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books



THE MEMOIR
PART ONE

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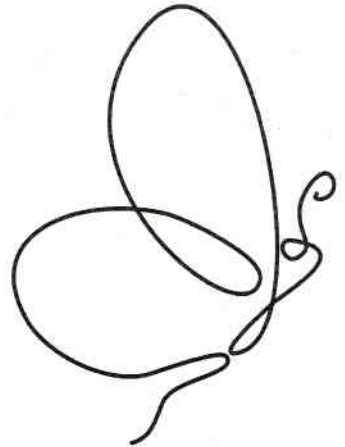
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preface

Los Angeles, Summer 1956

Staring at the television open-mouthed, I let my peanut butter and jelly sandwich drop onto the plate in my lap as chills ran up and down my body.

Home alone after school, I was sitting cross-legged (my favorite position, still) on the floor in front of the TV enjoying the peace and quiet and watching my favorite show, *American Bandstand*. “And now, ladies and gentlemen, Ray Charles,” Dick Clark announced as the camera panned to a handsome man in sunglasses sitting at a piano.

“*Georgia, Georgia . . .*,” he began, and I burst into tears. I couldn’t believe he was singing a song about my mom. As tears dripped onto my sandwich, I’d never felt more connected to anything in my life. Ray Charles’s voice and the melody seemed to express exactly how I felt.

It took me weeks to get over seeing him sing, and in some ways, I never did, but then someone whose songs I first heard on the radio blew a hole in my understanding of the world and I was never, ever the same. As I stared at the TV with my mom watching *The Ed Sullivan Show*, a popular young singer named Elvis Presley filled the screen. Mom and I were two of the sixty

million Americans who witnessed that historic performance in September 1956.

Even though Elvis was dressed quite traditionally that Sunday night, he looked and moved differently than any performer I'd ever seen. He began by singing "Don't Be Cruel," and by the time he broke into "Love Me Tender," I felt as if he was singing only to me. I wanted to jump right into the TV and *be* Elvis.

When I heard a year later that he was giving a concert at the Pan-Pacific Auditorium in Los Angeles, I rushed home with stars in my eleven-year-old eyes. "Mom, Mom! Elvis is going to be at the Pan-Pacific! Can we go? . . . Please?" I was convinced that I had to be there. Secretly, I thought that he would spot me in the crowd and pick me, although I'm sure that's what every girl thought.

Luckily for me, my thirty-one-year-old mother was as crazy about Elvis as I was, a fact that impressed my friends because their moms didn't approve of his raw sexuality. To this day I don't know where she found the money, but somehow Georgia did. Mom and I dressed up and made our way into town, more like sisters than mother and daughter. Feeling the tension grow the closer we got to the Fairfax District, we soon found ourselves caught up in a pulsing mob of nine thousand noisy girls.

We were swept inside the auditorium on a wave of pure adrenaline. Our folding seats were about halfway back in the audience, but that was fine by me. Looking around at all the girls gazing in anticipation at the darkened stage, I could feel my heart pounding inside my flat little chest—a sensation I was to become all too familiar with later in life.

The stage was dark, but when the spotlights hit him, Elvis was there and he was magic. There was a roar from the crowd that was like nothing I had ever heard. An explosion of flashbulbs went off. I only wished I'd brought our little Kodak Brownie. Elvis was

standing there in his famous gold suit, which was shimmering and changing color in the spotlights.

He was so handsome with that amazing smile and lustrous black hair, exactly the same color as mine. Everyone around us jumped to their feet and started screaming so hysterically that we could hardly hear a word of “Heartbreak Hotel.” But, boy, we could see his moves—the way he gyrated his hips and shook his legs so that they quivered. Not content with making as much noise as they could, the girls began jumping up onto their chairs for a better view, which meant that from then on, we could only see Elvis’s head and shoulders.

Being in the middle of that shrieking crowd was like being caught up in a massive swivel-hipped tidal wave, swept along with the hysteria toward the stage. I had no idea why everyone was acting so insane. I was too young to get that part of it, truthfully (but if I had been three years older and my mom had been three years younger, we would have fainted). It was the most exciting experience I’d ever had because I knew that I wanted to be on that stage in the spotlight one day too.

