very rooms where my father had been a baby, where Alice Budd had been a bride, a new mother.
But Charlie Lovell had not reached three years old when Casimir—or Charles—was discharged from the Coastal Artillery and the family left Portland for New Bedford, Massachusetts. There wasn’t more I would find in Portland. And so I crossed the street from the Inn at St. John and boarded the Peter Pan bus that would take me to New Bedford, Massachusetts, the city on Buzzards Bay where my father’s childhood and happiness would end.

The author most closely associated with New Bedford is Herman Melville. He too looked like a Famous Author, with his extravagant beard, although he didn't appear on our edition of the game. Not only did he look like a Famous Author, he looked like a seaman, which he was for a few years. As a young man, Melville set sail from New Bedford, worshiped at the Seaman's Bethel, where I touched his pew, and in later years visited his sister who made her home (now a bed and breakfast) there. “New Bedford is a queer place,” Melville wrote in what some consider The Great American Novel, *Moby-Dick*.

“It's a quaint little town,” the woman at the Peter Pan Bus Lines said, as I made my reservation over the phone. The queer, quaint little town was first settled by Europeans in 1651. By the time Melville knew it, it was the center of the worldwide whaling trade, dominated in New Bedford by Quakers, and known as “The City That Lit the World,” providing oil for lamps in those pre-petroleum days. Wealth oozed from the bellies of the whales. After oil was discovered in Pennsylvania causing the whale oil industry's collapse, New Bedford became wealthy again as a center for cotton manufactories. Both industries brought waves of immigrants, from Ireland, Portugal and the Portugal dependencies of Azores, Cape Verde, and Madeira, and later, French-Canadians from Canada.

By the time my father lived in New Bedford, its whaling heyday had passed and it was at the height of the textile industry boom. It was a cosmopolitan city then and remains so today, with ATM machines offering to dispense cash in French, Polish, Portuguese, Italian, and Spanish, in addition to English. It was on the streets of New Bedford that my father first began to notice words and the regional idiosyncrasies of spoken English.
I craned my neck so as not to miss the charming, picturesque houses lining every street, as the taxi took me from the bus depot to the Orchard Street Manor, the 1845–1846 house owned in succession by prominent whalers and textile industrialists. From the taxi window, I fell in love with New Bedford.

But prosperous, quaint, picturesque New Bedford wasn't my father's New Bedford. His New Bedford was cold and cruel, where his mother abandoned him by dying, his father abandoned him by leaving, where nobody wanted him unless for the long hours he could put in, for the cash he could provide the household. For my father, New Bedford was a prejudiced, small-minded, provincial town, where he was denied a formal education (although the education he gave himself surpassed any New Bedford schools could have provided), the town from which he had to escape in order to make a life of his own.

I settled my bags in the small upstairs suite, available at a reduced rate for researchers, and immediately got to work. Five cemeteries were listed in the New Bedford telephone book. One by one, I located them on my map of the area. I deduced that the Rural Cemetery on Dartmouth Street was Alice Budd's most likely place of interment, and a telephone call confirmed my hunch.

“How can I find the grave?” I asked the clerk who answered the phone.

“Oh, it's in the Civil War section. You can't miss it. There's a cannon—it's at the back and there are lots of flags. Look for all the flags.”

“Civil War section?” I wondered why Alice Budd would be buried in the Civil War section. She was born twenty years after the Civil War.

On Sunday, I set out down Dartmouth Street. The cemetery, no longer rural, is situated in the midst of New Bedford, surrounded by a rustic stone wall. I entered its archway and quickly became overwhelmed. The cemetery was vast with headstones in every direction as far as I could see and no way markers anywhere. Where to begin? I chose one path and began looking for some sort of sign, for the cannon, indicating the Civil War section, but found nothing. I decided I could find her—or the Civil War section—by dates on the graves, but they were all jumbled up. What had the clerk said? I tried to remember. It was toward the back. I would see a lot of flags.
Oh! I see it! Row upon row of graves—I thought of Flanders field and Vicksburg. The headstones lining the back area of the cemetery all were flying American flags. I headed to the flags and began walking up and down the rows. I should have asked for an "address"—like for my grandparents' graves at Rose Hill Cemetery in Ardmore, Oklahoma, where the graves are laid out on streets mirroring the street names of the town. Then I could go straight to it. It was beginning to dawn on me that these were not Civil War soldiers but were veterans of more recent wars. I was in the wrong place and I had no idea what next. Finally, I gave up and went to the Buttonwood Zoo. I tried to imagine my father visiting the zoo as a little boy, wandering through its maze of trees, majestic now but which would have been younger, smaller then.

On Monday, when the cemetery office was open, I returned. At the small office, a woman gave me better instructions and one of the groundskeepers on a golf cart drove me to the Civil War section. Aha! There's the cannon! But there aren't that many flags. No wonder I hadn't recognized it. I circled the area looking at all the graves and names and dates. Although I had a general location, the area was still large and the graves weren't laid out in a clear-cut pattern. Once again, I wished for an address—something more definite to be looking for. And then I saw it: "Edwin Budd." I knew from census records that Edwin was her brother, who had died young. I must be getting close. Alice must be nearby.

I began studying the rows near Edwin more carefully and then I came upon the large stone of my great-grandparents, John and Sophie Budd. I was getting warmer. But I couldn't find her. I was going in circles, retracing my steps, looking over and over at the same headstones, as if looking at them more than once would make their names and dates change into the one I was looking for. Once again, I slowly circumnavigated the section. I returned to John Budd and Sophie Budd's graves and studied the nearby markers. I was anxious with frustration and impatience. Where on earth could she be? I knew I was in the right place. Alice had to be here somewhere but I couldn't find her. It was like my entire search. Why couldn't I find anything? I supposed I would have to return to the office and force the clerk to tell me more—the one missing piece that would help me locate the grave.
And then I noticed a broken white stone tumbled to the ground in three pieces. I moved in closer and kneeled down so I could see. “Alice S,” one broken white chunk said. My heart pounded. I brushed away some tall grass from the middle part of the stone: “teckewich.” The third part, the only portion, still standing, gave the dates of her too-short life. Here she was. This was my grandmother. Daddy's mother. Alice Budd. I wondered if Daddy had ever seen his mother’s grave. Possibly he never had. Children, especially ones so young, do not customarily attend funerals. I wondered if, as a young man, before leaving New Bedford for what might have been forever, he had sought out her grave, to say goodbye, to tell her he was going out into the world; whether he had sought it out on his return visit to New Bedford in September 1942. I vowed to one day have it restored, the “S” and the “teckewich” brought together into one whole. I didn't want her gravestone to be as disintegrated as the lives of her children left behind. All those years neglected, unremembered, with never a flower. And yet I don’t believe in flowers for the dead. My mother and I never take flowers to my Hefley grandparents' graves; instead, we take sunflower seeds in hopes they will attract Josephine Hefley's beloved redbirds. Yet I want Alice Steckewich's grave to stand up proudly, erect, to not be trampled on, to say I lived, I mattered, I am not forgotten.

I thought of my father's grave at the cemetery in Willow Springs. Alice was near her mother and father and brother in death. My father is near no one. And yet they are just bones I am talking about. Alice Budd was with her son, my father, all the days of her life—even if he didn’t always know it, even when he despaired of her loss, her absence, her neglect. She was with him just as my father is with me all the days of my life even in the years when I never thought of him for a single second.

I thought of my friend Kay. One day, several years after her mother had died, she was driving near her family's old house and burst into tears. Her seven-year-old son, Hunter, asked why she was crying.

“I miss my mother so much,” she sobbed.

Hunter looked up from the toy he was playing with and said, “But she's right here with you, Mama.”
He could feel the presence of his grandmother, as if she were sitting in the backseat. And I believe that must be true, even if, like Kay, I can't feel it.

Like Portland, New Bedford is an old city. Its civic buildings are the same civic buildings that would have served the city in my father’s years in New Bedford. The fine old New Bedford Free Public Library on Pleasant Street, with its rich wooden carved doors, marble columns, magnificent high ceilings, and oil paintings, would have been the then-new library where my father went as a boy—if he were ever free to go to a library. Among historic New Bedford postcards is one of a crowd gathered for the unveiling in front of the library of the town's iconic Whaleman's Statue, with its stark inscription, “A dead whale or a stove boat.” My father would have been a little boy and the crowd abounds in little boys in knickers and leggings and caps. I scoured the picture, stopping at each small boy. But viewed from the back, all the small boys looked alike. It was impossible to tell if I was looking at my very own father and didn’t even know it.

For the next week, I spent half of every day at the library, on the second floor, working every day until my eyes glazed over and my head hurt. Sitting at a microfilm reader, one by one, I took up rolls of microfilm of the New Bedford newspapers, selecting key dates discovered from my previous research. From an index of deaths, I found my great grandfather John Budd's obituary. Here was the reason Alice was buried in the Civil War section of Rural Cemetery. John Budd had enlisted as a young man in the Union Army with a New York regiment. In later years, he was active in the Grand Army of the Republic, the veterans' organization. The first time he tried to join up, he was turned away as being underage. I began to see the Budds as the New England, Yankee counterpart of my southern, Confederate great-grandparents. My paternal great-grandfather, Henry Hefley, had run away when he was only fourteen and, lying about his age, joined the Confederate Army, serving under Nathan Bedford Forrest. I began to see my family as symbolic of the reunified nation—great-grandfathers fighting great-grandfathers who would later create lives that would be intertwined.

I continued scrolling through the microfilm reels. From the marriage certificate of Casimir and Alice I had dug up at the Bristol County Courthouse, I knew they had been married on March 4, 1907. On
Tuesday, March 5, 1907, the New Bedford Morning Mercury, under a notice announcing that the Gates Stock Company would occupy New Bedford Theatre all of next week except for Tuesday, and that “Quincy Adams Sawyer” would be presented the following week, reported both the intention to marry and the actual marriage of Charles J. Steckewich and Alice H. Budd. That same day, intentions to marry were filed by Ozias Riendeau, a blacksmith, and Cordelia Riendeau, a housekeeper; Karl Wolf, Jr., a weaver, and Mamie Silvan, also a weaver; Max Horenstein, a wine clerk, and Eva Cohen, who worked in a stocking factory; and Charles J. Steckewich, a mechanic from Fort McKinley, Portland, Maine, and Alice H. Budd, of 734 Kempton Street, “at home.” The very next item reported they were married on March 4 by the Reverend Frank S. Jones.

I also knew, from having obtained the abstract of Alice Steckewich's death certificate, the date of her death—only four years later. Because her marriage had merited only a brief item, I expected nothing more when she died. But there, at the top of the page, was what I had only imagined ever seeing, what I had dreamed of finding—a photograph of Alice Budd Steckewich. After all these years, my grandmother! And I knew her at once; she was instantly familiar to me, despite a smear that wiped out the middle of her face, incurred when microfilming flimsy, aged newsprint. In her eyebrows, one permanently arched, I saw my own eyebrows; in her face, I saw my own face. My father looked like a Budd, and I look like Alice Budd. She looks like me. I thought this must have been her wedding portrait and I wondered where the picture is now, whether some far-distant relative has it stuffed in a musty old box in an attic. Or is it one of those photos in an antique shop that scare me so? I want to possess this portrait, this photograph that rightly belongs to me, her granddaughter, her namesake.

