

An Empty House by the River

by

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An Empty House by the River
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To my friend and mentor, Smoky Zeidel

“He shall return no more to his house, neither shall his place know him anymore.”

—The Book of Job

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SINGLETON'S BRANCH IS not the Mississippi, and even among locals it hardly registers as an important landmark except in times of flood. But to us it was "the river." It affected our lives in ways I'm only now coming to fully understand. The river gave us place and sometimes gave us purpose, and brought us together in common cause. In the end, though, it took more than it gave.

Lacy and I grew up in a stately old Victorian style house that sat atop a wooded bluff on the river's west bank, sheltered at the back by a magnificent white oak and tall sycamore and cottonwood trees underlain by redbuds and dogwoods. The river curved gently around the base of the bluff, leaving a shoal on our side that offered endless hours of fun in the shallow water on hot summer days. A well-worn path with randomly placed flat sandstone steps angled down the steep slope and gave us an easy route to the water's edge.

I suppose in most ways our life might have been considered idyllic. We were accustomed to having our mother always there and our father home every night. Sammy, our little brother, came along a few years behind Lacy and me and was so much our mother's favorite we never felt guilty about our efforts to ignore his presence. We are well into our later years now, but I never outgrew a deeply felt need to look after my little sister. Unfortunately, my worry that one day I might not be there when she needed me proved to be prophetic.

The story I'm going to tell is rooted in a prolonged period of high water the summer I turned 15. This is a summer I'll never forget. It still burns in my memory as hot as if it all happened only yesterday.

We suffered little of the damage the flood wrought on the true river people—those who lived close to the water's edge along the east bank. Much of what they had was lost, even including a dozen or more houses, and after the water went down it took several weeks to clean up things and get them dried out. It was only the combination of courage and desperation we often see in those who never have had it easy that got the river people back on their feet. Most of them, anyway.

I suppose they had ample reason to be left feeling bitter over nothing more than the unkind hand nature had dealt them. They did nothing wrong and were victims only of time and circumstance.

If they needed extra incentive, though, they surely were taunted by the proclamation that this was the second of those "once in a hundred years" floods in just over a ten-year span. Especially for those who'd been there for the first one, a decade hardly constituted the promised century. None wanted to be there if it happened again.

In my mind's eye, I still can see the floodwaters, sparkling in the low-angled late afternoon sunshine as if studded by diamonds, spread out before us as we looked down from atop the bluff. Our high vantage point offered a dismal view. The flood covered the open countryside for miles up and down the river and well into the distance to the east. Roofs and chimneys barely peeking out of the water marked the homes of long-time friends and neighbors.

The spring rains started early. Heavier than usual, they had seemed endless, bringing muddy headwaters that turned Singleton's Branch into a swollen sea of raging currents. These would be stilled in time by silent backwaters after the mighty Ohio River filled to capacity with runoff from its vast drainage area and refused further offerings. The new threat, which might have been seen

as impotent next to the powerful currents, was in its own way even more insidious as it inched back onto lands as yet not nearly recovered from the devastation of an earlier passing. Night after night, exasperated river watchers measured its coming with small stakes stuck at the water's edge and hoped for a sign of recession in the morning. And morning after morning they found yesterday's marker submerged, until spirits that had been weakened before but not yet broken were splintered into near hopelessness.

My mother was among those who said their resolve was overcome. She vowed that one way or another she'd move away from the river and plant herself someplace miles from any stream. I believe this was mostly from guilt, the true anguish of having observed the incalculable misfortune that befell so many others while suffering none herself.

My father said no, life on the river was the life he wanted. My father was the one who made such decisions.

I was glad. I liked the river, too, and couldn't imagine living somewhere else. But of course for me this was the only home I'd ever known, and it was here that I had felt the comfort and security of family. It was here, too, that Lacy and I had relished the companionship of older brother and little sister who guarded our closeness as if afraid it might slip away during the dark of night.

And although I didn't realize it at the time, it also mattered immensely that this was the place where Victor and Bobbi had come much more deeply into my life. Theirs would be a lasting presence.

Singleton's Branch is a lesser tributary flowing north into the Ohio, combining waters with the latter some fifty miles upstream from the confluence of the Ohio and the Mississippi at Cairo, Illinois. Unless you are an astute scholar in the geography of Middle America, you should not be expected to know this means western Kentucky. This is not important to my story. I mention it only to make you aware that our culture tends to draw rather heavily on Southern roots. We are neither proud nor ashamed of this, but accept it as our lot and only on rare occasion find it to make any difference as we struggle through life much like most other inhabitants of God's green earth.

