

Whirlpools below the surface

I was leaving other friends in California; but Jim Hardy, with his death, became a friend I could take with me to Louisiana. Since he was lost to everybody anyway, he could accompany me on my melancholy trip to a place I had only heard about.

In life, Jim Hardy was just a kid like me, but in death he became much more. His haunting prediction that he would never see me again, grew in my mind until I came to picture him as someone possessing profound unearthly wisdom, so for three long nights I stared out the window of the train at the solitary moon swimming in and out the clouds and, imagining he was there for me, threw myself heartily into prayerful conversations with his soul.

But Jim Hardy was no more communicative with me than God had been, for try as I might to see the face of my friend in the moon and night sky, all I really saw was my own dark reflection in the window of the train.

I wasn't the only one who made that long train trip with Mom to Louisiana. There were three other pilgrim souls, each laden with its own private griefs.

Peg, I think, half-expected Mom to change her mind about going to Louisiana and half-expected Dad to leave Molly and come back home. I don't

believe my sister considered the possibility our train would actually leave the station. And when it did and she saw Dad turn and go away, she sat down, gazing dumbfoundedly out the window for the longest time. Through Arizona, New Mexico and much of Texas, the sense of what was happening would strike her anew. She would be combing her Barbie doll, then suddenly forget all about its hair, and look off as though she were a million miles away. A minute later with a pretend smile, she would say something to Donna or Philip, as though she had not just come back from Venus or wherever she was in her mind.

Donna also had great misgivings, but I don't think she was sad about losing Dad. Like me, she had received more than her share of lashes from his belt and had told me on numerous occasions she felt Dad didn't like her, that it was almost as if he wished she had never been born. No, it wasn't Dad she would miss. It was Gramps. The two had shared a special bond, and now that bond was being severed. From time to time during our trip, Donna would separate herself from her older sister, curl up in a seat across the aisle where she could be alone and look impassively out the window.

It may have been just a conceit of mine, but I felt I knew better than anyone what Donna was thinking. I remembered a scene in our garage the day before we left for Louisiana when, it seemed, Dad did something gratuitously to hurt Donna.

We had just learned we had to leave almost everything behind because Mom simply could not afford the freight charges. Peg had a roomful of dolls that had to stay in California. All of Philip's toys, his train set, his trucks were to be given away. I had a foot locker of little green plastic soldiers. That trunk of army men meant the world to me. I would play for hours, fighting one imaginary war after another, and now they too were gone, the trunk serving as their coffin. And Donna? She was in tears when she found out she had to part with two keepsakes Gramps had made just for her, a colorful throw rug that was fashioned with rags that had been twisted and tied together and a wood link chain he had carved from a single piece of wood. I remember her begging Dad to mail her the rug and chain, but Dad said he couldn't do that. If we stayed in California, he told her, she would be able to keep them, but if she left, they would have to stay behind.

What I most remember about that incident was Dad seemed purposely obtuse when Donna pleaded with him. He turned to me and asked if I wanted him also to mail my trunk of soldiers to Louisiana; and I, thinking he was actually offering to do so, said yes. But he had no plans of mailing anything. He was just using me to make his point, for he turned back to Donna and explained he couldn't mail something for her because then he would have to mail something for the rest of us. (I honestly don't remember if he grinned when he offered her his explanation

or if it was just his tone, but I do remember he seemed to take an almost malicious pleasure in pretending to be so even-handed with us.)

As for Philip, he was like the rest of us, loaded down with great emotional baggage and, with the exception of a few coloring books, almost nothing else. I don't think he said a word to me the entire trip. I could not see his emotional train wreck, but Mom could. (Years later she would tell me Philip, more than the rest of us, needed a dad. I think she was hoping one of her brothers would take up that role, but things did not work out that way.) Mom sat with my little brother during the whole trip. She talked to him, and he talked to her in a low whisper. He seldom looked out the window and seemed interested only in coloring.

For more than a day our train pushed through Texas. Long, hot, dry, flat, monotonous Texas, stretching out, it seemed, forever.

I was trying for about the seventeenth time to get interested in one of the two books I had taken with me to read on the train, Swiss Family Robinson and Robinson Crusoe. Mom was keeping Philip amused with his coloring book. And Peg and Donna, who had grown tired of playing with their Barbie dolls, were looking out the windows at the vast wasteland.

“When,” asked Donna, “will Texas ever end and Louisiana start?”

“I'll let you know,” Mom said smugly, like she had a secret she wasn't ready

to reveal just yet.