The obituary told me something else new: She was survived by two young sons, Julien and Valentine. They had called their sons by their middle names. All this time I had been thinking of little Charlie and little Stanley, when instead they were little Julien and little Valentine. I loved those names, Julien and Valentine, and even though it is too late, I wanted little boys to bestow them on.

Something began to dawn on me. What I remembered: Alice Budd had been disowned by her family when she married a foreign soldier of a strange religion. That painted a picture of a bold, spirited,
headstrong young woman who knew her own mind, who defiantly married her handsome, perhaps
grouish, soldier and left Ellenville, New York, and her “old family” for Portland and then New Bedford. I
pondered how she might have met Casimir. Her maternal grandmother was from Maine so in my
scenario, Alice, visiting her grandmother Butterfield, met the dashing soldier in Portland, and married him
there. But now I realized: the Budds had moved from Ellenville to New Bedford. John Budd worked as a
caretaker on an estate (neighboring the 100-room estate of Colonel Ned Green, heir of the Witch of Wall
Street, the richest American woman ever, Hetty Green) in nearby Dartmouth. Stanley Budd, Alice's
surviving brother, worked as a draper at New Bedford's leading department store on Acushnet Avenue,
and her married sister, Charlotte, or Lottie, also lived in New Bedford. When Casimir and Alice moved to
New Bedford, they were returning to what had become Alice Budd's home. So where had Alice met
Casimir? Every day, I discovered new questions that hounded me for answers, answers that were not
forthcoming.

I followed a routine during my New Bedford days. In the mornings, on my way downtown from
Orchard Street, I stopped for breakfast and coffee at Miguel's, where every morning Miguel handed me a
small Portuguese pastry fresh from the fryer, always saying “Hot and sweet, just like Miguel.” One day I
ordered pancakes. “In Texas, you call them 'hotcakes','” Miguel said.

“No, we call them 'pancakes', too,” I said. Or sometimes 'flapjacks.'” It amused me to think that in
New Bedford someone else was noticing variations in regional English just as my father once had done.

In between my stints squinting at microfilm, I wandered the streets of New Bedford, visiting
every address where the city directories showed me the Budds and Steckewiches had lived in their New
Bedford years. I saw the distinctively New Bedford three-decker houses where Alice Budd had married,
where she had first lived with Casimir, and her last house, where she had died. Casimir's shoe shops were
no longer standing. I saw the sturdy gray two-story house where Daddy had lived with the Giffords, the
family that was going to adopt him, the house where he was happy, the house where he finally felt loved,
the house where they put all his things out on the porch and the police came to take him away. I found a
Gifford in the phone book who seemed like—or I wanted him to seem like—he could be a descendant of
those Giffords. I called the number and left a message. Nobody was home. But for some reason I never called back. I wondered at myself, wondered what I was afraid of: that it wouldn't be the son born the next year? Or that it would? But I didn’t—don’t—know.

I was leaving New Bedford for New York tomorrow and I was trying to tie up loose ends in the library. There was so many possible leads to pursue. I wanted to pick the most important thing—something I couldn't possibly do from Texas via Internet. I was picking up and examining the large binders near the microfilm readers, trying to see some angle I had overlooked when a large green scrapbook caught my eye. Someone had kept it during World War II; it contained photos of all the New Bedford-area soldiers whose mugshots had been printed in the paper. All of a sudden, I remembered: Valentine. Born February 10, 1910, he would have been draft-eligible. I turned to the volume’s index looking for soldiers named Millett, the name of the French-Canadian family that adopted him. Millett is a common name in the region so there was a long list of Milletts. One by one, I turned to each photograph, studying it intently. I was looking for a man who looked like the picture of Valentine taken on September 6, 1942, looking for a man who resembled my father, looking for Prince Philip, Glenn Ford. And then there he was: John Millett. He didn't look like the man in the photograph; he didn't look like Prince Philip. But he looked like my father. The resemblance was uncanny. It would be a cliché to say that a shiver ran down my spine, but that is what happened. Or maybe it was Saint Anthony, the patron saint of lost things, breathing down my neck. Jackpot! I would have to verify my suspicion, but I believed I had discovered my father’s brother. He would surely be dead, but, if this were him, I could find his children, my cousins, my family, the other branches and roots of my severed family tree.

I grabbed the 1942 city directory and looked up the addresses of all the Milletts. I found the address where John Millett lived with his parents. They were all textile workers. I would go there, compare the yard in my sixty-five-year-old photograph of Prince Philip in front of the picket fence to the yard today. Maybe I could identify it that way. The address was too far to walk, so I took the bus to the corner and turned in the direction of the address. The area was working class, less well kept than the areas where I had been walking before. I began to feel a little nervous and told myself I could always turn back
if the neighborhood got any rougher. Finally, I found the address. It was a two-story light gray house. I had to discover if it could possibly be the same one in my photograph. I pulled out the copy I had brought with me. The picture must have been taken in the back, so, taking a deep breath, I walked up the driveway and into the backyard, holding up the picture and looking back and forth between its background and the background of this yard.

All of a sudden a man in a white T-shirt stuck his head out an upstairs window and screamed down in a thick New England accent, “What the hell do you think you're doing? Get out of my yard!”

I'm shy by nature, and I had felt nervous about walking into a stranger's backyard unannounced but I also felt emboldened by history, even if it was uncertain history—a hunch rather than a fact. I held up my photo and began rattled off my story. “My father used to live here—in the 1940s.” I was lying, but it was my uncle, and I wasn't sure he lived there, but it was possible, anyway. “I have a picture. I was in New Bedford and just wanted to see it.” I babbled on for a few minutes more, tossing out rationales.

He thought a minute, and then said, “Okay, but hurry it up.”

After that confrontation, it was hard for me to think straight. The trees had grown taller. The picket fence was gone and a hurricane fence was in its place. Is that the same house seen in the background? But that's ridiculous. All New Bedford houses—or a lot of them—look alike. How could I ever know? It was crazy to think I could know from a sixty-five-year-old photo. But I did think so. So many houses in New Bedford seemed unchanged, seemed to have weathered in place, and worn their pasts proudly, offering it up to seekers like me. But not this house or backyard. Finally, I realized I wouldn't find out anything there, not from an old photo, no matter how long I looked. Reluctantly, I put the picture back in its folder and headed back up to the bus stop.

Back home, I showed the picture of John Millett, soldier, to my mother.

“He doesn't look anything like Daddy,” she said with certainty. I had to face that maybe, just maybe, I wanted answers so badly I was willing to fantasize the answers.
But my father's New England years were so very long ago—a century. Fantasy might be the only way I could recover those years that were lost in time. His California years were more recent. I would head for Pasadena.
Chapter 7

Pasadena, Like Paradise

Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop away from you like the leaves of Autumn.

—John Muir

Here in Pasadena it is like Paradise. Always sunshine and clear air, gardens with palms and pepper trees and friendly people.

—Albert Einstein

I settled in the observation car, nursing a cup of coffee, my black-and-white marbled composition book open before me, as I mused on journeys—my own and my father's. As the Sunset Limited raced westward, across the deserts of the Southwest, I watched the stark, hauntingly beautiful landscape whiz by: cacti, sparse, scrubby vegetation, and mountains painted dusky yellows, lilacs, greens, and grays. When I was twenty and on my first cross-continent road trip, I fell in love with the desert. I was traveling then with an older man, a schoolteacher who was a ringer for the actor Robert Wagner. A student of Spanish history, admirer of Spain’s Golden Age, and incipient alcoholic, Patrick designed our route to fit his obsessions. We stopped at every Spanish mission or ruin of one, beginning with Ysleta in El Paso, winding through New Mexico, Arizona, and up the Camino Real in California, ending with San Francisco Solano in Sonoma. And at every border crossing between El Paso-Juárez and Mexicali-Calexico, we slipped across to drink cerveza in cantinas. Patrick taught me to squeeze jugo de limón on my fist, sprinkle salt on the lime juice, and then sip the beer through the juice-saturated salt. I practiced Spanish phrases, first in the Castilian Spanish he favored, and then in Mexican Spanish, “Uno más, por favor,” being the most frequent.
As Patrick drove, one hand on the wheel, the other holding a Marlboro, I studied the map, reciting names of obscure towns with unusual names. A W. C. Fields aficionada, I pounced on names I could hear Fields growling: Waxahachie! Woonsocket! Lompoc! Cucamonga! Patrick would interject the Spanish names of towns in places far from former Mexican territory—proof, he insisted, that in their glory days the intrepid Spanish had been everywhere, far surpassing the English. He had never gotten over the defeat of the Armada. “Valdez, Alaska!” he'd say. “De Soto, Missouri!”

At night, we pulled off the highway and slept in the car, me curled in the front seat, he sprawled in the back, spending two nights in the desert, one in the Sonoran Desert on what was then called the Papago Indian Reservation. I walked around, awed at being so close to the spiny, human-looking saguaro and ocotillo, the devil’s walking stick, kneeling to closely observe smaller succulents, breathing in the sage-scented air. I called my mother from a phone booth on the reservation.

“I'm here,” I said.

“Here” was supposed to be West Hollywood. My best friends, Kay and Docka, had moved there to seek their fortunes, although for now their fortunes involved telephone soliciting. Mother thought I had taken the bus—alone. I had picked up a copy of the Greyhound timetable to take with me so I could get my story straight. According to it, I would have just arrived in Los Angeles. I worried until we were connected that the operator would say something to give me away.

Just weeks before, as I was coming home after spending the afternoon in a bar with Patrick, Mother had screamed at me as Patrick and I walked up the sidewalk toward the house. A cigarette dangled from his left hand; his right arm was draped loosely over my shoulder.
Probably we were tipsy, or he was, anyway. Perhaps she really believed her irrational hatred of Patrick would have an effect on me, that I’d dump him without putting up a fight. But that was unlikely. He was my ticket to California. Although he was older than the men I usually dated—at least ten years my senior, he was a schoolteacher for chrissake. He taught “English to Spanish-speaking people and Spanish to English-speaking people,” as he always explained when asked what he did. I thought he’d be acceptable to my mother, a librarian and former schoolteacher herself. With his shortish hair, slacks, and sports jacket, Patrick didn’t just look straight; he looked like he walked out of a previous decade, unlike my hippie boyfriends with long, flowing hair and weed hidden somewhere about their person.

But I have to admit: there was something obnoxious about Patrick—his insouciant attitude, his smile that was a smirk, his dangling cigarette, its long ash threatening to drop on the carpet, his love of debate for the sake of annoyance. I too had first responded to him with violent dislike. Overnight, he had established himself as a permanent fixture, taking over the central spot on Kay and Docka's sofa, his unhip dark brown polyester jacket draped over a bentwood chair, jug of Ripple at his feet, lighting one cigarette off another, carelessly flicking the ashes. What rock had they dragged him from under? I thought but didn’t say. I didn't understand what they saw in him, what was so amusing about his stupid remarks. He looked like Robert Wagner. Big deal. But I wasn’t going to let him drive me away so I sat down and poured myself some Ripple in a jelly jar glass. Patrick and I spent most of our time sparring, when we spoke to each other at all. But when Kay and Docka moved to California, we agreed we’d go out and see them. It would be cheaper if we went together and shared expenses—and, I rationalized, he made more than I did. He had a fulltime job; I was only a part-time movie theater cashier. So I agreed to
team up. His lease was up at the end of the month. We’d go then. But until we left, we hung out in dark bars, plotting the trip.

