

# Leaving Mississippi

By

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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Honors Thesis

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## The Stories We Tell

It started in a sunny bedroom that had a view of the bay. A little girl with curly white blond hair was dressed up in a purple ballet costume and crown. She had the biggest blues eyes. Her lips wore her mother's least favorite lipstick. She danced around her bedroom to the Titanic soundtrack. This bedroom was full of her stories. It was 1997.

It was only the beginning of her journey. She would fall in love with words and the English language. When this girl wrote stories she would be the author of her own world where anything could happen and nothing was off limits.

As she grew up, the girl would be told her way of writing was wrong. Her teachers taught her structure, removal of imagination and only research was worth her time. She would write stories in her spare time. Journals, printed word documents and scrap papers crammed ever part of her desk. Eventually, she started publishing on a website for creative fan fictions.

Words flowed from her finger tips while numbers hurt her brain. In her twentieth year of life, she was at a cross roads. She had one step in the right direction and one in the wrong one.

She dared to take the leap. Journalism accepted her words but caged her imagination. So she had to find a way to tell her story.

At the age of twenty-two, on the verge of entering the real world, she is at another cross roads. This time she has to make the choices alone. Some will be easy while others will be harder. She will always have her words.

For her senior thesis, she decided to write series of short stories. She started with high hopes that turned into a series of good, bad and ugly moments. In the end, when the rubber met the road, she let all her words take over.

She was able to write three stories. Each one reflects a glimpse into her creative world. It's like an iceberg. We can only see the top but under the ocean waves reveals bigger ideas and worlds undiscovered.

This girl and the author are one and the same.

Her name is Summerly Sykes Brown and these are her series of short stories called Leaving Mississippi.

# Cross Country

"It is by chance that we met, by choice that we became friends."

Anonymous

As usual, I am late for my flight. My layover in Atlanta is way too short. Of course I have to run from concourse A to concourse D. Laptop bag, ticket and coffee all wrapped in my arms. The check in flight hostess gives me an empathetic look as I rush to the closing gate door.

I wave my arms in an attempt to get her attention.

“Sir, hold on there. Do you have a ticket?” she asks rather impatiently.

I fumble with my coffee and shove the ticket in her hands..

“I have to make this flight ma’am. I got to get to San Francisco. My life depends on being this flight.” I say in my best southern accent.

She smirks at my pathetic attempt. Usually in most cases that voice melts hearts. “We’ll it’s your lucky day Matthew Larson.” She answers while looking down at my ticket and scanning it. “By the way, I am a Tennessee girl myself.”

I nod, take my ticket back and give her the best smile I could muster. I do not have the heart to tell her that I am a proud Mississippi boy.

She smiles back and opens the gate door wider so I could get in. Relief fills every ounce of my body and the release the tension I feel and relax. It had been one thing after another recently. More of a whirlwind adventure than I intended. I felt like Alice in Wonderland as talked on that ramp.

As I walk down the ramp, I adjust my computer bag and push my hair back with my left hand. I make a mental note to get a haircut before the first day of work. I smile at the sight of my dishevelment in the picture frame mirror on the closest wall.

It had been a long week. First, my girlfriend of four years told me she didn’t love me anymore. Then I got a call about a film job out west that I couldn’t turn down. At that point, I thought over my options and decide that my future was going to be in my own hands.

It was the time in my life to try somewhere new, a place that I didn’t know and that wasn’t small like Treefall, Mississippi. As a Mississippi boy, I used to drive a truck, have an accent and love country music. Sounds nostalgic but in reality I didn’t have anything left there.

Most of my friends had left years ago and I lingered because of my ex-girlfriend and a series of other wrong reasons. Do I regret one moment of it, I don’t. My mother needed me all those years and I was not mentally old enough to be on my own just yet.

As I waited to board, I heart lyrical country bliss reach my ears. When you think about it is funny how country songs aren't that far off from reality. I really did lose the love of my life, my best friends and my dog.

I am greeted by a smiling flight attendant and then I look down at my ticket. It reads 26A. My favorite number and to my utter delight I discover it is an aisle seat.

As I shuffle down the aisle, my boots clank on the carpet and I caught the eye of a brunette bombshell. When I say beautiful I mean better than Megan Fox from the Transformer movies. In some vaguely distant way she seems familiar to me. Maybe that is wishful thinking on my part.

