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No Mom’s Land: Fade to Black

The day they lowered my daddy into the ground, my world faded to black. I was a mere 2,227 days old, and the concept and finality of death had neglected to filter through the labyrinth of my tiny brain. That day, the sky had put on a dark, mean, and ominous face. The dirt they threw atop the bronze-colored casket looked black, and everywhere I turned people were cloaked in black, even me. Looking down at the black patent leather shoes swinging under the seat of the wooden chair that devoured my frame, all I could feel, think, or see was the color black. I tilted my head back to search the brooding Kentucky sky for both the sun and God, but the blackbirds in the trees caught my attention. Since that day, I have loathed blackbirds. I still remember them 40 years later, occasionally in my nightmares. Acting as if I had breached the sanctity of their privacy, they took off, scattering over the black pavement behind me, where a fleet of black cars hummed a quiet requiem. BLACK, BLACK, BLACK! My world faded to black.

Next thing I knew, the blackness had made its way to our house. I saw suits and dresses standing, walking, whispering, and laughing. Facial features blurred into oblivion, leaving only black faces with dark eyes. Earlier, before the long, shiny black cars arrived to get us, I heard my mother admonish Aunt Helen to hide all of the liquor in the house because the preacher would be coming by. I recollected the directive as a long, black robe with a white collar glided by me carrying a plate, on which I spied a black piece of chicken and something that looked like macaroni and cheese under a black layer of skin. The other hand extended from it carried a short glass of “iced tea.”

To look at our family, one could make the mistake of thinking it to be a wholesome, nurturing, and loving unit. That was the perception they wanted to project. But when the lights of the public blacked out, it was anything but. They were cruel people, affectionate to no one but each other. Outsiders were especially prohibited from their circle of love. Foreigners were the fodder for their private entertainment. Pointing out the imperfections of others was the family sport, and I was not exempt.

My daddy’s gruesome and untimely death left a huge, gaping hole in my heart and in my life. No one had ever taken the time to explain death to the six-year old baby who was orphaned yet again. So when momma drug me and my barefoot self four blocks to see the house that had killed my daddy, I understood, but I didn’t understand. I got it that he was removing a television antenna from that house, that his ladder accidentally touched a live wire, electrocuting him. I got that this was sad, and that he was gone to heaven. But that was all that I understood. A thick cloud of loneliness had intruded my non-life. I felt “deader” than daddy could ever be. He was probably in heaven, dancing with Jesus in his size 13 tap shoes while the Blind Boys of Alabama, his favorite gospel quartet sang. Daddy’s stature was not diminished by his death. The casket in which he lay looked too small, but his 6’7” frame gave the appearance of a dark, sleeping giant. In life he was *the* presence in any room he graced. Death had not robbed him of that either.

I was the one who had been and would continue to be robbed. The “insiders” had their world, and I would soon retreat to mine. When Daddy was around, they treated me like I was the Golden Child. When he was absent, they morphed back into their true selves-nasty gargoyles, demons and dragons, out for blood.

Jessie William Cavanaugh Hanley had been the kind of father who could put most biological fathers to shame. With a 7th grade education and a mountain of determination, he used his ingenuity and his talents as a fix-it man and a cab driver to raise three daughters with the most over-bearing, narcissistic nag of a wife imaginable. Other people’s pain was her pleasure. Her very nature was antagonistic, and in her masochism she was at her best. I understand why daddy would be reluctant to adopt a child with her. But he agreed after she pestered him, having discovered that two members of her church-Mrs. Annie Mae Rogers and her husband, Wiley, and Mrs. Norma Pollard and her husband, Ben-had adopted babies. Mary Hanley was not the type to be upstaged.

Momma always found ways to deflect problems and mistakes, yet to take credit for anything and everything that had the potential to make her appear grand in the eyes of her adoring public. My adoption was no different. I was inquisitive, with an understanding of the world that was far beyond my years. On one of the few occasions she allowed me in the kitchen as she baked her mouth-watering, prize-winning pies, I dared to pose the question I had been pondering for some time now-What made her and Daddy adopt me?