Now I ask myself an unanswerable question: what if Daddy had been alive? Daddy's little girl was going off to California with a man she wasn’t married to, a man she had no intention of marrying, a man who was to her a free ride, an experience, an adventure, a man she would never see again once they parted ways in San Francisco. But there was no Daddy, and it had been ten long years since I had been Daddy's little girl. I don't suppose I even thought about Daddy, not even as Patrick and I sailed past the green turnoff sign saying “Pasadena.”

As Patrick and I drove into California late at night, explosions from distant military ranges lit up the night sky, stark reminders that across the world a war raged in the jungles of Vietnam, a war that had become, it seemed, a permanent fixture in American life.

Kay and Docka lived in a tiny apartment in the kind of building I knew from movies about Hollywood, with a courtyard and an avocado tree. Every day, we reached up and pulled down avocados, creamy, smooth, and buttery. We mashed them and spread them on saltines or turned them into guacamole or ate them straight from their shells, like mangoes. When I was a baby, my father had fed me mashed avocado, his large hand guiding the small spoon to my mouth, opened wide like a baby bird’s at feeding time. Avocado was one of my “first foods” itemized in the large pink baby book into which my parents carefully recorded the details of my first year. This was in suburban Chicago in 1950; avocados were not exactly staples in most American kitchens. My father told me another name for avocados—“alligator pears”—because of their pebbly green skin with its alligator-like texture and pear-like shape. Some of the early Pasadena nurserymen had been among the first to cultivate and popularize avocadoes in the
United States. But I wouldn’t then have been thinking about my baby book or my father feeding me avocados.

Annoyed at Kay and Docka for not providing him a permanent place to stay in their tiny apartment, Patrick agreed to drive me to San Francisco before he headed to his family's home in Tulsa. My neighbor from Willow Springs, Cecilija, lived in an orange Victorian on Jackson Street on the edge of Chinatown. We could stay with her. It had been four years since hippies had thronged the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco with flowers in their hair, but a mystique still shrouded the city along with the fog.

As Patrick and I headed north from Los Angeles, we must have passed the exit sign for Pasadena, only twelve miles north. I knew that Mary and Dr. Ben Dysart, my father's friends with whom my family still exchanged cards at Christmas, still lived on Lakeview Road. Patrick and I had no timetable. We were up for almost any sort of side trip. Maybe I said, “I should really stop and say hello to the Dysarts.” But I knew I’d be back. The Dysarts had always been part of my life; I had no reason to doubt it would ever be otherwise. Time unfurled before me like a canvas; I had all the time in the world to fill it up. And I did come back, but I never looked up Mary and Ben Dysart, not in Pasadena, nor when they retired to Encinitas; I never looked up the Dysarts who could have answered so many of the questions I didn't yet have, the Dysarts who, although I wasn't yet aware of it, weren’t just old friends but were in many ways central to my father's life in Pasadena.

I had always planned to attend college at the Pasadena Playhouse. I believed that was my destiny. Daddy had worked there; I would study acting there. When Daddy worked at the Playhouse, Raymond Burr was performing there. They had run on the beach together. Or now I wondered if I had made that up. I had loved the television show *Perry Mason*. Maybe I wanted
my father to have been Perry Mason's friend. After all, it wasn’t like my father had been an actor or stage manager, someone likely to befriend an actor; he was a janitor. He cleaned up after the actors. But whether the Perry Mason friendship was real or imagined, I saw the Pasadena Playhouse as my father’s legacy. I never considered going anywhere else. But when the time came to begin sending out college applications, the Playhouse was foundering. I enrolled instead in the drama department at the University of Texas in Austin. By the next year, 1969, the Playhouse had closed. But it no longer mattered. I had changed my major. I had become “undecided.” That designation would mark the next ten years of my life.

Now, almost thirty years later, I was once again California bound. Gazing out the train window, I remembered other California trips—to West Hollywood, again, to Laguna Beach where Cecilija had moved, to Novato, to Visalia. I even almost moved to Bakersfield, where I was offered the job of librarian at the Californian. I wanted the career move, to go from being only a librarian to being the librarian (albeit in a one-person newspaper library), but in the end I stayed home, stayed in my safe corner at the Dallas Morning News, stayed married, stayed put.

Some gypsy. Most of my travel had been to library conferences or to help my brother move—to Ellensburg, Washington; Tacoma; Yuma, Arizona; Greenville, North Carolina; Mesilla, New Mexico; Taos. He was the gypsy. I remembered a joke my ex-husband used to tell: A ninety-eight-year-old man had lived in the same house for seventy-five years. Then one day he up and moved into the house across the street. A mystified neighbor asked, “Why in the world, after seventy-five years, did you move?”

The old man shrugged. “I guess it’s just the gypsy in me.”
That's the kind of gypsy I turned out to be: one who clung to places, to men, to jobs, who stayed put, stayed home.

But now, if only for the week of spring break, I was headed for Los Angeles and, at long last, Pasadena.

I thought about what Mother had told me before I left: the revelation. I had visited her in Oklahoma the previous weekend. I was sitting on the sofa; she was sitting in her rocker, when she looked up and said, “You know when Daddy lived with the Dysarts?”

I nodded.

“Well, evidently he became very emotionally attached to Mary. He’d never known his own mother and when Mary was so good to him, he became overly emotional and I guess he became too much for them to deal with. They had to have him institutionalized.”

I didn’t change my expression but my mind was a rollercoaster. Institutionalized!

Mother continued. “I guess it must have been really hard on Mary, having to do that.”

That's just like her, I thought. Being sympathetic to Mary when it was Daddy who was in the snake pit. (The movie starring Olivia de Havilland as a patient in a state mental hospital had left a profound impression.) I pressed her for details. “Do you know where? Or how long?”

“No, that's all I know. But maybe you can find out something when you're out there.”

A family secret. A skeleton. Maybe this was what I had been hoping for all along.

That night I called my brother. Somehow, we weren’t surprised. Alongside our joke about being long-lost heirs to either the Steckiewicz castle or the Budd fortune is a darker joke: One of our Steckiewicz forebears, maybe even Casimir himself, our very grandfather, is a madman, a murderer, a werewolf, a vampire. Maybe he is the source of a family curse that ended with my father running away, changing his name. Or maybe a family curse emanates from the
venerable Budds: In their ramshackle mansion, their Grey Gardens, in Ellenville, New York, the Budds have locked Boo Radley in the basement.

When I visited Ellenville, I stopped at the village hall. “My grandmother, Alice Budd, was born in Ellenville,” I told the city clerk.

“Oh, yes, we still have Budds in town,” she said.

But when I told my brother the story, I had the city clerk start backing away, eyes widening in terror, as soon as she heard the name “Budd.”

When mysteries exist, anything is possible, so, no, we weren’t surprised to find this skeleton so well secured among all the stuff in our closets that it didn’t rattle at all.

In the biography my father wrote for the Canada Council, he had revealed the merest hint. On his thirtieth birthday, Mary baked him a cake—the first anyone had ever made for him. He was both dumbfounded and ecstatic. Exactly what transpired next he left unstated, but, unreasonably, he began to expect too much attention from Mary, who had her own two small sons and daughter to mother.

“The doctor ordered me to leave and never contact the family again,” he wrote.

Without details, I felt the banishment seemed extreme. Something had to have been left unsaid, between the lines, But, his narrative continued, ultimately the rupture was breached. Mary sewed a featherweight tent he designed for one of his mountaineering expeditions, the friendship endured, and he named me after their daughter, Bonnie. At Christmas, we exchanged cards and gifts with the Dysarts; they sent us souvenirs from their travels: a mother-of-pearl Star of David necklace from Jerusalem, colorful glass bangle bracelets from India. They called Charlie “Bonnie Prince Charlie.” But now I learned my father's mystery held another mystery wrapped inside, a mystery the Dysarts could have solved for me.
I wondered why Mother had never told us. Perhaps she had been ashamed. Mental illness held a stigma that could permanently taint somebody, so people believed. But she spoke openly about their first child, my severely deformed brother, who lived only a few minutes, and after whose death she wanted to steal every baby she saw. That suggested honesty, a willingness to face the cruel things fate sends everyone’s way. But then too, I had frequently heard her talking to her mother on the telephone, carefully omitting things she didn't need to know—about her children’s escapades.

A burst of anger flashed through me. My ex-husband was manic depressive; I suffered with him through several institutionalizations, initiated by the courts, initiated by me. Why hadn’t she told me then, when it might have helped me cope? I had felt so alone, and I thought no one in the world understood. His own family didn't. And so I carried on the family tradition of shame and silence, not knowing it was a family tradition. She had kept Daddy's bout with mental illness a secret for all these years, just as I had hidden Jim's for too many years, until I grasped that secrecy wasn’t helping me, might be killing me, and that telling would make finding comfort and compassion more likely. But, I reflected, she was eighty-three; she wasn’t responsible now for what she did then, all those years ago. And maybe it wasn't shame; maybe she hadn’t wanted to taint our memories of our father with something he had overcome. Or maybe it was so far in the past, it really was past—forgotten, over and done with. After all, it had happened before she even knew him; it wasn’t part of their shared past.

“But he came a long way,“ she said. “He got over it.”

Maybe my upcoming trip had shaken loose her memories of Daddy's Pasadena years. She likely doesn’t even remember her reasons for never telling us, so there’s no use asking or blaming. And now I know. If she hadn't told me, it's unlikely I would have discovered it. I didn’t
have any idea where I would begin to look for evidence of something like that. I didn’t even know if mental illness court records are public information. Besides, that was only a small part, I supposed, of my father’s life in Pasadena. Weeks maybe. Or months at most.

Small, perhaps, but crucial. In Pasadena, he was twice born anew: when he arrived in the orange- and rose-scented garden city in the Golden State, a place many men before him had reinvented themselves, a young man wearing a new suit and bearing a new name; and when he emerged from the “institution” to start his life all over again.

When my father headed for Pasadena from New Bedford, he was nineteen. I thought of my journey to Canada when I was nineteen and my brother’s journeys at nineteen. Was that the year Charlie planned to go overland from Dallas to Rio de Janeiro? I couldn’t quite remember. One year, Peter Park drove him on the first leg of the trip, and I went along for the ride, racing south in Peter’s Cadillac convertible. We stopped for margaritas at the La Posada bar in Laredo and for more at the Cadillac Bar across the border in Nuevo Laredo where Charlie boarded the Águila Azteca to Mexico City. He was grounded by hepatitis in Lima, Peru, but he finally made it to Rio, although not overland. In Rio, among his friends was an older house painter, Michael Haynes, an English émigré extremely reticent about his past. With good reason. He was Ronnie Biggs, one of the Great English Train Robbers, who had escaped prison, changed his face with plastic surgery, and barely escaped capture in Australia before hightailing it to Brazil. As a boy, the Great English Train Robbery had fascinated Charlie, so for him to have, all the way around the world, met one of its instigators was the ultimate serendipity, proof of how our vagabond lives would fulfill, or even surpass, every childhood fantasy.
At nineteen, we were drifting with reprobates, rebels, renegades, eager only for ecstatic experiences and expanded consciousness; my father at nineteen was engaged in a more serious pursuit: running for his life, leaving behind his wretched boyhood and the taint of being a Steckiewicz, setting out across America and, on the way, discovering the words of America. He was creating a meaningful life, free from the ignorant, small-minded people who had made his early years miserable. We had the safety net of home to return to when our cash ran out—and we often did, until we finally left home for good, in our twenties; his only safety net was the one he wove with his own two hands. He was alone in the world. He didn't just flee—he had a goal, a destination: Coolidge Rare Plant Gardens in Pasadena. While working at a New Bedford nursery, he had seen their ads in trade magazines. The interesting, exotic name intrigued him. And it was in California—across the continent from his abusers, the place where John Muir, his hero, had explored the Sierra Nevadas and lobbied to establish Yosemite and Sequoia national parks. Pasadena was nestled in the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains, which Muir had written about in *Steep Trails*. He would be able to “climb the mountains and get their good tidings,” as Muir had advised.