Then in the late morning of our final day on the train as we barreled through a heavy thunderstorm, Mom pointed out the window and said, “You know what that is? That’s Louisiana sunshine. Now you’re in Louisiana.”

Peg and Donna cheered.

Philip continued to color.

I looked out at the dark clouds and the rain streaking across the window. I could remember maybe five or six days in my whole life when it had rained this hard in southern California. And this was every day in Louisiana? My heart sank. “You can’t play baseball in the rain,” I muttered dejectedly.

And Mom, not knowing how my heart sank, smiled at me, then complimented Philip on his coloring.

That was when I realized our move to Louisiana was a mistake -- as soon as our train crossed the state line into Louisiana.

Mom would also come to the same conclusion, but for her, the realization would come weeks later. “I never should’ve let my family talk me into moving to Louisiana,” she would tell me from time to time.

Never had I seen so much green before. It drooped down over everything in a mournful beaten-down languor, vines covering sheds and climbing telephone

poles, weeds swallowing fences.

And the trees? Oh, the trees! Louisiana was overrun with the things! Spruce trees, cypress trees, chinaberry trees, pines, magnolias, mimosas, sycamores, elms, willows. I had never seen Spanish moss before, but as I looked at it hanging from the far-reaching limbs of ancient oaks, I thought I was going back to a land before time and that the moss was actually gray dust-covered vines that had been undisturbed for years.

To me, a tree was something neat and planned, not at all like this. In Arlington, California, we had a palm tree in our front yard. Every third house had one. They were planted that way. And we had an apricot tree in our backyard; the people who owned the house before us planted it there for shade. And once, when I had gone on an outing with the Boy Scouts, I had seen an orange orchard, so to my mind, trees were planned for and made to grow in nice neat rows. Not like this where the trees were there first and the people and the houses came afterwards.

The train pushed on. The rhythmic click-click had long since lost its novelty, and every thought that issued from my brain echoed the mind-numbing beat of the rail. The homes, the homes, the homes in Louisiana. To my eyes, all of them were shacks, small wooden things with a rough and tumble-down look. Yes, some of them were freshly painted and had pretty curtains in the windows, but most had the

look of a people who had given up, with roofs that were tin, screen doors that were torn, paint that was peeling, and fences that were made of chicken wire with posts that tilted one way and then the other.

In California there were houses all around you up in the foothills. I had never given it much thought before. I figured everyone in the world had a panoramic view like that and could see snow-capped mountains in the distance.

But as we entered Louisiana, it was as if the train had gone down a rabbit hole, squeezing itself and us lower and lower into a world where the land was flat and trees blocked your view, where there were no mountains, no sun, no sky that you could touch, only rain and vegetation everywhere.

In the late afternoon the rain stopped and the sun broke out. I was yawning at the cypress trees growing out the water when Mom sat down beside me.

“You’re going to be happy in Louisiana,” she said.

“I hope so,” I replied.

Then she patted my knee.

As I looked up into her smiling gray eyes, it occurred to me that she had not really intended those words for me but was trying to convince herself that going back to Louisiana was the right move. She was, after all, the only one of nine siblings who had left in search of a better life. Her five sisters and three brothers

had stayed in southeast Louisiana, not even moving so far away as Baton Rouge.

My eyes went down to her hand, which rested on my thigh. It was a hand that was ragged and worn, and I remember thinking it was so unlike my mother. Everything else about her suggested a frail and tender soul. Her small stature, her petite shape, her skin so thin and transparent you could almost see her veins. There was a time, in fact, when I believed -- really believed -- the profile on the Camay soap was that of my own dear mother. But her hands betrayed this soft southern belle exterior. Soon I would learn they, more than even her eyes, were the true representation of her soul.

On our final push into New Orleans, we were the only passengers in our car. The train came to an almost complete stop, then started a clanking snail-like ascent onto a bridge.

Suddenly Mom came alive. "Look!" she exclaimed. "The Mississippi River!" She may have been thirty-four, but right then Mom was a kid again, running excitedly from one side of the car to the other.

The mighty Mississippi, I knew something about that, having read eight chapters of Huckleberry Finn and all of Tom Sawyer. I looked out my window at the long crooked brown barge canal hundreds of feet below us. It was nothing like I had pictured it. I had imagined a blue rushing river with whitecaps, but all I saw

was a slow-moving river of mud.

Mom obviously saw the river differently, for as we crossed the Mississippi, she was aglow. She stood there in the aisle, her hands clutching a seat on either side, her eyes rolled toward heaven, and sang “Old Man River” for the four of us.