“Well,” she said, as she trimmed the neat, homemade, taupe colored pie crust from around the pie pan, “we knowed dat ou’a chullun was grown, wid dey own hus-buns and fam-lis. And we knowed dat der wuz a chaince dat one o’us was gon’ die ‘fo de ud’n. So we ‘cided dat we’d ‘dopt a baby so if one o’us died, the oth’n won’t be left by theyself. Jessie Han’e”-that’s how she always referred to him-“thought I wuz crazy. But de day I walkt in dat orph’nage and laid eyes on ya, I knowed you was de one, with dem big bright eyes, smilin’ all ova de place, and dem big fat cheeks.” I beamed with pride for years on end until one day in my grown life, I remembered that conversation, thinking--what a fucked up reason to adopt a baby-as insurance! A baby, sitting adults! And what happened to those beautiful attributes that supposedly drew her to me? After daddy was gone, all I heard about was the plethora of things that I lacked and “wasn’t never gonna be.” Me and my “ugly self.”

Who in their right mind, with reasonable intelligence would give a newborn baby to two people with limited education, pushing 60, with undoubtedly more years behind them than they had ahead of them? Did they count out the possibility that maybe this arrangement could be detrimental, leaving the baby wading between the devil and the deep blue sea? Could the social worker not see beyond my mother’s ass-kissing, step-and fetch-it routine? The clue would have been when she took away my birth name and gave me the name of the pretty white lady with the long blonde hair, the social worker responsible for delivering her the bundle of joy. Boy, she knew how to play the game! Fade to black.

I wondered often, while watching the “real” mothers on television: “What kind of God would kill the man I loved, the only person in the world who brought joy to my vulnerable and underdeveloped life. If Jesus loved me the way they said in Sunday School, why would He halt my Sunday treats? That’s when daddy would allow me to ride shotgun in his white cab, putting me in charge of collecting the fares from his patrons, (most of which went into my piggy bank). And what happened to all of those piggy banks? When daddy was around, so were they. More than anything, I wanted to know why God would take the “good parent” and leave me with the parent from hell. Why leave me with a family that made the Manson family look like “The Cleavers?” Again, my world faded to black.

Like typical Kentuckians, we all answered to two names. Daddy called me “Lee-Lee,” and my mother “MurSam,” short for Mary Samuel. My siblings, Martha Jane, Shirley Ann, and Mary Lou were married with children, and were all 30+ years my senior, which added more wicked “stepmothers” to my unsolicited entourage. Their children were obnoxious, spoiled teenagers, too old to want anything to do with me, choking me with more mother/father figures. I became a loner. Black.

Throughout my childhood, I was ignored by everyone in my family, except on the occasions when my accomplishments put the spotlight on 110 Liberty Street. My “real” family and friends were on television or lived within the covers of the droves of books to which I’d retreat. My life also became the theme for a series of songs. The writers and vocalists were family members who sang them as solos, sometimes duets, trios, or all together, as a family choir. Some of their favorites included: “You Are So Ugly,” “Why Can’t You Be More Like ‘So-and-So’,” “Your Butt is Too Big,” “You So Black,” “You Got Book Sense, No Common Sense,” and my all-time favorite-“That’s Why Yo’ Momma Gave You Away, ‘Cause She Knew You Would Grow Up to Be a Nothing and a Nobody.” Every song had the same refrain-- “You aint shit! Never gonna be shit!” Much to their chagrin, I excelled at everything I attempted. My musical talent and my academic success kept me in the public eye from the first grade lead in the school choir, until I graduated, married the first thing smoking, and jetted out of Who Ville.