He had been stashing money away and so he began his getaway by bus. He was in Missouri when the Great Flood of 1927 struck. Heavy, unrelenting rains throughout the Midwest the year before had caused the Mississippi to rise. When the rains continued into the new year, the river crested, leaving acres and acres of farmland underwater. And the rains continued. Heavy rains on Good Friday made the situation dire. The next day, the levee in Dorena, Missouri, where Missouri, Illinois, and Kentucky touch, burst, sending water spewing at the rate of 1.7 million cubic feet per second. All down the river, levees broke. Before it was over, the resulting flood killed 246 people in seven states, caused upwards of $400 million dollars of
damage, and left 700,000 people in ten states homeless. It also halted bus travel. Roads were flooded, bridges washed out. And so my father was stopped in his tracks. He was forced to spend some of his bus money on living expenses. By the time he hit San Antonio, he was flat busted. And so he walked to Pasadena, a journey of 1,349 miles, stubborn Yankee pride, as he described it, forbidding him to bum a ride. And maybe it was partly the desire to emulate John Muir’s thousand-mile walk, from Indiana to the Gulf of Mexico. When he made his walk, Muir had just recovered from an industrial accident that temporarily blinded him, causing him to reassess his life. He resolved to spend the rest of his life doing what he loved, studying plants. In that way too, my father may have felt his own life resonating with that of Muir’s.

I wonder what he would have thought of his hapless children, especially Charlie, buming rides everywhere in the 1960s and 1970s, even on airplanes, hanging out at Love Field, near the private plane hangars. Charlie finally stopped after being picked up on the way to Houston by a man driving a van. Something about the man and his companion made Charlie uneasy—he couldn’t say what exactly—and he contrived to be let out before Houston. He later identified the men as mass murderer Dean Corll and his associate Elmer Wayne Henley. Even then, before knowing their identities, he suspected he had made a narrow escape.

In California in 1970, Kay and Docka told Patrick and me about the disappearing hitchhiker. People all over California kept picking him up. A man was driving north on Highway 1, the Pacific Coast Highway. He stopped to pick up a hitchhiker—a hippie with long hair. Somewhere along the way, the driver glanced over to the passenger seat and it was empty. The man hadn’t stopped the car anywhere, but the hitchhiker had vanished. The same thing happened to a man driving to Sacramento. And a man driving through the desert. It wasn't reported as
multiple versions of the same story, but as one hitchhiker, picked up by multiple people, disappearing multiple times. In 1970, California was rich with strange vibrations. The whole world seemed strange enough for this to seem entirely plausible. The year before, in Los Angeles, Charles Manson and his “family” had run amok, in helter-skelter killing frenzies. I shivered. We speculated on who could appear and disappear at will like that. Was someone trying to tell the world something? Warn us? With bombs exploding in the night sky and disappearing hitchhikers, sometimes it felt like the world might be coming to an end. So the only thing to do was keep moving.

When my father made his way from Texas to California, it must have been then that he ate some of the creatures he described in letters to the editor: tough Texas owls, rock tripe, skunks, prairie dogs. He too must have slept in the desert. Somewhere along the way, he emerged from the desert and shed his past, becoming Charles Julien Lovell.

By the time he reached Los Angeles, his only suit was dirty and tattered. He had lived and slept in it for weeks, maybe months, and so he slept at a mission and worked until he could buy a new one. The next Monday, he arose before dawn and set out to walk the twelve miles to Pasadena and Coolidge Rare Plant Gardens. Mr. D. W. Coolidge, a distant cousin to the president Calvin Coolidge, must have been impressed with the young man who wanted to work for him so badly that he crossed the continent to do so. He must also have been impressed by the young man's extensive knowledge of plants. He hired him on the spot and so my father began his new, settled life, renting a room in a house on Orange Grove Boulevard.

Pasadena, in the late 1920s, was a prosperous city of lush nurseries with orange groves scented the air. Wealthy Easterners came for the climate, staying in fabulous resort hotels, some
staying to build their own fabulous homes. During that decade, Pasadena experienced an almost 70 percent population increase, growing to 76,000, new buildings and civic institutions springing up to provide the culture and educational opportunities the booming town demanded: Rose Bowl Stadium, the Pasadena Playhouse, Pasadena City College. For the next twenty years, Pasadena was my father's home base. It was where he reinvented himself and where he went through a crucible, emerging tempered. It was also where he slowly began establishing himself as an expert on the history of American words and their changing usages.

He became friends with Mr. Coolidge's son and the two read and discussed literature, philosophy, and religion, fancying themselves intellectuals. But then the Depression struck. Even rich Pasadena wasn't immune. Mr. Coolidge was forced to let my father go. So my father began years of odd jobs, rented rooms, and living by his wits. He took whatever he could find, including a job as a lab technician and, for a couple of years, another as a janitor at the Pasadena Playhouse and another, later still, as a gardener. And yet why do I believe that, after his first nineteen years, even the Great Depression with its financial freefall didn't hold terror for him. He was his own man, free to pursue his own interests and develop his talents, free to climb the mountains and get their glad tidings, which he did at every opportunity. He worked as a freelance ghostwriter, had poems and crossword puzzles published, collected stamps, created intricately inked bookplates, and wrote a never-published novel, *The Crime of the Grouchy Blood Donor*. He camped in the San Gabriel Mountains and Angeles National Forest immediately adjacent to Pasadena and made treks to the other California forests Muir had explored. Because his jobs were often short term, he would save his money and spend summers guiding and hiking in the Canadian Rockies, where he became interested in Canadian English. And in Pasadena he began
the correspondence with H. L. Mencken that would last the rest of Mencken’s life and would set
my father’s life on a new course.

On a clear, perfect California day, the Sunset Limited deposited me at Los Angeles's
Union Station. Wheeling my bag behind me, I walked up the concourse and found the platform
where I awaited the Metro Gold Line train that would take me to Pasadena.

The city today is still wealthy and beautiful, surrounded by lush gardens and dotted with
the arts-and-crafts bungalows popularized by the Greene brothers who headquartered in
Pasadena. It looked the way I thought Southern California towns should look, with civic
buildings in the Spanish colonial style. My motel, the Vagabond Inn, was on the main street,
Colorado Boulevard, on the Rose Bowl Parade route, centrally located between downtown and
Pasadena City College, where my father had attended classes.

After checking into my room, the first thing I did was race-walk down Colorado
Boulevard. The Pasadena Playhouse, which had reopened as a theater only in 1986, is on El
Molino Street, right off Colorado. All through my recent journeys, I had stared intently at
buildings my father had once lived in, breathed in, worked in, examining them for clues, as if his
energy were still in the buildings, as if just by seeing the physical structures, the architecture, I
might discover—by osmosis, by “vibrations”—something of my father and his life, who he was,
what made him tick. And so I paced the sidewalk in front of the Playhouse grounds. Its Spanish
mission architecture seemed timeless. It must have looked much the same in the late 1930s when
my father pushed a broom there.

Later in the week, the Playhouse archivist, Penn Genthner, gave me a behind-the-scenes
tour of the stage, backstage, the dressing rooms, the lobby, the offices, the cavernous area where
the sets were built, the old dorm, and a smaller practice stage. The theater smell brought back
ghosts of my own past—the Kalita Humphreys Theater in Dallas where I studied and acted as a
teenager, the tech department where I painted sets at the UT drama school, the stage at El Centro
College where I performed. The mixture of dust, sawdust, paint, and greasepaint smelled like the
path I had not taken, closed to me now, except in memory. My father had swept these floors,
smelled these same smells, perhaps stood at the back of the theater watching Raymond Burr
rehearse a scene. Penn looked through file cabinets for old staff photographs but told me that
during the years the Playhouse was dark, the Huntington Library had gained possession of their
archives. The Huntington! I knew my father had researched words there, but I hadn't thought it
would have anything I needed and so hadn't planned to go there. Now I knew I must.

At the Playhouse, my father had become friends with another janitor, the poet and writer
Bert Morehouse. They shared an interest in word origins. Morehouse had had an item about the
origin of the word Dixieland published in Reader’s Digest in 1930.

As I walked down the sloping Playhouse walkway made from rocks and fossils from
every state, I looked back, trying to memorize the theater. The janitor, a Hispanic man carrying a
bucket and a mop, walked past. I smiled, thinking about my father doing the same job once upon
a time.

Downtown, the YMCA building at 235 East Holly Street, where my father lived after
falling out of grace with the Dysarts, was still standing, although no longer a Y. The building had
been converted to Centennial Place and rents rooms to the formerly homeless and others down
on their luck. The Old YMCA Barber Shop, marked by an old-fashioned barber pole outside,
was still open in the building’s lower level, offering old-style haircuts at old-style prices, with its
talkative, opinionated barbers, Wing, Joe, and Chau, drawing a devoted following.
A few blocks away, on East Walnut Street, bright red-orange poppies lined the front lawn of the Pasadena Public Library, another Spanish mission-style building, brand new the year my father arrived. I started my research there, copying addresses from city directories, searching an index of clipping files for the few names and places I knew associated with my father. While there, I searched the historical *Los Angeles Times* archives for my father’s name, not that I thought there would be anything, but I wanted to be thorough. I searched every possible variant of his name: C. J. Lovell. Charles Julien Lovell. Charles J. Lovell. And under Charles Lovell, two items appeared: He was one of several runners sponsored by the YMCA taking part in a moonlight marathon in the mountains. Running! I hadn’t made it up. It was one of the things I dimly remembered, so dimly I doubted its truth. In a follow-up brief, a columnist dubbed Charles Lovell an “ironman,” in the days before the term took on its current meaning.

Between stints at the library, I visited every one of my father’s known addresses, the family homes and small residential hotels where he had rented rooms. My mind's eye transformed Pasadena into a black-and-white 1930s movie. Cars transmogrified into rounded black roadsters. Clark Gable, in a big-shouldered suit and fedora, press card stuck in its brim, exchanges snappy patter with his editor in a noisy newspaper city room. Clark Gable, slicked-back dark brown hair with widow's peak: Daddy. Joel McCrea, dressed as a hobo, sitting next to Veronica Lake, dunking a doughnut in a cup of joe at an “owl wagon.” Joel McCrea, hobo: Daddy. Shy, bookish philology professor Gary Cooper as a slang researcher who learns all about slang from Barbara Stanwyck as burlesque performer Sugarpuss O'Shea. Gary Cooper, slang researcher: Daddy. All the movies I love are from this era: I love the clothes, the talk, the look. It's as though I believe that by watching the films, over and over and over, whenever they show
up on the classic movie station, I will be transported to that era, be there, know how it was, know what my father’s life was like, know my father.

