

Martha King

True Stories from Lynchburg

This was prompted by my cousin Pete. As happens in families suddenly all the contemporary informants are gone. We forgot to ask.

What was Lottie's age?

What happened to her brother, was he "Uncle Fred"?

As Pete said, I'm now one of the elders. But in my memories my head just clears the banisters. The shadows of the spindles slashed the wall paper on the other side. In my memories I had to squirm to keep a grip on my fork and steer it, loaded with Sunday dinner mashed potatoes, so it cleared the edge of the table, with the heavy white damask tablecloth, and into my mouth without calling down a critique of my methods. And in the meantime would I listen and retain the things they were saying and not saying?

I was staying out of sight behind the living room couch while they doled out longer stories. Or looking at my plate at the dinner table, hoping no one would get mad when I pushed food onto the fork with my fingers. Pete who is twelve years younger than me doesn't remember nearly as much and why does he want his fuzzy memories corroborated anyway? I suppose he wonders who were all those aunts?

Year after year a formal photograph was taken at Christmas, showing the living room couch, with our grandparents Miss Lot and Big Minor seated alongside various adults, while other adults ranged themselves round the sofa back, with children either lap held, squeezed on the couch between adults, or sitting in a row on the floor below. America

must have ten thousand thousand photos like this, everyone holding out a nice public face except for a child or two who doesn't quite manage it.

Pete knows the smell of the carpet behind the living room couch, he has the image of the disappearing arch of elm trees over the street as the car leaves Woodland Avenue, turns left on Elmwood, mumbles up to the top of the steep incline where the gears clutch a little, and the car shivers before rolling out onto flat wide Rivermont Avenue. Would you have to know the rhythmic dark brown hands of Gracie rolling out soda biscuits for Sunday dinner if you shared the fear that the car might slip backward? If you too puzzled how to put together all the disconnected disinformation we children heard about black people and their lives?

Unhappy families are also all alike.

Pete wants a list: Our grandfather Big Minor's siblings were Carrie Lee, Aurelia, Aleaze, Nan, and Tom. Their parents were T.N. (for Thomas Nelson) and Mary. Big Minor and his wife, she was Lottie (Charlotte) Sydenham Lambert of Richmond (at least I *think* that was her middle name). She had three children, Pete's mother, my father, and our never-married Aunt Bim. Tom, Nan, and Carrie Lee had only one child each; Aurelia, like her niece, never married, and had no one. Only Aleaze, who left, lived a different life. She was somewhere in West Virginia—bonded with her husband's family and with children who weren't counted in on the clan. She was out of the story.

One was told to quit teaching and come home when it was clear she had become too old to marry.

One said bread and chocolate would keep you fed and free of stomach upset while traveling in Europe.

One said her husband was in a state mental hospital and that dementia praecox could not be treated and he would never get better. It was for confinement that he was sent there until he died. No one described what he did that made him need lock and key.

One insisted you mustn't wear blue and green together because they do not match. I stamped my foot and said the trees look fine with blue sky, and got a spanking.

One said his Mammy Alice was "born a slave" and that she never learned how to read. It was an amazing story. One thought it was almost magical, the same way one of my school friends claimed her great-grandmother was a real Cherokee.

One told me privately their baby was defective due to prenatal syphilis. A bad disease nice people shouldn't have. Was the baby "confined" too? No one discussed where or for how long. Maybe the baby was born dead.

One said her son inherited the same mental disease as his father. He lived long years in and out of mental haze and periodic storms. In the 1950s, after his mother died, researchers uncovered the psychoactive properties of an Indian herb called rauwolfia. Another group synthesized a drug designed to be an antihistamine which turned out to have similar properties. The results were chlorpromazine (aka Thorazine, still in use) and reserpine (out of favor today because of side effects).

The two new drugs worked marvels on the whole world of looneys tortured by violent dreams. Their screaming and wild attacks toned down, tuned out. They began to remember daily things and the institutions that housed them began to empty out. Many families repatriated lost members.

One said the poor quail hunting was caused by degradation of natural resources. He didn't know about DDT, but he did know open land was being bulldozed and built on. He liked to explain the water cycle to the neighbor children and how you could tell which way is north in a forest because more moss grows on the north side of tree trunks. But most of all he liked leaning on a fence and talking weather, crops, and quail with old white farmers out in the country.

One said there was no family left able to claim the elderly cousin. Surviving aunts and uncles were old and poor. Younger cousins who never knew him were occupied with their different lives.

One said her best friend in high school had Huntington's Disease or was it something else and she died when she was only 19.

One said he begged to stay and for a few years was allowed to work on the hospital grounds in custodial positions. A bewildered old man with no way to organize daily life. His horrible nightmare had been a cocoon, a time capsule. Eventually he was placed in a half-way house for elderly alcoholics. One said he might be free of raving but he was fundamentally completely mad anyway.

I don't know his name so I can't tell Pete.

One noticed that he never talked with black people as if they had any useful information for him: he asked about their health, their children, and their dogs. He said, "God bless you." If the black person was a man, the man would bob his head, bob his head and if the black person was a woman, she would punctuate her replies, "Yessir, yessir, oh yessir," but usually her head stayed steady.

One didn't ask.

Everyone knew that the black people had long time ago been slaves. It's hard to know how early everyone knew. It just was.

One said the great uncle's war injury was untreated syphilis which had advanced to affect his thinking and reasoning. Why did she let him take me and my little brother on unsupervised canoe trips?

Why did anyone go canoeing on the James River in 1949 anyway? The river was reddish brown and full of curds. A steel mill upriver made spectacular night sky displays when the furnaces were opened for cooling. Reds and pinks and oranges blistered against a night sky – more beautiful than a sunset. But then it was over. It no longer

happened. Did the mill close? Was it real? Was it something told or was it really witnessed? Over the trees on the other side of Woodlawn Avenue, above the Davidson's and the Guggenheimer's roof, what was that brilliant glow?

One said Chollie the garbage man was feeble minded but another one said he just acted that way to keep himself out of trouble. Chollie smiled and smiled criss-crossing the street to fetch everyone's big metal garbage cans. His long brown arms grabbed them round and calmly tossed their contents up into a reeking open truck. Then Chollie jumped up right into the mess, thumped on top of the truck cab and off they went.

And after we think it through, and after we are sure it's not a novel or a movie, why do we think there is some inner sense to it? We do, though. Especially because tropes of race and class remain so viciously unsolved. They don't taint the understory. They are the understory.

Today public narrative runs like a river full of previously untold stories from people who were previously voiceless. Instead of telling a story in code, with a woman standing in for a deeply loved man or men replacing women, with genders toppled or race trumping all, we hear what may be graphic truth or a persuasive invention. Instead of having Dickens speak for them, they speak for themselves and Dickens, despite his days in the blacking factory, his days as the child of a ne'er-do-well, had such a poor grip. The society that had taken so much from him gave such beautiful advantages to its chosen. His awe trumped all.

What's the truth from Lynchburg? Middle of the middle. Custodians of status. Carefully husbanding their middling small advantages. Do the Great Aunts peer over the fence in fear? Or with manipulatory glee? What would the facts (if found) provide about balance, disappointment, change, love, rearrangement, or despair? Where is the body between and which one of us is One?