Her smile is refreshing and contagious. As I sit down, I bump my head on the seat. My face I can feel turning crimson red. I am simply put awkward on planes due to my 6'3 stature.

She smirks and goes back to reading her book.

"I always do that. Embarrassing right?" I say while looking for a reaction.

She nods and goes back to her book without a second glance.

I try to rearrange my things before settling in my chair and attempt to get a better view of seat 26b face. The Flight attendants hurry the safety instructions and as we hit 10,000 feet I breathe easier. I feel like the only time I slow down is when I am on a flight. I always force myself to stop for my crazy life of video production, editing and producing.

As I close my eyes, the girl starts talking me.

"You look relieved." She said while turning another page of her book. "In fact, you remind me of someone I used to know."

I open one eye slightly and stretch my arms in front of me.

"You could say that. I hear that the California air is cleaner. I thought you seemed familiar too." I say.

She smirks and pushes a strand of hair behind her ear. "There is something special about the west coast."

I shift my weight and open both eyes to focus on her.

"My name is Matt Larson. And yours?" I asked while offering her my right hand.

She smiles, scratches her head and takes my hand in hers. "Everyone calls me Penny but my name is Penelope McDonald."

“Well, Penny it’s a pleasure.” I say while letting go of her fingers. I rack my brain for some sort of connection to this beauty. I have to know her somehow.

“So why are you going to Cali?” She asks.

I stretch my arms in front of me.

“Well, that’s a long story. I got a film job in San Francisco and I wanted a change of scenery. “ I said while pulling out my head phones from my laptop bag. “I lived in the same state all of my twenty-four years.”

“Running from your east coast problems?” she asks.

I laugh and shake my head.

“Not exactly how I would describe it. You know those sad country songs where the lyrics talk about the dog running away, the house burning down and the guy loses the girl? Well, that’s my life with a bit less drama. ”

She laughs. “I love Kenny Chesney and you’re so right. Those stories seem so true sometimes.”

“Penny, you have no idea. If you ever step into Treefall, Mississippi you’ll know what I am talking about.” I say half heartedly.

Her eyes light up when I mention Treefall. “I knew that’s how I knew you!” She says excitedly.

“Well, please do explain.”

She grins now and proceeds to explain that her cousins live in Treefall. She is related to the McDonald brothers whom I grew up with most of my life. She describes her childhood about living for those summers at the farm with her cousin.

“I seriously cannot believe how awesome this is.” I say smiling.

“You’re going to love San Francisco! I live there now,” she answers. “I work for an advertising company.”

The conversation felt like old friends catching up. The more Penny talked the more excited I got about this move out west. Like when you go to Disney for the first time, she had a way about her that made this move seem so easy.

“So what advertising company do you work for?” I ask while munching on my pretzels.

“I work for an up incoming surf magazine called Perfect Curl,” She says. “I had a few bad gigs before this one. I was Interning for practically nothing but just a bed.”

“So, you’re saying that I should prepare myself to be disappointed along the way,” I ask.

She nods contently and steals one of my pretzels.

“It means more to you than just a job that pays the bill. If you love what you do you can deal with everything else along the way,” she says.

“I know what you mean. I used to work this 9 to 5 job in accounting. It was awful. I hated the cubicle lifestyle,” I recall.

“Well Matt, life is all about enjoying every second and every moment. I would not be the person I am today without that attitude.”

“What are you saying Penny? That I need to live life like that? How do I even start?” I ask jokingly.

She shakes her head. “First you got to take this seriously.”

I nod and stop the jokes.

“How do you really live a free life? I guess I got the first step down by following my dream of film.”

She nods and asks the question. “What mindset do you have Matt? Are you a fixed or growth thinker?”

“Is this a trick question?” I ask.

“I asked the same thing you just did. When I learned about this novel thought process.”

“What are the differences between fixed and growth mindsets?”

“Oh, that’s easy to explain.” She says while pulling book into better view.

I read the title of the book. It says Mindsets: How to Change Yours in a Changing World.

“No offense but I don’t need a self help book.” I say.

She smirks. “I said the same thing too.”

I grab for some more pretzels and listen to her talk about this new idea of thinking. How I should see the world as full of opportunities and never let anything stop me. All I could think about was all the bills I would have in a few day, a family and endless months of

paying a mortgage someday. As much as I wanted to believe her, it just did not seem like the way I would or could live my life.