Pasadena City College is in the other direction down Colorado Boulevard from the Vagabond Inn, away from town. It too was new in the years after Daddy arrived in town. He had taken classes there, not working toward a degree but simply for the joy of learning. At the Shatford Library, the archivist carefully brought out boxes containing old files of the Forestry Club. Inside were two issues of the club’s newsletter for which my father had drawn the covers, one a woodblock print, colored bold orange, of a California poppy, the kind bordering the lawns of the library, the poppies that say “California.”

During the years my father was in Pasadena, Albert Einstein, while a visiting scientist at Caltech, spoke at the dedication of the junior college’s new observatory. Jackie Robinson was also a student there during some of the years when my father may have studied there. So was Tex Schramm, the long-time Dallas Cowboys president and general manager.

Miss Florence Brubaker, one of California’s first female botanists, and later the dean of students, taught botany. My father took classes with her. She also must have been a strong influence on him as we exchanged Christmas cards with her for the rest of his life and even afterwards.

I never pinned down the chronology exactly, but if the crisis with the Dysarts happened on his thirtieth birthday, it began on December 3, 1937. My father had met the young family through a mutual love of hiking and the outdoors, and they invited him to live with them. He called them “a pair of merry extroverts.” They had led interesting lives, having accompanied Sir Wilfred Grenfell on one of his medical missions to Labrador. At first my father was suspicious
of the motives of a family so happy and so nice, skeptical that happy families really existed. But as Mary encouraged him to take lip-reading classes and encouraged him in other ways, he became convinced of her genuine goodness. Mary provided the warm, motherly presence he hadn’t known he had missed in his life, and he responded to her warmth with raw emotions that frightened her. When she made his first ever birthday cake, he broke down in tears, inconsolable. The situation became uncomfortable for the Dysarts—and so, as Mother put it, “they had to have him institutionalized.”

For the second time since his mother died and his father abandoned him, he had found a family that—he thought—loved him. The first time he was rejected by a family, he didn’t understand what happened. This time, he understood that he was responsible. Through his own actions, he lost the Dysarts’ love. After emerging from the hospital or sanitarium, he moved into the YMCA and, once again, started over. When World War II began, along with the rest of the country, he had something bigger than his own troubles to concentrate on. The war gave him a renewed sense of purpose. He couldn’t fight, but he could donate blood and he could work in a defense plant.

On Sunday, I headed down Colorado Boulevard toward the address I had tracked down for Fletcher Aviation. Finding it was tricky; there was no listing anywhere in city directories in years I knew it existed. Then I realized: the war! Of course. They would have wanted to keep the location of defense plants—especially on the coasts—secret. The building is gone now, a highway overpass in its place. But in what would have been the same block, on the other side of Colorado, a car dealership in a cavernous old building bears a historical marker: during World War II, it too had been an airplane factory. My father couldn’t serve in the armed forces because he couldn’t hear so he served in other ways. He set a record for blood donations. He worked the
swing shift at the Colorado Street plant of Fletcher Aviation, conditioning the metal used on bombers meant for Japan. He won cash prizes for his suggestions to streamline production. He bought war bonds. He also made a close friend, Mel Dixon, one of his co-workers with whom he played chess. Dixon became a Lutheran minister, and he and my father kept up a lifelong correspondence.

I had tried before unsuccessfully, but this time I found Mel and Nancy Dixon’s latest address. One day I received a phone call from their daughter Marra. Mel had died only a few months before but had suffered strokes before that. Nancy had died a year ago. Once again, I was too late to talk to someone who had known Daddy during the Pasadena years. Marra is several years older than I am, and she had her own memories of my father. She remembered visiting us in Willow Springs. Daddy made strawberry shortcake with whipped cream. She remembered the passion with which my father talked about his work. “My father thought the world of your father,” she said.

On Monday, I rented a car so I could drive to locations not easily accessible by foot or bus: I saw my father’s first address in Pasadena, the house on Orange Grove Boulevard where he had rented a room; the Dysarts’ longtime home on Lakeview Road; the old location of Coolidge Rare Plant Gardens; one of Daddy’s addresses in ultra-rich San Marino where he evidently lived in the garage apartment, practically across the street from the Huntington Library, my last stop. Because I had not made an appointment and was not a real scholar, the supercilious uniformed security guard refused to consider admitting me to the sanctified halls or even telling the librarians I was outside begging for admittance. But I persisted and he finally agreed to give my desperate handwritten note to one of the librarians.

“It won’t do any good,” he said.
But after returning from lunch, a librarian agreed to look up my request, although he didn’t find anything. He said to e-mail him if I got more information. I spent the rest of the afternoon in the building I believed to be the old library, the one where my father would have conducted his research. I wondered how on earth he, with no scholarly credentials whatsoever when starting out, had convinced the holier-than-thou Huntington that he was a serious scholar deserving access to its riches. I could only imagine the obstacles he had to overcome.

It was my last day in Pasadena. I returned the car and waited for the bus that would take me to Los Angeles and from there back to Texas. My research trips in search of my father’s past were over. I couldn’t help but wonder if I had discovered anything at all of value. Did I really know any more of my father than when I started? Yet I felt satisfied that I had finally at least seen the places that had shaped his life.

Since beginning graduate school, I have moved five times. With every move, knowing I will soon be moving again, I unpack fewer and fewer boxes, thinking they can wait until I settle somewhere. From time to time, I feel curious about the forgotten, unused things I have been doing without for so long, and I open a box. One contained old files dating from the 1980s. I started pulling out and weeding folders. Among the outdated files of diets I had never started and scraps of ideas for stories I had never started writing was a manila file labeled “Dysarts.” I pulled out the only item in the file: a letter, handwritten on thin, light blue airmail stationery. It was from Mary, in response to a letter from me. I had forgotten ever writing her, ever receiving a letter from her, and had certainly forgotten the contents of the letter. By then, she and Ben had retired to Encinitas. I eagerly read the letter.
One of the things she wrote shocked me: “I always wondered if the reason that your father stayed so long when he had so many things he needed to do was because of reincarnation. Are you familiar with the theory?”

I may have let out a little gasp. I was. The little end table-humidor next to my grandfather’s gold brocade, claw-footed easy chair had a cubbyhole where he kept various sensational (to me, anyway) paperbacks: Erle Stanley Gardner’s Perry Mason mysteries, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*—and *Truth Is Stranger Than Fiction*. The latter book contained, among its other sensationalist tales, the story of Shanti Devi, a little girl in India, who claimed to have lived before and died giving birth. One day a man came to her family’s door and she recognized him: he had been the husband of her previous life. I remembered that story with crystal clarity, remembered the name Shanti Devi, remembered the thrill of recognition that went down my spine, the thrill that made me understand what Hamlet meant when he told his friend, “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” I believed. And I knew I was in good company. When the Denton library presented a traveling exhibit on Benjamin Franklin, one item on display was the epitaph he had written for himself, which included his belief that he would “Appear Once More / In a New and Elegant Edition / Revised and Corrected / By the Author.”

Oh, how I wish I could talk to Mary. She must have believed in reincarnation to have brought it up. She must have known the theory that people are reincarnated in “soul groups” of people they shared lives with before. And if she did believe, she may even have formed theories about who she and Daddy might have been to each other. The eternal skeptic in me told me I had a screw loose. Yet the Dysarts were rational, intelligent people, and Mary didn’t find it
incredible. Along with the mysteries of my father’s life, I was now being asked to contemplate the mysteries of the universe.

After the war ended, my father had the idea of getting together a group to hike the Pacific Crest Trail from Mexico to Canada. The YMCA had been exploring potential trails and putting together a proposed route. Daddy placed an ad in the *Saturday Review of Literature*: “Seeking Adventure?” In her dorm room in Norman, Oklahoma, Dixie Carroll Hefley spotted the ad and composed a letter that she typed up and mailed. She had a passion for mountains, even though the only ones she had seen were the Arbuckles between her hometown of Ardmore and Norman, where she attended college. The hike never materialized—my father’s path would take him away from the mountains to the canyons of Chicago—but, through an exchange of letters, a romance did.

I thought about my father’s Pasadena years. I imagined him at night in his room, preparing his bachelor meals over a single burner, sitting at a small wooden table covered with oilcloth, cutting out clippings and gluing them onto the large black pages of his scrapbook, painstakingly affixing hinges to the backs of stamps to add to his collection, clacking away on his black Royal typewriter, the one I would inherit one day, letters to H. L. Mencken, to Franklin D. Roosevelt, to Miss Dixie Carroll Hefley in Ardmore, Oklahoma, letters that would lead him away from the place where he had reinvented himself, grown to maturity, and made a name for himself, letters that would led him onto the next leg of his life’s journey.
Chapter 8

Gosling

Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

—Mary Oliver

I picture my father, in his small room at the Pasadena YMCA, opening his mail, leafing quickly through the latest Saturday Review of Literature, eager to see in print his classified advertisement. My mind shifts to Norman, Oklahoma. I see my mother sprawled across her bed in the house she shares with Phyllis, Mabel, Barbara, and Hildegarde, leafing through the same issue of the same magazine. Or maybe she is home for the weekend, in Ardmore, lying on the chenille bedspread in the front bedroom, barefoot, legs in the air, idly flipping through the magazine’s pages, her interest increasing upon reaching the classifieds. She will graduate in May from the University of Oklahoma with a degree in letters. She is already thinking about job hunting, poised for wherever her fortune will lead her. Then, in the back of the magazine she spots the ad: “Crave adventure?” it asks and proposes putting together a group to hike the new Pacific Crest Trail from Mexico to Canada. And shy, bookish Miss Dixie Hefley goes to her typewriter and composes an almost-three-page letter, which leads to a correspondence with the man who placed the ad and, ultimately, to me and my brother and the cottage in the enchanted forest.

I had often wondered about my father’s life, with its blank pages, but never my mother’s. I thought that I knew her life story in my bones. I knew the people she knew, played in the yards and houses she had played in. Summers, I sat on the sofa in the Grieders’ house across Eleventh
Avenue from my grandparents’, with its cool, high-ceilinged rooms, or climbed their bois d’arc tree, with its spreading branches. Charlie and I played with Martha and Jackson, Emil and Paul, the children of two of the Grieder girls, Billie and Patsy, who had been my mother’s and aunt’s playmates. Or I was next door, swinging on the porch swing on Claudia Thompson’s wide front porch, where Mother once swung with Colene Shinn, who would come to visit with her two boys, Randy and Gary. Or I’d be on the other side of the hedge at Claudia and Rebecca Brooks’ house, where once upon a time the Hefley girls and their neighborhood playmates played in the Bakers’ backyard fantasyland, with its small pond and little-girl-size playhouse.