When I looked over at my mother, she was down for the count. We were both mesmerized. She looked so beautiful dressed in some amazing outfit that of all the girls in the place, including me, I felt sure that Elvis would have picked her.

Pressing my mouth to her ear so that she could hear, I cupped my hand over it and yelled, “Mom, can we stand on our seats and scream, too?”

“Yes,” she replied, grinning like a teenager and taking off her high heels. “Come on, let’s do it!” So we did, straining on our tip-toes to see him.

Glowing with happiness, I tried to work out if Elvis would be too old to marry me by the time I was grown, so that he could sing to me every day. Dreaming of being Mrs. Presley, I couldn’t stop talking to Mom about Elvis for weeks as I floated around on a gold lamé cloud.

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Cher

1

georgia on my mind

Somewhere in the back of a drawer in my mother's house was hidden a small black-and-white photograph of me that I'd never laid eyes on. She couldn't bring herself to share it with me and broke down each time it was even mentioned. To the day she died, the pain of the moment that picture was taken in 1947 was as raw as ever, and the woman later known as Georgia Holt couldn't bear to be reminded of it.

From what little I'd learned, the tiny square of celluloid depicted me as a baby clinging unhappily to the rails of my crib in a Catholic children's home in Scranton, Pennsylvania. It was taken through a small viewing window by my tearful twenty-year-old mom, at that time still "Jackie Jean," her birth name, a singer from rural Arkansas working for tips as a waitress in an all-night diner.

She'd come to see me on one of her weekly visits to the home where my father had placed me before he took off on his latest moneymaking scam. I still can't believe he left her in Scranton with a baby, no money, and few skills, never to return. The nuns took in two types of waifs and strays: teenage girls who'd "strayed from the path of virtue," and infants "rescued from evil surroundings." I guess I fell into the latter category. The sisters charged my mother \$4.50 a week, and with the tips she made at the diner, she was just able to make ends meet.

Often when I think of my family history it sounds like the opening of a Dickens novel, but it's true. Ours was a sad, strange story of Southern folk coming from nothing and carving out a life after the Great Depression. It wasn't pretty and it was never easy. Every day was a fight for survival for most of my family going back generations. Resilience is in my DNA.

In another photograph Mom kept for years, her maternal grandparents and their children were captured on the front porch of their funky-ass log cabin in the backwoods of Missouri, flanked by their hound dog. You can tell how hard their life was by the state of the cabin and the look on my grandfather's face. Not one person in the picture was smiling, least of all my great-grandfather Isaac Gulley, a railroad worker with a bushy beard. He once snapped the neck of my grandmother's beloved pet kitten after it got into their bucket of milk. They were so poor there wasn't anything that could be spared, not even for a kitten. She remembered that every day for the rest of her life because she loved that kitten so much and even taught it tricks, including how to push a doll's buggy.

I wish I knew more about my great-grandmother Margaret, who wore her hair in long braids and was the woman in her community who would go into the forest and gather herbs for medicine. With knowledge inherited from her own mother and the local Native Americans, or Original People as I now know they prefer to be called, she knew which herbs and roots to pick from

the forest to make natural cures. She also knew some of the tribal dances, which she taught to her children. With the psychic abilities that also ran in my family, she sometimes had premonitions in her dreams and in 1923 had a vivid nightmare that her husband blew up and then fell to the ground in a million tiny pieces like confetti. It was so real to her that, the following day, she gathered her children around her to tell them. By nightfall her husband, Isaac, was dead. Isaac blew up stumps for the railroad for a living and that day he lit too close on the dynamite fuse. He was blown sky high in the explosion.

Widowed and penniless, Margaret struggled to feed her family, and when she lost their small farm, she could only afford to keep the two youngest boys, sending the rest to relatives they didn't know. Skinny, shy, and tiny for her ten years, my grandmother Lynda had to move in with relatives she hated. To pay for her keep, she was sent to work in a boarding house where one of her chores was to fetch the bread from the local bakery. That's where she met my grandfather Roy Crouch, a baker's assistant who'd fled an abusive childhood in Oklahoma to work in a café owned by his elder sister Zella—a tall, dignified, and colorful lady everybody adored. In those days in rural areas, history was passed down orally between generations. It wasn't written. It was the same in my family so no one seemed to know for sure how old Roy and Lynda were when they first met. I was told that Roy was sixteen and Lynda was twelve. Who knows?