After she finished her speech, she sits back and stretches. I notice a tattoo on her wrist poking out of her cardigan that says *carpe diem*.

“So you believe in seize the day?” I ask casually.

She nods and laughs at my questioning tone. “I got the tattoo when I was 18 in Hawaii. Sounds epic right?”

“I suppose that’s more than I can say. Needles terrify me and if I had gotten a tattoo when I was younger my mom would have keeled over at the sight of it.”

“I’ll let you in on a secret Matt. My parents would do the same to me.” She says while pulling down her cardigan to hide the tattoo.

I frown at her action and wonder if I said the wrong thing to her. Penny shifts her weight in her seat and adjusts her body. I decide to correct this before it gets out of hand. After all, we have a few more hours on this flight together.

“I didn’t mean anything by pointing out your tattoo.” I say.

“Matt, I think I’m going to read some of my book. You didn’t hurt my feelings.” Penny answers.

I feel like one of those kids when their mother scolds them and says that they are disappointed. Not mad but just sad by my choice of actions. I sigh out loud out of frustration and it makes Penny look up from her book.

“I remember how I met you now.” Penny says.

“You got that out of one sigh?”

She laughs and shakes her head. “You came over with breakfast for my Aunt when she was in the hospital in high school.”

I tried to remember that time when mom made me go over to Mrs. McDonald’s with breakfast. I tried recalling who answered the door. A vision of a younger girl with a ponytail and glasses came to mind.

“I’m trying to remember that day. It was so long ago Penny.”

“Don’t hurt yourself Matt. I am sure your mom forced you to bring over the food.”

I nod and think about how I was back in high school. Those were not my best years. I wish I could tell Penny that I was the boy that every girl wanted to date. If I recalled right I was the class clown, unruly and barely graduated.

“I had trouble plastered on my forehead back then. I’m surprised my mother didn’t kill me when I was seventeen.”

“She probably thought you’d turn out.” Penny answers. “I think she was right from what I can tell.”

“Alright Penny let’s stop talking about me. Why did you move out west in the first place?”

She shifted her weight again. From her body language, I could tell she didn’t like talking about herself much. I have an eye for observation and sometimes it benefited me and hurt me. I tried to face her better and get direct eye contact.

“I was engaged to this guy. He loved me more than I loved him.” Penny says. “I wanted to follow my dreams and he wanted to follow me on a whim.”

I place my hand over hers at that moment. She looks like she’s about to lose it. Then she breathes out and composes her emotions. I am a loss for words.

“I broke up with him and ran for the hills,” She continues. “It was the hardest choice I ever made.”

I nod and think about my own ex-girlfriend. How she had a meltdown and wanted to move on. I could not blame her but it always hurts when you are blindsided by it all. I was not able to speak anymore.

After a few moments of silence, Penny points towards her book and goes back to reading. I look down at my watch and notice we have been talking for 2 hours already. As I think of the situation, I think it would be a good idea to edit some film on my laptop for a while. I place my earphones on and start up the video editing program.

After about an hour of editing film for a friend’s wedding, I turn to see Penny sneaking glances at my computer. I inwardly get excited to see her fascinated by what I am working on. She catches me looking at her and points to the screen.

“Why did you edit the flower girl out of the scene?”

I smirk and reply, “I’ll be able to put the cut scene in an earlier part of the filming. I had several angles being filmed at once. Let’s just say I went elaborate on this filming project.”

“Well, I think you are the person I would hire for my wedding someday.” Penny says confidently.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence. Someday, I might have a real production company.”

“You’re starting on the right coast.”

“What do you dream about Penny?” I ask.

She looks down at her book and then back at me. “I want to have a family and have my own small business where I am the boss. I cannot do the whole adverting gig forever.”

“Well, you got a good thing going now Penny.” I say.

At that moment, I notice one of the flight attendants stand up and indicate that we will be landing soon. I smile, buckle up my belt and put away my laptop. Penny grips her book and looks out her window. There is a hint of sadness in her behavior.

“So I really have enjoyed this talk Penny. In fact, it’s awesome to know someone in this city. I think we should get come dinner sometime?” I say confidently.