My family was not prominent. My father's name was Graden Prather. He was the only Graden I ever heard of. He and my mother—her name was Evelyn Childs—were married when he was 22 and she was 18.

Graden Prather was a good man, and hard-working. He had an air of competence and being in control and the rugged good looks of a movie star like Gary Cooper. He had thick black hair and piercing brown eyes, wore a carefully trimmed moustache, and never went more than three weeks without visiting Harvey Bowman's barber shop. And although he never wore expensive clothes, he always dressed neatly and appropriate to the occasion and made sure his shoes were shined.

He was a good father, although at the time we thought he was much too strict. His rules were meant to be obeyed and there was a penalty to be paid if you broke one. I suppose, looking back, we were somewhat intimidated by him. We never called him "Daddy" or even "Dad." It was always "Father." I can't say whether this was his choice or ours.

I loved my Grandpa and Grandma Childs and they were an important part of our lives. My Grandmother Prather passed away before I was born and my Grandfather Prather lived in St. Louis and we never saw him. I remember Father going on a train to visit him a couple of times, but I don't remember him ever coming to visit us.

Lacy and I assumed he was rich. He sent each of us a ten-dollar bill with Father, who seemed proud to be the bearer of such gifts.

“Your Grandfather Prather loves you very much,” he told us. “He wants you to know he misses his grandchildren and hopes one day you can come with me when I visit.”

This gave us false hope, of course. For the next year or so we talked often of the train trip we were going to take to St. Louis. We’d never ridden on a train or been to a city and fanaticized what it would be like. Surely there was an exciting world beyond the one we knew. Our hopes eroded as the months rolled past and Father never mentioned it again. I’m not sure Father went back, either, until he got word that Grandfather Prather had passed away.

Six days a week Father drove an old Dodge pickup truck the three miles of pot-holed county blacktop highway into town for his job at Ficklin’s Hardware. Ficklin’s most notable distinction was that it happened to be the only real hardware store in Erinville, the population of which has held steady at about thirty thousand souls unto the present day. Citizens gave the store credit both for stocking what they needed and offering outstanding service.

I doubt Father ever realized how truly indispensable he was to Seth Ficklin, who would have been lost without his daily presence and remarkable ability to answer customers’ questions about tools or paint or plumbing and electrical fixtures or building supplies, or anything else one might expect to find in a hardware store. I can think of very few new houses built in Erinville during my entire life, and Ficklin’s customers often sought Father’s advice on how to fix the small things that went wrong in the aging homes most of them occupied.

He always had an answer. When a customer expressed gratitude for his help, he shrugged it off with a modest, “That’s what I’m here for.”

Father didn’t play golf or go hunting or fishing like most of the Erinville men did, or spend his time in bars or taverns. His recreation was reading. Ranelle Bishop, director of the Erinville Public Library, looked on him as one of her primary patrons and urged him to run for the library board. He told her he was honored, but declined.

“That’s a commendable public service,” he told her, “but nobody ought to do it unless they can devote all their spare time and effort to it and I don’t believe I’m up to that.”

Hardly a night went by that he didn’t spend an hour or two sitting in his ratty old wingback chair under a perfectly positioned swing-arm floor lamp with a book in his hands. His taste was eclectic. He favored non-fiction, but he claimed to have read most of the classics and loved a good novel. It wasn’t uncommon for him to go back to something he really liked for a second reading.

We weren’t supposed to know, but there were times Mama got up in the middle of the night and came looking, only to find him fast asleep in his chair, a book still in his hand or dropped on the floor. She would gently remove the reading glasses and lead him to bed and knew he would not remember this come morning.

Our mother was a quiet woman, shy in the presence of strangers but warm and friendly once she became acquainted. She had a kind but expressive face, with soft grey eyes that gave outlet to her feelings, usually contented and at peace with her world but occasionally flashing the deep resentment of a woman and mother wronged.

I don’t think I ever heard Mama raise her voice. A frown was her way of letting us know she disapproved of something, and for Lacy and me that was enough. It was different with Sammy,

who demanded a firmer hand, but then she rarely if ever disapproved of anything our little brother did.