I played in the parks where my mother had played, one around the corner on D Street, where Hargrove College had stood before burning to the ground in 1894, the other, with merry-go-round, swings, and tennis court, on B Street. I took ballet and tap and ballroom dancing from Betty Brown, who some twenty years before had taught my mother ballroom dancing. I bought Grapettes and Dr Peppers at Mr. Sperry’s and Mr. Elles’s, two of the small neighborhood grocery stores that dotted every corner before being displaced by supermarkets, the same stores where my mother and aunts had done the same, where my grandmother called in her weekly grocery orders. I attended, briefly, Franklin, the grade school Mother and her sisters attended, and the same junior high. I saw Blood and Roses and The Parent Trap and A Hard Day’s Night and West Side Story and To Kill a Mockingbird at the same movie houses where she saw Ginger Rogers and Alice Faye. After the movies or after school, I sipped nickel cherry Cokes at the same drugstore soda fountain where she sipped limeades. I borrowed books, maybe even the same ones, from her same childhood Carnegie Library, an imposing gray brick building with white columns and red-tiled roof, the sun shining through its tall windows, dappling its glossy wooden floors.
I knew the history of the neighborhood around 11th Avenue and C Street in the Northwest part of town, who lived where, who used to live where, who Mother had grown up with, gone to school and Sunday school and parties and sunrise breakfasts with, who she had planned to run away to Hollywood with, their maiden names, who they married, their children. I knew her favorite teachers and Sunday school teachers. I knew about the cow chasing her down an alley and about the law chasing notorious bank robber Harvey Bailey right down C Street, around the corner from her house and how, hearing about the chase on the radio, townspeople gathered to watch.

I knew the downtown and its businesses, many having been there since early in the century. In Ardmore, I first became aware of history whispering through its old downtown buildings and ghost signs visible on old red brick walls and sidewalks that said “Ardmore, I.T.” I loved the old Exchange National Bank building where Uncle Tom had worked as a cashier and the building housing Daube’s, billed as “Southern Oklahoma’s Finest Department Store,” which had opened in 1898, and where Granddaddy still worked as the credit manager. I knew the stories about how on Saturdays, the store stayed open late to accommodate the farmers who would come into town to trade, tying their teams of horses out back where there were hitching posts and a big watering trough.

And I knew, from stories Granddaddy told, about “Bloody Caddo.” Its name had been changed to A Street, but to old-timers it would always be Caddo or, more often, Bloody Caddo, the name arising from the shootouts and knifings frequent during Indian Territory days. Ardmore’s first hospital was on its corner with Main, over a drugstore, with a tavern, the Dew Drop Inn, in the basement. The hospital’s location was handy when bystanders had to haul a victim upstairs for Dr. Hardy or Dr. Von Keller to extract a bullet or stitch a wound. Caddo ran
north-south, crossing Main Street where the Northwest part of town ended and the Northeast began. Beyond Caddo, to the east, lay the Santa Fe Depot; beyond that, Main Street Northeast, the main street of “colored town.”

Although Caddo’s reputation was unsavory, it crossed a respectable block. Daube’s department store anchored the west end of that block. Next to Daube’s stood the old City Drug Store, with its white-and-black tiled floors and long marble counter, run by Granddaddy’s crony Mr. Vickers. Granddaddy would step inside the cool interior to buy his cigars and the Tom’s peanut butter logs and Juicy Fruit gum he would hand out to children; or he would mosey down the block to exchange jokes with Mr. Greenberg in his jewelry store.

Charlie and I were fascinated with the legends of Bloody Caddo, the drama and allure of its history clinging to its present-day shabbiness. Now it was a sad street, of dusty, broken-down buildings and dusty, broken-down men, but in our fevered imaginations, the blood, danger, and mayhem of territorial days lurked. We dared each other to step onto Bloody Caddo. All you had to do was put one foot down, just one foot. In those days, I always took a dare. As the oldest, I had to go first. I sauntered from the starting point at Daube’s down Main. The first part of the block was a breeze, but beyond City Drug Store lay two taverns, the Stag Bar and the Main Street Lounge, with Greenberg’s Jewelry a haven between them. I stopped at the corner, breathing deeply. I gripped the edge of the building—the one that had housed the Dew Drop Inn, drugstore, and hospital—as though clutching solid bricks would protect me. I reached around the corner with my right foot and set it firmly down on Caddo Street, glancing back at Charlie to make sure he had seen proof. Then I ran like hell, back to Daube’s, back to safety. But I had done it, tested my limits, and survived. And I see now that feeling safe in my mother’s history is what allowed me to do that.
Besides knowing my mother’s history and the history of her neighborhood and town, I knew the history of her family in Ardmore before she existed. I knew the apartment building on North Washington where Granny and Granddaddy lived when they first moved to Ardmore from Tennessee with their small daughter, Josephine, the same building where Aunt Nelle and Uncle Tom first lived. And I knew the small frame house on Sixth Avenue where Mother was born, delivered by Dr. Hardy.

When I lived there, Ardmore with its red-brick streets seemed unchanged from when Mother grew up there, from when Granny and Granddaddy moved there, barely more than a decade after statehood, which occurred in 1907. When we visited Aunt Nelle and Uncle Tom or my grandparents’ friends, we stepped across thresholds into cool, dark parlors shaded from the southern sun by heavy venetian blinds, into rooms that looked and felt and smelled like antique stores (although I had never been inside an antique store), rooms where time stood still—or even went backwards, as if we were stepping into the past itself. Ardmore to me represented picture-postcard-perfect, early-twentieth-century small-town America; I could see my mother going to school with Andy Hardy and Polly Benedict or George Bailey and Mary Hatch. When I would mention a classmate’s family, Granny would say, “I don’t believe I know them,” and indeed it had once been possible to know everyone in certain segments of the town’s society. Ardmore and my mother’s world represented life stretching out forever and ever, life everlasting, amen. The people and places and stories of her life were interwoven into a seamless net of continuity and comfort.

And while my mother left Ardmore after college and headed for the Colorado mountains, she always returned, weaving her life history even more firmly into the town’s history. Where
my father’s life was one of disruptions, severings, and uprootings, my mother’s was one of permanence, family ties, and roots.

Dixie Carroll was a middle child, born in 1924, the second of the three Hefley sisters. The petite, glamorous Josephine, with her red lipstick and gray squirrel coat and cigarettes and string of adoring beaux, was older by six years, born just as the Great War blazed to an end, and the petite, cute, popular Jamie, with her string of adoring beaux, younger by six years, was born just as the Great Depression tightened its grip around the country. Mother, by contrast to her lively sisters, was a bookworm and wallflower, although with her chums she was far from quiet or shy, organizing sunrise breakfasts where they would bike to a spot north of town and cook breakfast over a fire while watching the sun climb above the horizon. She was an avid reader, a would-be writer, and a student of nature. The Hefleys’ next-door neighbor, Ken Baker, was a geologist and he and his wife, Norma, would take Dixie along when they went climbing and rock and fossil collecting in the Arbuckle Mountains, an ancient range north of Ardmore dating from the Precambrian and Paleozoic eras.

While in high school, she clipped patriotic poems and articles from newspapers and magazines and pasted them in a scrapbook. She contributed to the war effort by becoming a Red Cross nurse’s aide. One summer during her college years, she and one of her housemates got a job at a defense plant. They rode the bus from Norman to the air base where the plant was located, but after only one day on the airplane assembly line, they quit, realizing they might actually be sabotaging the war effort with their lack of mechanical inclination. When I think of my mother as Rosie the Riveter, I always think of Lucy Ricardo and Ethel Mertz trying to keep up with the candy assembly line as it goes faster and faster. Two of her other college jobs—in
the Robert Bebb Herbarium and in the Periodical Department—proved the beginning of a long library career.

Her girlhood hero was adventurer and writer Richard Halliburton whose spellbinding articles and books told of his romantic, daredevil exploits. With Halliburton, she crossed the Alps on an elephant like Hannibal, followed Ulysses’ route, swam the Panama Canal, retraced Cortez’s path, and circumnavigated the globe in an open-cockpit biplane. But the year Mother turned fifteen, Halliburton disappeared when trying to cross the Pacific on a Chinese junk. While I always characterized my mother as a stereotypical librarian, in fact, she had the spirit of an adventurer. She revered nature; in her small town with its regular grid of red brick streets and well-kept houses with manicured lawns, she longed to climb majestic, snow-capped, faraway mountains. So the question “Crave adventure?” and the ad’s proposed hike was an arrow aimed straight at her heart.

She responded right away to the post office box in Pasadena, California, writing of her love of hiking and her favorite courses in botany and geology, trying every written wile to persuade the anonymous ad placer that she, a young, untried woman, not yet a college graduate, could not only keep up but could contribute significantly to the success of the hike. As a postscript, she added a favorite excerpt from We Took to the Woods, by Louise Dickinson Rich, a memoir about a family’s life in the Maine woods.

No, poor Riches, we don’t have plays and music and contact with sophisticated minds, and a round of social engagements. All we have are sun and wind and rain, and space in which to move and breathe. All we have are the forests, and the calm expanses of the lakes, and time to call our own. All we have are the hunting and fishing and the swimming, and each other.
We don’t see pictures in famous galleries. But the other day, after a sleet storm that had coated the world with a sheath of ice, I saw a pine grosbeak in a little poplar tree. The setting sun slanted through a gap in the black wall of the forest, and held bird and tree in a celestial spot-light. Every twig turned to diamond-encrusted gold, and the red of the bird’s breast glowed like a huge ruby as he fluffed his feathers in the wind. I could hardly believe it. I could only stand still and stare.

She could little know the words she had copied and stuck in her dictionary to reread would prove prophetic for the next part of her life, nor would she have minded if she had known.

My father replied; they exchanged letters, then photographs; correspondence became courtship. Once, he mailed her wild orchids he had gathered in the California forests, tenderly protected by moss.

In the meantime, she graduated from college in 1946 and began working as a proofreader at *The Daily Ardmoreite*, where she drove the reporters mad with her painstaking attention to detail. And then she got what she had searched for: a job as an English teacher in the mountains. She arrived by bus in Yampa, Colorado, a small town outside the Flat Top Mountains, surrounded on both sides by Routt National Forest, and took a room in a boardinghouse whose proprietor served boarders three hearty, home-cooked meals a day.

But in the spring, angry because the school had given some of her English classes to the new football coach and now expected her to teach math too, she quit and moved to Denver. She took a room in the YWCA and a job typing index cards in the Western History Division of the Denver Public Library. She talked her best girlhood friend and across-the-street neighbor, Billie Grieder, newly divorced after a brief wartime marriage, into joining her in Denver. And in
Denver, she finally met, after almost two years of corresponding, the man who had placed the intriguing ad. He was living in Chicago now, employed as an editorial assistant to Dr. Mitford M. Mathews of the University of Chicago Press, having postponed his plan to hike the Pacific Crest Trail.

I wonder how much my father’s love of words and his desire to establish himself in the scholarly community had to do with choosing to accept the job in Chicago and how much had to do with another desire: to be loved, to have the family he never had and always wanted. Living his precarious freelance existence in Pasadena, he could not have afforded to marry. And now, through a slowly evolving correspondence with a young woman with similar dreams, he had found someone he wanted to marry. Taking the job in Chicago meant leaving Pasadena, with its proximity to mountains, and moving to a large, dirty, soulless city; it also meant the possibility of marriage, home, happiness, all he had been deprived of. For whatever combination of reasons, he accepted the job in Chicago; now he was taking the California Zephyr to Denver to meet in the flesh the young woman he had christened “Gosling,” the nickname part of a motif that would resonate throughout their life together: They would be wild geese, who mate for life. When one goose is stricken, the other drops out of the V formation to tend to its mate.