She looks at me and smiles slightly. “I would love to help you settle into the city. I remember what it was like to be on my own.”

As the plan jerks and finally lands, I feel confident that this could go somewhere. Granted we had just met but our conversations were amazing. I had been flustered and rushed at the beginning of this journey. Penny had calmed me down and made me smile about this whole transition. It was kind of funny how she did not comment about my dinner comment.

Everyone shuffled to stand up and grab our bags. I kept glancing back at Penny but she was focuses on her phone. I never thought she was a technology hound but then again I never asked.

“Well this was really nice Penny. We should swap numbers.” I say.

She nods and asks for my number to save into her phone. I give it to her and she says she’ll text me. I like the thought of Penny texting me. I help her with her bags. She objects and says that she can handle them. I notice tenseness about her that I try to ignore as I carry her bag.

“Well, now that were off the plane I should take my bag back Matt.”

“I can walk it to your car Penny.” I say while readjusting the strap.

She looks uneasy at that comment.

As we walk out of the terminal, I notice friends and families gathered to greet people from the plane. I smile at the sight of a little girl with brunette curls searching all over for someone important. She is carrying a sign that says “Welcome home momma.”

I notice that Penny has fallen a few steps behind me now. Like a movie scene unfolding before me, I watch in slow motion as that little girl drops the sign and tackles Penny. A man comes up with flowers and hugs that engulf Penny’s small form. I had not expected that one.

My breath was caught in my throat as her bag began to feel like a hundred pounds. I awkwardly walk up to the happy couple and place the bag at Penny’s feet.

“Thank you again Penny for all the advice. I think your husband can take it from here.” I say in a strange tone.

The husband grabs the bag from the ground and smiles at me. Penny introduces us quickly.

“Matt, this is my husband, Ben and this is my daughter Jenny.” She says while pointing to the little girl at her feet.

I look at my clock for a desperate way to leave. “Well, I should go get that rental car. I’m glad I could help with the bags. Thanks for the vote of confidence about moving.”

She tries to say something else but bites her lower lip. I half heartedly wave in their general direction. I felt like a fool so much for chance at love with meeting someone on a cross country flight. Now, I grip my computer bag and walk towards baggage claim.

Penny never texts me like she promised.

I don’t blame her and I have taken a few pointers from our conversations.

Carpe Diem is truly the way to live life.

# Carolina Calling

“Life is a series of experiences, each of which makes us bigger, even though it is hard to realize this. For the world was built to develop character, and we must learn that the setbacks and grieves which we endure help us in our marching onward.”

Henry Ford

It had been two hours since his last breath, his last goodbye and his last drink.

My mother barged into my room and shook me awake at four am. I was still hung over and felt disoriented. The world felt like it was spinning around me. As I sat up I tried to concentrate on my door as she rambled on about something.

She grasped my shoulders firmly. “Carolina, listen to me! The officials just called. Tommy was found dead on the beach.”

My stomach did a summersault. Fear consumed every ounce of my body. I could barely breathe as I looked into my mother’s eyes that were full of tears. Images of Tommy came flooding to my mind. His bear huge that engulfed my small form and I placed a hand on a photo at my desk. I blinked back the initial shock.

I thought of Tommy’s smirk, the smell of his cologne and his laugh. Those things seem so irrelevant now. It was worse than when a friend dies from an expected illness.

“No, no, no!” I yelled as I got out of bed and pulled a sweatshirt over my head. “They must have the wrong person. I saw Tommy only a few hours ago at the beach.”

My brain was in denial mode. I needed proof that Tommy Philips was not walking on this earth. In a sick twisted kind of way I thought he had put my mother up to this act.

“What do you mean Carolina Leigh?” said my mother as she wiped away her tears and crossed her arms. “Were you at the beach last night?”

I bit my lower lip in frustration. I had been grounded earlier the day before for sneaking out last week. This was neither the time nor the place to have a heart to heart with my mom. I had trouble tattooed to my forehead and I was the bane of my mother’s existence sometimes.

“Well...I heard from Tommy about this party hosted by Kenny Roberts.” I said while tugging at the corner of the sweatshirt and adjusting my hair.

“Kenny Roberts does drugs!” she yelled angrily at me.