After the sea of blackness left our house that gloomy day in August, and all was quiet again, I knew I was alone. Daddy had left me, and God had deserted me. Sitting on the floor of my room in silence, I remember being startled all at once by clanging pots and pans, then by the melodic and heavenly humming of my mother. It was one of the songs I’d heard a million times at church. How could she be humming while my daddy was in that cold, black ground becoming worm food? He was probably glad he’d escaped her accusatory rants. Let her tell it, he was guilty of everything under the sun but doing right. And she’d let him know it by throwing those heavy rod-iron skillets at his head when they disagreed. I doubt that he missed her irritating voice, badgering him for the newest furniture or appliance that her “haters” at church had talked about acquiring. Maybe daddy knew how to fade to black, too.

He missed me, though. I was sure of that! On most Sundays, after momma and I returned from church, and daddy’s and my taxi shift was done, I’d climb atop the back of his favorite red upholstered chair and brush the place where his hair should have been. He called it a cowlick. I lay on the cold floor, trembling, trying to remember the sound of his voice, and I felt my daddy’s peace.

Growing up in my misery, I blamed God. “Why would You steal my daddy and leave me with her?” was all I could pray at night for years. From childhood to my eventual escape, my pseudo-mom taught me to fear her, everything and everybody, how to hate myself, and how to love Jesus. Ironically, she taught me the art of Kentucky hospitality as well, but that was one luxury that was not afforded to me.

I remember while in middle school I had attempted suicide by taking a bottle of Midol, along with some other miscellaneous painkillers. After realizing I wasn’t going to die, I thought, “They are all right! I’m not even smart enough to kill my damn self.” Mother was called to the school after my Math teacher, Mr. Wallace, discovered that something was off kilter, and wrestled the truth from me. She showed up with her perfect hair, her perfect dress, flashing the perfect smile, gold tooth gleaming behind that god-awful red lipstick and face powder that was twelve shades lighter than her natural skin. It made me wonder if she secretly wanted to be that social worker, my namesake. After having played the role of the perfect mother for the principal, literally putting Merle Streep to shame, she turned to me just outside the school doors, with a menacing look that would have given even the devil goose pimples, and spat through gritted teeth, “Why would you do that dumb shit? Pretending to try and kill yo’self? Embarrassing me in front of these white people. Is you crazy, fool?” As I watched her jerk and convulse her way through the parking lot fussing and cussing, all I could do was fade to black.

I could not fathom then how my life would be affected by having parents whose parents and grandparents had been born slaves. One would think that having lived through The Great Depression, The Harlem Renaissance, and The Civil Rights Movement, my parents had seen enough change to view it as an inevitable, necessary, and positive thing. Yet, I was raised in the way of the 1920s.

The day I gave birth to my first son, Mikie, I saw a light at the end of the tunnel. Now I had something to love, and that something possessed an ability and an inclination to love me back. The moment my child arrived from the hard, dark journey of my womb, I turned my back to the blackness of my life, and took a step toward the light, just like Carol Ann. His father, my new husband, looked groovy in his army uniforms-especially his dress greens-but he had bad breathe, ugly feet, and wasn’t the brightest crayon in the box. Though he was an abomination to my eyes and my nose, I didn’t much care because he was the “Harry Houdini” whose magic lifted me from the wretched “Black Kingdom of Doom.”

My eventful journey has led me to a place of healing and of discovery. Finally being able to embrace my identity and purpose has been my saving grace. I wonder what daddy is thinking in heaven, especially on July 31st and August 4th, the dates of his birth and death. What would he say about me becoming the first in the family to graduate college, about me finding myself, raising three terrific kids and two spectacular grandkids? About how I named my baby girl, Jesseleia, meaning “Jessie’s flowers” in his honor? About my fights through clinical depression, homelessness, a bad marriage and divorce, and a stroke my junior year of college. What would he say about my becoming an outstanding teacher, respected and loved by peers my students? What would he think about how I now use my writing to say all of the things I couldn’t say back then because fear had paralyzed my mind and my tongue? What would he say about my having used my gifts to escape No Mom’s Land, rendering my fading to black a thing of the past? One day I’ll see him in heaven and I’ll ask him.