He had written that he would smother her with kisses. She was waiting at Union Station and when he stepped off, he pelted her with Hershey’s kisses. That weekend they joined a hiking group for an outing. I have a photograph taken on one of his visits: they’re in worn hiking clothes posing in front of the Georgetown, Colorado, post office, looking elated. They must have agreed to marry rather quickly after meeting in person because a few months later, in June of 1947, my mother took the California Zephyr to Chicago to marry my father.
Not long ago, the fiancée of the son of one of her church members disappeared, weeks before the wedding. The small country town where she lived searched far and wide; the congregation prayed she’d be found alive. All along, my mother knew what must have happened. “Maybe she’s a runaway bride,” my mother kept saying, adding, “I was a runaway bride.” And so she tells the story again, adding details I hadn’t known before, but leaving out others. She couldn’t do it. She was scared. She just couldn’t go through with it. And so, she slipped quietly into Daddy’s Blackstone Avenue apartment. She could hear him humming in the other room, as he worked. He couldn’t hear her. She placed a note on the table, quietly closed the door behind her, and ran home to Oklahoma.

She forgot the part about the bedbugs: Her hotel room was infested; sometimes when she told the story, the bedbugs were a major contributor to her cold feet. “Marriage is such a big step,” she said, when I tried to get her to tell me again what she had been thinking at the time. “And I didn’t believe in divorce.” It always gives me pause: how close I came to never being.

Telegrams, long-distance telephone calls, letters, and flowers followed. The bedbug bites scabbed over; the fear of what she was getting into abated, and so she flew back to Chicago where she and my father were married in a Methodist church. She wore a turquoise silk dress with embroidered flowers. For years, the dress hung in her closet; sometimes I would try it on. In her wavy dark brown hair, she wore a small straw cap with woven straw flowers. For years, it was in the box with her curlers and bobby pins until finally it disappeared.

She got a job at the Billings Hospital library, so she and Daddy both worked for the University of Chicago. In the city, they went to movies in the ornate old downtown movie palaces, heard Paul Robeson talk, and ate at Guey Sam in Chinatown. On hot, sticky summer nights, they, along with their neighbors, would take their sheets and pillows and sleep outside in
a nearby park. And on weekends, they took to the woods, discovering Willow Springs and the forest preserves.

She became pregnant right away, with the first of what they hoped would be six or seven children. She posed proudly in profile for a photograph, hands cradling her rounded stomach. Their first child, a son, was born in April of 1948, severely deformed. He died minutes after birth. “I didn’t even get to hold him,” she said. The doctors told them that usually such severely deformed fetuses spontaneously abort, but that she was so strong, so healthy, her uterus had held onto the fetus with all its might. Afterwards, she feared she wouldn’t be able to have children. Her arms felt empty; she wanted to steal every baby she saw.

The next year, they went to the mountains and into nature for healing. Daddy took Mother on his beloved Skyline Hike, after which they rode a train across Canada. There were other outings. In the Christmas card box full of old photographs are snapshots taken August 15, 1948. It is my mother’s birthday; she is twenty-four. She looks haggard in her white trousers and man’s jacket, but smiles gamely, having just suffered through a rocky boat ride that made her seasick. Perhaps some of the pain in her face is still from the lost baby. Another photograph taken the same day shows my father, grinning broadly, in his swimming trunks, next to a huge sand sculpture that he formed and patted into shape for my mother: a replica of the Sphinx.

Another photograph from their early years together tells so much. My mother, seated in front of a tent, holds an iron skillet in one hand as she stirs scrambled eggs with the other. The early morning sun’s rays shine through the trees, dappling the tent and casting a warm glow on her radiant face. Her eyes are downcast, a half smile on her face like the Mona Lisa. For the first time, I see my mother through my father’s eyes. Instead of the woman who, because she lived and he didn’t, thwarted me—or so I felt at sixteen—with her staid, librarianish ways, I saw a
beautiful, idealistic young woman, her newlywed face aglow. And I began to see my father anew: not as a tragic orphan, not as Daddy-Boy, but as Charles, a handsome, romantic lover, whose imagination and creativity made his courtship always interesting: orchids, not from a florist, but hand-picked from the California forests; the fabled Sphinx as a birthday present! The photographs capture my mother and father in love.

“I was so backwards; it’s a wonder I ever got married,” my mother often says. I wonder if my father doubted that he would ever marry. His loss of hearing must have made him shy around women. He didn’t learn to lip read until Mary Dysart encouraged him in his late twenties and he didn’t have a hearing aid until in his late thirties. He must also have felt at a disadvantage because of his financial circumstances. During the Depression, those wouldn’t have been unusual, but in the postwar economic boom, he was still living hand to mouth. But writing letters allowed the shy couple, awkward with the opposite sex, to learn about each other’s character and shared interests and beliefs: a love of words and nature’s wonders and religious faith. Some women, more conventional than my mother, might have been put off by my father’s disability and by his past; my mother saw beyond those things. My father deeply wanted to be part of a family; my mother was part of a small, close family. And together, they would create their own family.

They bought the forested lot in Willow Springs and began building their house. That first Thanksgiving, they camped out. My mother wrote about it as “My Most Memorable Thanksgiving” in an employee magazine. By the next fall, the house was mostly built. Halloween, they threw their first party, a Halloween housewarming; the puffy insulation piled around, waiting for Daddy to stuff it into the attic and walls, provided seating for their guests.
They began attending the village’s small white frame Presbyterian Church where they square-danced with the Willow Weds, its group for young married couples. Through the Willow Weds, they became friends with Ann and Rex Smith. Ann had been a settlement house worker before marriage and Rex was a chemical engineer. The couples gravitated to each other. Unlike most people in the largely blue-collar town, the Smiths were college graduates, interested in education and ideas. But more importantly, both couples shared a love of the outdoors and hopes for a large family.

On one of my earliest Valentine’s Days, my parents gave me a tiny heart-shaped locket. It was light-blue enamel with a tiny pink rose in the center, rimmed in gold, secured on a gold chain. When I opened the tiny latch, inside was a miniature photograph of me: a fat, smiling baby. I can imagine my father’s big hands cutting my face into the shape of a tiny heart from a strip of developed negatives and carefully inserting it into the locket. I didn’t know for many years the personal significance of Valentine’s Day, although the cards my mother sent me, addressing me as “My Valentine baby” should have clued me in: On Valentine’s Day of 1950, I was conceived. This too made me see my parents in a fresh light—as romantics.

This time, Mother kept her pregnancy a secret from her family in Oklahoma, fearing she might lose this baby too. Finally, when she was about to go into labor, she called her mother and sister Jamie, who were visiting Mama and Papa Carroll in Kenton, Tennessee. She wanted them to come right away; she was having a baby. So they took the train north in time to greet me.

My brother, Charles Muir—Charlie Boy—was born two years and eleven days later. Flipping through the box of snapshots, the photos form a montage of our lives: me, with my bowl haircut, Charlie with his long, golden curls that my mother wanted to never cut, sitting on
the slip-covered sofa reading, my book right side up, Charlie’s upside down; in footed pajamas, each holding our very own jack-o’-lantern carved by Daddy, mine big, Charlie’s small; bundled in snowsuits in our Radio Flyer wagon, my arms around my little brother’s; crawling toward the camera in rompers and sunhats, big sister imitating baby brother, tongues sticking out like kittens about to bathe; Mama, hair done up in pin curls, sitting on a blanket dishing plums from a can. The background is lush with apple blossoms.

Before they could arrange baby number three, my father had his first heart attack. He was working in the front yard, digging holes to insert the bulbs that would burst forth in the spring. It was in October, on a Friday the thirteenth.

Rereading the obituary of my father from the *Des Plaines Valley News*, I am struck by something I never before noticed. After his heart attack, six years before, he had not held down a fulltime job but only did freelance lexicographical work. I knew my mother had gone back to work. Now I realized the significance: she was the one whose income had supported our family; she was the one who made it possible for my father to continue his lexicographical research. I thought back to an interview I had recorded with her several years before. One of her first jobs on returning to work was an all-night job at a factory. She took the job not in spite of but because of the hours. She left the house in the late afternoon and came home in the dark before we woke up. I thought of her in the fiercely cold northern Illinois winters, piling on layers of warm wrappings, braving the pitch darkness that always seemed so much darker on our unlighted street. I thought for the first time how brave she was, how much she loved us, and my heart broke a little for that young woman who wanted above all else to have babies and stay home and read and sing to them.
I remembered how, later, when she was working as an editorial assistant at Together magazine, a Methodist publication, I waited for her to come home with my nose pressed to the window. Outside, I could see the snow piled up, the sky so black it seemed to hold the vast emptiness of the entire universe. When I finally saw her coming down the flagstone walk, I breathed a sigh of relief. She hadn’t been swallowed up into the darkness, into eternity, into never, forever. The front door opened and she stepped into the warmth and light, shaking snow from her boots, taking off her purple coat and gloves and babushka. In the kitchen, Daddy would have dinner ready, maybe Valencia Tamale Pie from the United States Regional Cookbook and Cottage Pudding with New England Nutmeg Sauce for dessert.

On Sunday afternoons, we would go hiking in the forest preserves, but sometimes, she remembered in her interview, she couldn’t go along because she had to get ready for work the next day. Sometimes she went anyway, her hair put up with bobby pins so it would be curled for work in the morning.

I thought back to my most persistent memory of my mother over the years: light shining from under the door at the end of the hall. Early in the morning, before dawn, when the sky outside was still black, I might stir for a moment. I’d rearrange myself in bed, inclining my head to see the yellow light shining from under the bathroom door. I’d snuggle back under the covers and return to my dreams. My mother was dressing for work, as she did every morning for thirty-five years. She would always, except in summers the years we were old enough to fend for ourselves, make us a hot breakfast, even if we didn’t wake up to eat it until the last possible minute. She tied her scarf around her head (in Dallas, babushkas were scarves), closed the door behind her, and walked to the corner where she caught the first of two buses that would take her
downtown and beyond to her job as a librarian. Year after year after year, I could count on seeing my mother’s light at the end of the hall.

Now, she is eighty-six and still arises before dawn. When I visit her in her small senior apartment, from my bed on the sofa in her living room, I sense the light going on in her bedroom. If I peer into her room, I see her sitting on her narrow bed, wrapped in a voluminous purple sweater-coat, a purple muffler twined around her neck, a wreath of shimmering silvery white hair, one hand clutching her devotional, one crooked finger moving along the lines of the day’s reading. Every morning, year after year after year, she sits in the light. And I realize now that the light I associate with my mother doesn’t come solely from a lamp but as much from my mother’s presence.

My mother was the one who was always there, the one who raised us, who made sure we went to a good high school and to Sunday school every week, that we had lessons in art and acting and music, that we said grace before meals, that we had a hot breakfast every morning, who saw that we climbed the mountains she and my father loved, the mother who on that dreadful week in March of 1960, I wished had died instead of my father. No, that’s not right. I didn’t want for her to die, but if someone had to have already died, I wished it had been her instead of Daddy. And then I spent the next year terrified that she would die, until the anniversary of his death passed, and I gradually got over the fear that God would punish me by killing my mother at the perfectly symbolic, symmetrical moment.