Mama spent most of her time in the kitchen. She was a wonderful cook. She took this as a mother's principal responsibility and was her own most severe critic. She insisted on doing all the grocery shopping, made careful lists of what she needed, and planned most of the coming week's meals before Father took her to the store on Sunday afternoon. She complained sometimes that Sundays weren't meant for shopping, but that was Father's only day off and so the only day she had a ride to the grocery store.

She once decided she needed a bicycle, and said if she had one with a large enough basket she could ride into Erinville any time she needed to shop and leave Sunday free for church. This idea never came to fruition. Father said there was not a large enough bicycle basket on planet Earth to hold her groceries, let alone all the "extras" she usually loaded into the pickup.

I remember a few occasions on which Mama went down to the shoal with us and waded in the water. She liked to stand in one spot and feel the gentle current wash pebbles around her feet. She showed us where the elderberries grew, and the blackberries, hazel nuts, and wild strawberries. We easily found on our own the hickory nuts, walnuts, and pecans when they fell from the trees in the fall.

Neither Lacy nor I really liked elderberries, yet we went to great effort to keep tabs on the bushes and know when the berries were ripe. They represented nature's bounty, plentiful and free for the taking, and we felt obligated to accept what was given. Anyway, it was fun to try to cast our images onto the water when the juicy clusters had painted our faces purple. Lacy mastered the art of making funny faces and I came to admire her talent.

Because Victor Kenton is such an important part of this story, I also need to tell you about him. He and I had been friends since first grade. He was my age, but looked older because of his husky physical stature. When he was 12 years old he probably could have passed for one of the high school football players, only a little short. Both he and his older brother had their father's rugged build.

I remember Victor running up and hugging me at school one day when we were little. I was embarrassed and looked about to see if anyone was watching.

"I wish you were my brother," he told me. "Sometimes I pretend you are."

The Kentons were among those driven out of their homes that summer by the flood. Beginning then, it was almost as if Victor were part of our family. He would be, in time, and much of what I'm about to tell would not have happened had this not been so. Sometimes I lie awake at night thinking about him—trying to sort out my feelings after all that's gone on. If there really is a love/hate relationship, this is what developed between Victor and me. I'm sorry for this. Much of the fault surely is mine. My conscience tells me he deserved better.

As we got older I happily accepted Victor for what he was: a decent boy who wanted to do the right thing, but often was unsure of himself. This would have been the end of it except for Lacy, and from the summer of the flood forward it was my efforts to shelter her that led to such difficulties as I had with Victor. Some might question my application of this to the later years, but they don't know the whole story.

Lacy is only two years younger than I. She was named after some distant relative, maybe a great-grandmother. I used to know, but have long since forgotten. She would have been proud of

this had she been aware of it. Such trivia often escaped Lacy's thinking, though, something I saw from the time she was little. She had problems in school and her teachers considered her a slow learner. I knew she was smart. I think it likely she had some variety of attention deficit disorder or something of that sort that wasn't caught by any of those trained to recognize the symptoms.

I doubt that Father would have accepted such a diagnosis and allowed her to be treated, even if someone had grasped the situation. While Lacy would have rolled with the punches easily and without complaint, Father didn't like anything he thought might tarnish the Prather name. No daughter of his could be stigmatized by some label that set her apart as different.

Lacy always was the prettiest girl in the room before Bobbi came along. She had her mother's honey-colored hair and soft grey eyes. As she got older she became a virtual magnet for the boys' attention. They wasted their time, because Lacy already considered herself bound to Victor. Close as I was to my little sister, even I was slow to recognize that what may have begun as quite ordinary "puppy love" plainly had grown deeper over time.

I believe Victor already had strong feelings for her, too, although sometimes it seemed as if he was embarrassed by her presence. Apparently there were instances when he deliberately avoided her when classmates were around. I don't think she ever noticed, but the other girls tried to tell her.

"They act like they think Victor is weird or something," she told me one day on our walk home from Hemingway Terrace School. "I just told them it takes weird to know weird."

I didn't know how to answer.

Lacy's ready acceptance of any personality quirks Victor might have was not limited to him. For her, "different" only meant more interesting. She always said the world would be a monotonous place if people were all the same. She thought it appropriate the human race should parallel the rest of nature, given that we all inhabited the same planet.

"What if all the flowers were alike?" she said. "Or the birds? Or the furry little things that dig into the river bank? I'm happy they're all so different and I love them all."