I loved the way my mother would sing. She wasn’t a great singer. There were cracks in some of her notes, but she put her heart and soul into it.

It had been almost two years since she had last sung to us. I remembered the occasion. I was ten, and we were all in the car, Mom, Dad, everybody. Mom started singing a song on the radio, and Dad told her to be quiet, that she was a lousy singer and was too stupid to know it. (Stupid, Dad regularly used that word when referring to Mom’s family. “They’re stupid,” he would say, “like all southerners.”) Anyway, when he used the word that particular time, it went straight to Mom’s heart. She swallowed her song, tears welled up in her eyes, and she just shut up like a clam.

Two years, that was how long she had gone without singing, but one look at that Old Man River and the song burst out of her like a bird that has gotten out its cage.

Then came her stories about the river. One minute she had us pressing our noses to the window as she told about how her brothers had swum across the Mississippi. The next minute all of us would be at the window on the other side with Mom issuing stern warnings that we were never to set foot in the river because there were whirlpools just below the surface that would drag you under so your body would never be found.

The excitement must have been greater for Mom and my siblings, for they kept running from one side of the car to the other while I alone kept my head about me. I saw how high up we were, how far down was the river. All this running from side to side, I feared, could tip over the train, so I stood in the middle of the car. Someone had to maintain the balance as we crossed the bridge.

When we got off the bridge, Mom rushed the girls into the restroom where she took the sponge curlers out their hair and had them change into pretty dresses. That left Philip and me, with the car all to ourselves, to change into clean clothes in our seats.

As the train rolled into the terminal with us four kids anxious and squirming and ready to bust out, Mom launched into a final lecture that began with three words that were to become her mantra -- "Don't embarrass me."

We were a reflection of Mom, an extension of her very soul. She made it clear she would be judged solely by the conduct of her four children. Everything

we said and did -- not just at the terminal but always -- reflected on her. We were Grace's kids. That was our collective identity, and this lecture was the beginning of that. "I'm counting on all of you to be on your best behavior. David, you hear me? No running. Peg, you stay close to me. Donna, you do what I tell you. Philip--"

Philip never got his instructions because Mom saw someone outside run up and try to peek through the windows. It was a young man with black closely-cropped hair.

"E.J.! Look! It's E.J.!" Mom shouted. Then seeing a crowd of people, she gave names to each one. "There's Elma and Frank and Virginia!" Her hand clamped down on my shoulder. "Papa! David, you see him? That's your Papere!"

Papere looked as old as Grandma Gret. A small, wrinkled, bald man in a suit and tie, he stood meekly next to a pole like someone who had been told to stay there and not budge from his spot.

Mom tried to go on. "Pearl! Nola!" But it was too much for her. Overwhelmed by the sight of so many, she began to cry.

With a jolt the train came finally to a stop, and we stepped off into a crowd of relatives I'm sure I had never seen before.

Faces were shoved in mine. "Remember me?" "You must be David." Someone pinched me to see if I had any meat on my bones. "I'm your Aunt Betty."

Peg and Donna in their pretty dresses quickly became the center of attention.

“The girls look like twins.” “Which one’s Peg?”

Other things were shouted, but I didn’t hear most of it because of the humming and hissing of the train.

Donna, growing uneasy, told me she didn’t understand what the people were saying. “Are they speaking French?” she asked.

I still had the sense of our having gone down a rabbit hole, a loud, hot rabbit hole where all the women were plump and all the men had dull eyes and everybody’s underarms and backs were wet with perspiration.

Hugged and kissed mercilessly, I too was getting wet and sticky with perspiration, but not all of it was mine. At first, I could smell the fumes from the train, but with each wet hug, I breathed in somebody else’s body odor until finally my sense of smell shut down.

Malcolm came forward and introduced me to some other boy cousins, and while we shouted at each other to be heard over all the noise, I saw Mom with Papere. There was no hugging or kissing, at least that I saw, and the conversation seemed very one-sided with Mom holding one of his hands with both of hers like he was a king, but he wasn’t a king, for when Mom, speaking to him, started to cry, Aunt Elma, the oldest of all the siblings, showed who was in charge. She ordered Papere to leave. She spoke to him like he was a child, her child. “Go open the door, Papa, for Frank and the others so they can put Grace and the kids’

suitcases in the car.”

And he obeyed.

Then she told Mom, “Don’t let anyone see you cry. You made the right decision in coming back to Louisiana.”