“He throws awesome parties.” I said softly. “I stayed for like thirty minutes mom. Tommy asked me to come pick him up. Seriously, it was no big deal”

“Not a big deal? Well, Tommy is dead because of that party Carolina.” Ellen, my mother, hollered. “You should never have left this house. In fact you and Tommy should never set foot on that beach.”

“Well I did and so did Tommy. He cannot be dead. He drank so much less than everyone else.”

“That explains the stench.” Ellen said while her sobs became uncontrollable. Her body shook as she planted her bottom onto her bed.

I shook my head. “It’s not like that mom. I am not having this fight with you.”

Mom pointed in my direction. “You should never have gone! You’re only sixteen and way too young to be going to those type of parties.”

“I am old enough to do whatever the hell I want.” I said while my heart quickened as I brushed past my mother.

She tried to call me back into my room and chase after me. “Carolina Leigh comes back here this instant!”

“I can’t handle this right now.” I yelled as I opened the front door and rushed down the porch steps. I heard the front door swing open but steps did not follow my own.

The thought of Tommy being dead was unfathomable. He was healthy, athletic and young. Tommy was the golden boy of Treefall. He was my oldest friend, my big brother and the one person that completely got me. Selfishly my denial blinded me from seeing other’s pain.

The fresh air greeted my nostrils and I breathed a bit slower. I rushed down the steps to the beach and in the far distances I could see the pier where the party had been held.

The flashing lights were still bright and the sirens were blaring. They stopped me dead in my tracks. My eyes saw the truth while my heart did not have an answer. The sea breeze tugged at my hair and I felt tears hit fall on my cheeks.

As the tide washed in, I felt my body collapse beneath me. My fingers clenched into the damp sand and the tears rushed down my face. Uncontrollable sobs consumed me.

“Please Tommy No,” I cried out but only the ocean heard me.

My heart was broken. I kept replaying the details of that night in my head. The thirty minutes I had told my mother had really been three hours. Three hours to the end of my best friend’s life. It was just an ordinary sneak out. He called, begged and told me about his fight with his girlfriend. I kept trying to remember something that I had missed.

I watched the sunrise on the first day of a life without Tommy. A day that did not seem real but at the same time was happening. The world would continue to spin madly on. I would get older and smarter. Tommy would not be there to meet me step for step.

While thinking all this over numbness crawled up my arms and legs. Between the tears and the sunrise, I saw Tara come over one of the sand dunes. She wore the same clothes

from the night before a short mini skirt, tank top and bathing suit top. Her eyes were teary eyed and when she saw me on the beach she rushed towards me.

Tara was Tommy's girlfriend. In many ways, one of the few people I wanted to see right now. Last night, I had seen Tara when plastic cups were flying around the bonfire. The couple shared angry words that had carried over the music. It had been then that Tommy had asked for me to leave the party with him. He had grasped my forearm and nearly dragged me off that beach.

She collapsed onto the sand next to me. Rubbing her temples and watching the ocean hit her toes. Tara placed her hand on my shaking back.

"I talked to the police," Tara said quietly. "They said he jumped off the pier. He killed himself Carolina."

My breath caught in my throat and I focused on my hands as they dug into the sand. I could not ramble on, only sadness consumed me now.

"Could he have been so drunk that he thought it would be okay to take his own life?" I asked.

"Carolina, he did not drink last night. He was the designated driver for me and Matt." Tara said while looking towards the sunrise.

I looked into her blood shot eyes and shook my head. "I saw him with a solo cup in his hand."

"It was water. I swear Carolina on the bible."

"That's a bit drastic Tara. Especially since I saw him pour strawberry vodka shots and then take them." I said while still holding her gaze.

Her nostrils flared and she shook her head. "You let him drink? Do you know what happens to him when he drinks?" Tara yelled while standing up and wiping the bottom of her skirt. "He becomes loose cannon and acts stupid."

"Yes, I do Tara. He fights with you and then comes to me complaining about how awful you treat him!"

"Well, he won't be doing that now will he? I saw the body." Tara seethed.

My body was shaking from anger and my fists clenched. All I wanted to do was take a swing that flawlessly perfect face. She had no right to tell me lies.

"I didn't ask." I yelled. "You should have never been his girlfriend."

“When will you learn Carolina?” Tara asked. “I lost my boyfriend to suicide. I have the tragic story not you. You’ll be left alone scraps of sympathy.”