And she did. She would have made pets of the groundhogs and chipmunks that burrowed into the bluff below our house, and she could sit all day just counting the different kinds of birds she saw and admiring their varied colors. She noted all the small things, such as how some hopped and others ran with their legs moving much like those of humans. She separated "ground" birds from those who never left the trees and was fascinated by how they all became diligent nest-builders in the spring.

But I think it was the wildflowers she liked best. She adored the pink and purple carpet of spring beauties and wood violets that spread beneath the trees along the bluff and the ubiquitous bugleweed that started to flower in April and May and waited eagerly for the daisies that followed. In the fall, when the black-eyed Susans and wild sunflower and goldenrod and ironweed and Spanish needle all bloomed at once she would wade through the waves of purple and yellow and express her gratitude to the "god of everything" for such splendid gifts. Mama liked for her to pick wildflowers for the kitchen, but Lacy decided flowers were living things and she had no right to kill them.

I suppose it was inevitable that at some point she would learn of the violence that routinely occurs among wild animals. She witnessed it with her own eyes one winter morning, right outside a kitchen window, and was terribly upset.

Once cold weather came, Lacy habitually went to the window almost every morning to look for a flock of mourning doves that sat and warmed themselves in the sun beneath the big pine tree on the south side of the house. Their color blended well into that of pine straw on the ground, so they were nearly invisible—except to sharp-eyed predators overhead. She was standing at the window watching when a red-tailed hawk swooped down and carried off one of the doves in its claws, the rest of the flock fleeing in terror.

Lacy cried all day.

Beginning the next morning and for days to come she stood watch, looking in vain for the doves to return. I could tell it was hard for her to accept what she had seen. The pain was visible in her eyes, but I had learned she wouldn't talk about it until she was ready. For better or worse, Lacy was remarkably consistent.

I knew, too, that she would work at this until she had convinced herself it was the way things should be. When the time came, she was eager to explain.

"I understand it now," she told me. "Birds are not like us. They have small brains, our teacher said, and live pretty much by instinct. That means they probably don't feel pain like we do. They don't have funerals and mourn when one of them dies, and birds work like crazy to feed their babies, then kick them out of the nest and pretend they don't even know their own children after they're gone."

I agreed. I told her this made a lot of sense to me, and I commended her for coming up with such a comprehensive theory.

"The hawk probably had babies to feed," she went on. There was an element of excitement in her voice. "Birds can't go to the store like us and buy food. The god of everything provided for the mother hawk so her babies wouldn't starve. And I think birds probably know they're not going to live very long and don't worry about dying. Maybe they even feel honored if they are chosen to feed another bird's babies. And people eat chickens and turkeys. Don't you think all this makes their lives easier and it's why birds are happy all the time?"

"You're probably right. I guess that's why they sing."

"Why can't we be more like the birds? They don't attack each other because they're different colors and stuff. A red daddy cardinal bird will feed other birds' blue babies when they get out of the nest and run around on the ground just like they were his own. Didn't you ever see that?"

I told her yes, I had, and was rewarded by her sweet smile and an expression of smug satisfaction.

Lacy was the kindest and gentlest person I ever knew. There was no apparent change in her personality as she got older. I developed something of a sense of dread just knowing she would face challenges as she journeyed farther into the cruel world. It wasn't physical danger that worried me; it was my concern that this loving, innocent girl who expected others to be as good as she was, who saw beauty wherever she looked, faced endless disappointment. She wanted the whole world to be perfect and the world was going to come up far short of her expectations.

Still, as we came of age in the imposing old Prather house on the bluff overlooking Singleton's Branch, there was nothing that could have prepared me for what lay ahead. I remember that time as a time of beginning. A time of ending was of far greater consequence and was not so long ago.

At no point along the way could I have envisioned the terrible day that would take Victor from us, leave Lacy shattered almost beyond repair, and cause Bobbi to be abandoned. I can barely force

myself to contemplate it now, even though I was there and was drawn into the heartrending affair to a degree that left me, too, with no way to save myself. My life story, if it ever were to be told, would be divided into two parts. Part I would cover the years before that day and Part II the years since.

I won't pretend not to be bitter. I was blindsided by events over which I had no control. But Father taught us that cursing the darkness doesn't bring light, and no words of mine now can possibly soften the painful images engraved deeply in my memory after what happened that day. I can only hope you will understand.

Like the river, life gives and life takes away.