

The Ballad of Evermore

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My great-grandfather killed his wife. Negligent homicide they'd call it today. Good intentions gone wrong. I'd heard the story of that blistering summer's eve over a century ago a thousand times—cancer ravaging her breast, flies swarming the window screens, attracted by the fetor of rotting flesh, all because her husband had believed he could heal her with ritual and prayer.

He'd studied a faith healing instructional manual he'd ordered from a catalog. He'd read his bible and memorized key verses and chanted them, alone with her in their backwoods shack on the outskirts of Aurora in eastern North Carolina. He'd loved her. He'd loved God more.

I harbor a picture of that night in my mind's eye—my great-grandfather keeping vigil at her bedside, bearing witness, kerosene lamps lofting shadows on the walls. My great-grandmother's theatrical stare, legs splayed beneath a quilt tattered and yellowed with age, her mouth a perfect O—a last word half spoken, an oracle undelivered. Her spirit lingers in every threshold I've ever tried to cross, reminding me, warning me: there is sorrow, there is suffering, there is regret; you will try to escape it; you will fail.

Following her death, a minister begged my great-grandfather to resurrect his boy. An accident had claimed him a few hours before—a drowning, I think. Word had spread in the community that my great-grandfather had healed itinerant field hands of injuries and illnesses through the years. Surely he could do it again. You have to do it, the boy's father insisted—a minister, a messenger of God, imploring another man, one he thought a diviner, a sage with plow and hoe. My great-grandfather hesitated. He had not saved his wife. Perhaps that was God's will, though, no fault of his own. He leaned over the boy's body, bathed in candlelight, and prayed, touched his bloated face, his chest, tried to wake his sleeping soul, but it had left, absconded in the brooding summer rain.

Others came calling, too. They still had faith in him. They had to. They were desperate, poor, unable to afford medical care. They paid him with chickens, bacon, bushels of tomatoes and greens from their gardens. Heal my aching tooth, they'd plead. Cure my disease. He tried. He failed. Accept the pain, he'd tell them. Don't ask why.

My great-grandfather perished in agony in the house his son and his son's neighbors had built on the outskirts of the same dying town, cancer consuming his brain, like the fire that had made kindling of his leg when he was burning trash. The smell, my grandmother bemoaned to me, oh honey the smell. She'd taken up smoking to mask the stench. When I was a child, I would hide her cigarettes and she would pay me a dollar to retrieve them. I still love to tell that story, just as my grandmother used to love to tell it. She'd revise the details. In some versions I'd hidden them in a kitchen cupboard, in others in a shoe box in her closet, she'd claim, a Camel pinched between her fingers, her throaty voice the victim of consequence and time.

They are all gone now, like I will one day be gone, my ashes nourishing fabled Southern soil. I will become a tale, like my great-grandparents and my grandmother, fodder for family lore, swapped like photographs over dinner, the image unclear, the context forgotten. I am a devastating eye injury when I was five; a thief of bubble gum from a grocery store around the same age; a recalcitrant third grader paddled by my teacher for writing fuck on the coat closet floor; a tete-a-tete with John Fogerty backstage

at Mingus Coliseum when I was seventeen; a Bob Dylan soundalike contest winner when I was twenty; a solo road trip from California back home to North Carolina that took me to Graceland and Beale Street when I was twenty-three; a horrified gaze at the half-frozen Pepperidge Farms coconut cake my new mother-in-law pulled from a plastic Food Lion bag following my civil service wedding when I was twenty-five; a relieved divorcee a decade later; a quixotic journey to London in search of Led Zeppelin guitarist Jimmy Page that summer; a stowaway on a bus from Liverpool to London after I ran out of money when I was thirty-six; a grief-stricken widow of another husband when I was forty-four; a serendipitous lover of one who slipped into my story nearly five years later. I am the great-granddaughter of a charlatan and his ill-fated love; the granddaughter of their carpenter son and his pack-a-day wife; the child of their daughter, dead over fifteen years now. I am rising action, conflict, climax, denouement, and resolution that never comes, a song with strained rhymes and awkward melodies, tragedy told in verse, the innocuous sung in tune.

I am fettered to my family's folklore.

Bio