“He was my best friend!” I said calmly while standing up and placing my hands on my hips.

“Well, he ain’t here anymore now is he?” Tara said while turning on her heel and walking back towards the town.

“He will always be with me” I whispered. As I stood up I felt the sunrise on my back, my shoulders slumped and the realization that Tara was right weighed on my soul.

She was the girlfriend and I was the childhood best friend. They were two starkly different positions in life. I was not the notorious couple Bonnie and Clyde but rather the kid sister of Clyde.

The sirens and the flashing lights were brighter than before as I walked towards the pier. I rubbed my shoulder with my left hand as I approached the group of gathered people. Some people I recognized from the beach party while others were neighbors from the town.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Tommy’s mother talking to an officer. She wore her night gown and robe. Her tears began again as the officer embraced her shaking body. All I wanted to do was rush over and hug her. I couldn’t figure out what was holding me back in that moment.

I wondered how this must feel for her. How she was coping at the thought of her son willingly taking his own life. A streak of anger flashed into my mind. Tommy never thought about us; the ones that were left behind.

While standing in the crowd, I heard whispers around me. I heard the stories from last night, about the fight, about why Tommy would take his life, and how others should have known. All of this was speculation and nothing could be confirmed.

It was amazing to me how everyone all of sudden thought they knew Tommy. I tried to recall the quote about how when someone dies everyone says they knew him. It had been less than a few hours; he had become the talk of the town and a legend of sorts.

It comes down to the would of, could of, and should of seen the signs. The combination of his mother’s teary eyes and the stains of blood on the sand, where they had carried his body out of the water, made me believe he was really gone.

I could not handle the crowd any longer. As I turned to leave a set of hands stopped me. I stared down at the boots of the stranger. I knew those boots anywhere. Matt, Tara’s brother, stood in my way.

“Carolina, are you doing okay?” he asked with concern.

I shook my head while still looking at his shoes. I couldn't be angry with Matt even after what his sister had said to me. Matt always seemed to get in the middle of my spats with his sister.

It was common knowledge in Treefall that Matt Orson was in love with me. I should have felt flattered but instead I chose to always turn away from him. Tommy had always been my number one; even when I had not been his. Tommy had told me time over time to give Matt a chance.

Ironically, I never listened even if something was good for me. Usually, I never did what was good for me but rather the opposite.

“Tara told me what she said to you at the beach this morning,” he said while taking his hands losing his hold on my shoulders. “I want you to know that I saw him drink the vodka too and we couldn't have stopped him.”

I looked up at him and tried to blink back the tears. He was listening to my side of the story and trying to comfort my certainty.

“I don't know how I am going to cope without him.” I said quietly.

He engulfed my body in a bear hug. “You'll get through this day. I told Tara the same thing. We all will be fine.”

I nodded slowly and then felt the sobs consume me. Matt placed his hand on my leg and stayed with me till my tears stopped falling. He really was something special.

Of course Matt was right. I did make it through that day and the next and the next.

I went back home and hugged my mom a little longer than I had the day before. Tommy wouldn't stop invading my thoughts. Everything reminded me of him. Our fishing trips, all the photos that covered my walls and our late night conversations.

Everyone grieves about death differently. I tried to remember the best things about him. It was the little moments that caught me off guard.

For my mom, she cooked meals for Tommy's family. Tara started a suicide awareness group at our high school. Matt seemed distant from it all. At the funeral, he balled like the rest of us but after that he never shed another tear for Tommy Philips.

I was waiting for the breakdown. In the process I cried but I never seemed sad enough. Every day, I thought he would magically appear. Walk through those high school doors and say he'd been on a long vacation. I avoided the pier and the beach for several months. I could not get myself to go visit the place that he died.

One day, weeks after the funeral, I ran into Matt and Tara. Both seemed fine on the surface. Tara kept walking as they passed me to go to the parking lot. Matt tried to gauge how I was doing. I couldn't blame Tara for feeling the way she did.

My answer was always the same.

"I am doing fine Matt." I said.

I figured if I kept saying it long enough that it would come true. He looked over his shoulder at his sister's disappearing form. "I'm sorry that she just walked past you."

"Why are you apologizing Matt? Your sister and I never clicked. We only were civil for Tommy's sake." I said with complete honesty.

He shifted the weight of his stance and brushed back a strand of his shaggy hair.