The second youngest of nine children, Roy didn't get along with his mother, Laura Belle Greene. According to family folklore, Laura Belle was an imposing figure, almost six feet tall and part Cherokee. She had a fierce temper and beat her smart-mouthed son with a buggy whip. Despite that, I wish I'd known her, as she was, by all accounts, a remarkable woman who passed on her love of music to her children and, ultimately, to me. Once, when she beat him badly, Roy's sisters, my great aunts Zella and Clara who

doted on their kid brother, carried him to the springhouse and dabbed his cuts with ointment. Desperate to escape, Roy dreamed of becoming an outlaw like Jesse James or Pretty Boy Floyd, but then he met Grandma Lynda and fell for the twelve-year-old farm girl with no life experience. After a moonlit swim together, she was pregnant and gave birth at the age of thirteen to my mother, Jackie Jean, in 1926. Lynda was too young to cope with a baby, and Roy, tired of her complaining, turned to other women and the illegal whiskey known as “moonshine” during the Prohibition years. When he was drunk, he sometimes beat her, continuing the cycle of violence that began when he was small.

Growing up I heard that he was arrested more than thirty times for violence and drunkenness, and having known him from childhood when he visited us in the summer, I could well believe it. After attacking the local sheriff, who tried to arrest him for bootlegging, Roy went on the run with Lynda and their baby, living the outlaw life he’d always dreamed of. They could only find menial labor, so he and Lynda picked cotton. My mother’s earliest childhood memory is of being pulled over uneven ground on a burlap gunnysack while her mom picked cotton, my grandma Lynda stopping every couple of hours to nurse her. A thumb-sucker, Jackie Jean was given one of the fluffy white bolls as a pacifier. A full day’s labor in the hot sun was worth a gallon of molasses that the little family ate with biscuits or stale bread—their sole diet apart from the occasional wild rabbit. The only time their bellies were full was when they sneaked back to Zella’s bakery for a free meal.

They were saved from starvation by donated government “relief”: beans, canned milk, flour, and lard. Lynda had to stand in line for hours to get them. It was the Great Depression, the worst financial collapse in the history of America, in which tens of thousands died of malnutrition and diseases. Jackie Jean was a sickly child who contracted rheumatic fever and strep throat that her

grandmother Margaret treated with herbal remedies. When she became dangerously ill with German measles, her parents couldn't afford a doctor, so they handed her over to the Salvation Army until she was well enough to be returned.

Despite almost dying, my mother grew into a pretty child with a singing voice so powerful it could have been that of a grown woman. I guess this apple didn't fall far from that tree. People were astonished to hear her sing, and Roy would swell up with pride for the daughter he affectionately called "Jack." Lynda, still only a child, never took to motherhood, so Jackie Jean saved her love for her daddy, who was caring and fun—when sober. He took her everywhere, including to speakeasies, swinging her up on the counter to sing while he drank.

The first time he passed around his hat for her in the Shamrock Saloon in Saint Louis, with its spittoons and sawdust floor, he was astonished to collect sixteen cents. After buying some liquor, he gave the change to his daughter, who ran to the grocery store to buy a pack of tea, a block of ice, and a bag of sugar for her teenage mother, knowing how much she longed for the sweet tea that her own mother had made her. With her final penny, Jackie Jean treated herself to some candy.

The moment Roy saw that his five-year-old child with the voice of a blues singer could turn him a profit, he declared her the breadwinner. On a good night, people would throw so many nickels that when she stuffed them into her pockets the weight almost pulled down her pants. Although grateful for the money her daughter was earning, her mother was jealous of the attention she was getting and, tired of Roy's neglect and refusal to get married, ran away. She just disappeared and left my mom.

Roy looked everywhere for Lynda and listed her as a missing person. When he couldn't find her, he took Jackie Jean to stay with his sister Lodema and her husband, Wesley. Her uncle molested her. He swore her to secrecy, so she never told her father, and