I had been angry with her when we moved from Willow Springs because she called the Animal Welfare League to take away my cats. The two kittens were beautiful, playful, and longhaired. They might have found homes, but their mother was an adult, a plain tabby cat, the kind of cat people overlook. My anger was wordless, buried deep inside, something I would
never confront her about, but nurtured within like a festering sore. In ninth grade, in Dallas, I saw on her dresser a form from the school asking what she wanted me to do in the event of a nuclear attack during school hours. The choices: go home or stay at school. She checked off that she wanted me to stay at school. I could only react emotionally: the anvil looming over my childhood, my darkest fear, ready to crash down, since Dallas was a likely target, and she wanted me to face it alone, without my mother, my only security. Of course, now I see how ridiculous I was to think a fourteen-year-old girl could outrace nuclear bombs, that buses would run on schedule—or even at all—so that my mother could make her two transfers and reach home, which was nowhere near an air-raid shelter anyway. I see now she gave the only sensible, responsible answer. But then it infuriated me and terrified me, and once again I buried my fear and my anger, never telling her how I felt, never asking her why she wanted to abandon me, to let me be incinerated alone. I never thought about how she might feel, not being able to reach her children, not knowing if they were alive or dead.

After my father died, my mother asked the Smiths, Rex and Ann, who by then had the first four of five sons, if they would raise Charlie and me if she should die. She didn’t ask her parents, who were too old, or her sisters, both married to successful corporation men; she asked a couple who shared my parents’ values. I study a picture of the three Hefley girls and their husbands taken in my grandparent’s front yard one summer day. Jo’s husband, M. F., who works for an oil company, wears dress trousers and a short-sleeved dress shirt, summer office attire in the South; Jamie’s husband, Gene, who works for Pillsbury, wears a suit. My father, who has been camping with my mother at Lake Murray, wears baggy trousers and a casual shirt that have obviously spent time in the woods, and a broad smile.
I think now how hard her life was, how it wasn’t the life she signed on for, how bravely she put one foot in front of the other and did what my father’s death required her to do: raise us without him. We rebellious, adventurous teenagers caught up in the maelstrom of the Sixties and Seventies with the attendant sex, drugs, rock ‘n’ roll, and lies didn’t make it easier—but she persevered, strengthened by her deep faith in God.

In their hand-tinted wedding picture, my father wears a white carnation boutonniere; my mother, a small white carnation corsage. Their eyes shine. In the traditional “language of flowers,” white carnations stand for true love and luck. My father, in the past, had known hard times and not a lot of love or luck; for both of them, more hard times and bad luck lay ahead. For that day at least, the possibility existed of true love and maybe just a bit of luck.

I was searching for my father, and along the way I found my mother. I thought I knew her in my bones, but what I thought I knew was superficial; I hadn’t considered her character or truer self—a strong-willed, independent-minded, service-oriented, non-materialistic woman and a woman with a romantic past—a self I could never know from simply knowing the people and places, neighbors and houses and streets of her town. Searching for my father revealed that truer self, just as seeing my mother fresh revealed another aspect of my father’s past.
Chapter 9

Journey’s End

We shall not cease from exploration. And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.

—T. S. Eliot

I had set out to find my lost father. I searched the ether for my own lost memories; I sifted through history’s ashes for my father’s lost past. I recovered rich memories; I found facts, saw documents, and experienced places my father had lived, worked, walked, dreamed. But no matter how many facts I know, I can never know how it really was to be alive then, how it really was to be my father in his younger days. I sifted through history’s ashes but found only shards and bones. I remembered a line from an Enid Bagnold play, The Chalk Garden, made into a movie I loved as a teenager: “What I have been listening to . . . is not my life. It is the shape and shadow of my life. With the accidents of truth taken out of it.” I supposed that I had found only the shape and shadow of my father’s life and if I had discovered any truths, it was accidentally.

Along the way, I discovered things I hadn’t been looking for: my mother’s luminous presence and how my father’s death spread a glaze of sadness over my life.

“Did you have a happy childhood?” I asked Charlie, thinking that no matter what he said, I’d have my own answer to that question. It seems strange to be uncertain about such a thing. Charlie paused. “Well,” he said. He paused again. “Yes . . . but my father died.” And so that was the central fact of our childhood. Once upon a time, in our cottage at the edge of the forest, we were happy: Daddy-Boy, Mama, Bonnie Boop, Charlie-Boy, and Queenie. We were the Bear family. And then Daddy died. He would never come back, never, forever.

I suppose I have been looking for my lost father all my life. Surely that was why I loved Atticus Finch. My father had wanted to become a lawyer. As Atticus Finch, he was able to
become a lawyer. And if he were Atticus and I were Scout, I’d have another long-ago, long-suppressed wish fulfilled—my mother dead in his place and my father to raise me. I remembered the letter he wrote me when he was in the hospital after his first heart attack about his African American nurse. “Some people look down on her because she’s a different color. But she’s a kind person who is helping Daddy-Boy get well to come home to you and we should love everyone.” Like Atticus Finch, my own father stood up against small minds and prejudice and was teaching me that I should do the same.

Even in the men I loved, I looked for the slimmest, most far-fetched threads of resemblance. The first time I saw the man I would marry, he was walking past the Fine Arts Theatre box office, where I was the cashier. The theater was located in Snider Plaza, a few blocks south of Southern Methodist University, where he had been a triple threat in the drama department, as an actor and dancer who could sing, until he dropped out after winning his first paying professional role and his Actors’ Equity card. We had in common being actors, but what attracted me far more than our shared interests, far more than his tall, blond, blue-eyed, young-Michael Douglas good looks, was what he wore the first time he stopped at the box office to flirt: a red plaid flannel shirt and mountain climbing boots. And he had bought them in Canada. His family had lived in Canada. And he loved words. One of the first things we bought with the wedding money his family gave us was a dictionary. But those slimmest of threads soon frayed. Still, what power they had over the course of my personal history.

When I fell in love with Enrique, to whom I was once engaged, again I latched onto the slightest of threads of resemblance. As a little boy, Enrique had worked on a horse-drawn ice cart in Ciudad Juárez, helping the delivery man carve blocks of ice for iceboxes, carrying them with tongs to the customers’ doors, just like my father had once done in New Bedford. Enrique’s
classmates had called him “El Profesor” because he was so smart, just like my father’s classmates had called him “Professor.” (In other ways, I imagined I was reliving Alice Budd’s story: marrying a man of foreign birth and strange religion, although my mother was too wise to disapprove. My brother had no such qualms. He recognized a fellow eel when he saw one: “You hooked him but you can’t reel him in,” he said.) More slim, but surprisingly sturdy, threads.

One December night Enrique came from Monterrey to tell me good-bye. It was over, he couldn’t do it anymore, the six hundred miles was too far, he wouldn’t change his mind. He held my face in my hands and looked into my eyes as though memorizing them. This was, he said, forever. I stood on the porch watching him go. When he slammed shut the gray metal door of his rental car, I heard instead the gray metal door of my father’s coffin clanging shut. Good-bye, good-bye, to everything! That night, I curled up in my bed in a fetal position, pillow clutched tight to my chest, keening. “I want my daddy! I want my daddy! I want my daddy!” I was wailing from a pain that had burrowed deep beneath my skin, a pain that had never healed, maybe never could heal. That was the first time in more than twenty years I had even thought of my father, the first time in more than thirty years that I had cried for him.

I found the small blue heeler on a cold, rainy January Sunday. She was headed quickly with what looked like determination in a definite direction, up Parkway Boulevard to where it becomes Oakland Street, headed toward Quakertown Park. But many hours later, I spotted her still walking up and down nearby streets, now slowly with what looked like dejection. I stopped the car and offered her dog biscuits, which she gnawed on greedily. And so I took her home. She was ancient, with overgrown toenails, missing teeth, missing fur where a missing collar had evidently grown too tight, mole-like protuberances everywhere, enlarged nipples that looked like
she had either recently nursed or had given birth to too many litters, and, on her rump, a giant
tumor, red and glistening, as big as a cauliflower and shaped like one too, malignant with roots
too deep to remove. She would be dead within two months. I referred to her as “the little dog”
but she believed it was her new name and so she became Little Dog.

She was quiet, good-natured, house-trained, and friendly to cats and dogs alike. That first
night, she jumped up on the bed and curled beside me as close as she could get, as though she
were accustomed to sharing a bed with a human. She obviously had once belonged to someone.
Someone had loved her and trained her. She trusted people; she knew the basic dog commands.
But somewhere something had gone devastatingly wrong. Nobody ever claimed her. The
mystery of her past haunted me. I imagined all sorts of scenarios, all heartbreaking. The truth is I
will never know where Little Dog came from. I will never know her name before she came to
me, whom she lived with, how she happened to be wandering the streets that dismal, dark, dreary
January day, why no one was looking frantically for her, why they left her to die alone, left it for
a stranger to take her to the vet that final day, Saint Patrick’s Day, as it would happen, the fiftieth
anniversary of my father’s death. I will never know.

Rescuing animals, like Little Dog and my feral cats, should have taught me everything
possible to know about life’s mysteries. I will never know their stories before they arrive at my
door or my chicken house or shed. When they disappear, never to be seen again, as happens far
too often, I will never know what fate befell them. I will never know. I will never know what
happened to Mr. Potter, who came home one day twisted like an accordion. He could never tell
me what happened, whether he was struck by a car, electrocuted, drank anti-freeze. I will never
know what happened to Aunt Pittypat, the timid feral who always stayed close to the house, until
the day she didn’t. She disappeared forever. Cats’ and dogs’ lives contain mysteries.
And so it is with my father’s life. I went to Fort McKinley and New Bedford and Pasadena. I studied things my father wrote; I studied his dictionary. But I cannot ever know the exact same past he lived through. It is impossible.

But I realized things about my father: He was a brilliant man whose life contained one struggle after another. He suffered a horrendous childhood. He was born in a bad year; the American economy was just beginning to recover from the Panic of 1907; the Spanish influenza pandemic swept the world when he was a boy, as did World War I. He was twenty-one when the stock market crash ushered in the Great Depression, which lasted throughout his twenties and early thirties. World War II hit in his mid-thirties. The world in which he struggled to find his way offered hardships for everyone of his generation; his own background left him internal hardships to overcome. Through perseverance, he turned a passion for words and research into work that was rewarding, if not yet financially. And he managed to turn some of the curses of his life into blessings. In one of his families, in those years before sliced bread in every grocery, he was forced to bake the family’s daily bread. Later, he used that skill to bake ethereal breads to nurture his own family. He had a wretched childhood, but he gave his own children a storybook childhood—and I believe through us he finally had a happy childhood himself. He was Daddy-Boy—our father but also the little boy he never got to be.

In the end, I realized something more: what I wanted all along was not to find my father, to remember him, to discover his past, but to have my father alive and walking among us, for him never to have died, for my life to have unfolded with him at its center, with him to have died an old man with white hair. I didn’t want to find history; I wanted to rewrite it. I was a middle-aged woman and I wanted my daddy.
I hung a photograph of my father on my kitchen wall. It looks down on me while I cook or study or read. Daddy is standing in front of an open refrigerator holding a cocoon from a raisin box full of the cocoons that in his endless curiosity he studies. He is smiling down at the moth, and I feel like he is smiling down on me, as though I am inside the cocoon. He’s gently protective of my cocoon, but he will die, and I will emerge from my cocoon into the world without him.

On another February, six years later, an arctic wind piled snow on North Texas. As I opened the back door to watch my dogs frolic, I thought of Willow Springs. I could see Daddy shoveling snow from the flagstone steps, helping me and Charlie build a snowman and putting his plaid hat on its head as the finishing touch, guiding our sled as it races down the Eighty-seventh Street hill, handing us steaming cups of hot cocoa with marshmallows, setting a hot supper on the red kitchen table when Mama comes home from the city, the warm heart at the center of the cottage in the woods. I don’t remember everything, but I remember enough.