"I wanted to make sure that everything was okay with you."

"Thank you for checking in on me. I really appreciate it."

He nodded and looked back at the parking lot. "I should go. You know how Tara can be."

I smirked and nodded. "See you around Matt."

It was a Friday when I finally lost it. I was at home in my bedroom. Between the exhaustion of finals and not finding a date for the semi formal, I finally broke down. The tears felt foreign since I had been so good about not crying as much.

As I stared up at my ceiling, I wished that I could talk to him just that once. I dreamed that he would walk into my bedroom and lay on my bed.

I have realized how much it sucks when your voice of reason goes away. You have to make your own decisions and hope for the best. In my case, I was not able to find a Tommy replacement. Instead, my behavior pushed me to be a loner.

While I cried that day, I realized something very important. I needed to find a way to leave Treefall forever. Find a new place to live and have a fresh state. I didn't want to be paralyzed anymore. I wanted to be a free unguarded spirit and the only way I could do that was if I left.

As I wiped tears away, I felt a strange calmness overwhelm me. I got up from my bed, opened the front door and I found myself walking towards the beach pier.

As it came into view, I remembered the people Tommy and I used to be. He would never be next to me again. His last breath had been on top of that pier. I climbed the steps and

felt the old wood sway under my feet. The boards creaked under my weight and I had to be careful as I stepped.

The sun was setting on my back. The pinks and yellows bled across the sky like they were painted. I took the final steps to the edge of pier and slowly sat down.

I looked over the gulf and felt the breeze pull at my hair. I smiled inwardly. It felt like he was there with me. In his own silent way, Tommy Philips found a way to be near me. I was not able to talk to him but I developed a comfortable understanding.

I concluded that everything happens for a reason. Often, we never know why it does but we can never take a moment of life for granted.

# Living is Easy with Eyes Closed

Our most basic instinct is not for survival but for family. Most of us would give our own life for the survival of a family member, yet we lead our daily life too often as if we take our family for granted.

Paul Pearshall

A Beatles song once said “Living is easy with eyes closed”. But what that song left out was if you want something bad enough you have to keep your eyes open. If not than you are no better than the rest of them.

Elizabeth Warner had always wanted to leave the small town of Treefall, Mississippi and her family behind. She was five foot nothing, big hazel eyes and considered by some as a heartbreaker.

One day, she woke up and planned to pack up her small apartment and take the first Greyhound bus to Memphis. She had enough of the small town life and the drama of being around it. So many of her friends had left while she had stay behind.

The plan was flawlessly executed until her mother arrived at her front door just as she was packing up her bed sheets. All her luggage was neatly lined up next to her bed. The moment the two locked eyes, Elizabeth knew something was not right.

Martha looked around at her daughter’s apartment and she was troubled by the fact that everything was packed. It reminded her of the day when her son left Treefall. Burt, her son, had decided that the military was his ticket out of Mississippi. To that very day, she blamed herself for his leaving.

Martha gestured to Elizabeth to sit on her luggage. She watched her daughter cautiously sit. The girl looked troubled by her mother’s sudden appearance.

“We need to talk Lizzy.” Martha said while patting the edge of her daughter’s bed.

Elizabeth was the youngest of four. She was the baby and the one that got away with everything. Elizabeth had two older brothers. The oldest, Franklin, was married and lived in the next town over from Treefall. Then there was Elizabeth’s favorite sibling, her older brother, Burt. He had excelled in sports, gotten a full scholarship to join the military. Elizabeth’s older sister, Gwen, lived within the town limits with her new husband Rodger.

As she took her daughters hand in her own Maratha told Elizabeth the sad news. Elizabeth’s father was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. Cancer seemed to be the plague of their family.

Elizabeth bit her lower lip and blinked back as many tears as she could muster. Crying was Elizaebeth’s best coping mechanism. She wasn’t inwardly strong like her mother but kept her heart on her sleeve.

“Lizzy, you cannot leave me stranded in Treefall with your ill father. I know this is a burden you don’t want. But you’re all I got. You know that it would not be the Christian

thing to do to leave me in this time of need,” Martha said while watching her daughter sigh.

Elizabeth knew when her mother called her Lizzy it was serious. The kind of serious that needed her help alone when nobody could fix the problem.

“Mom, I’ll stay for a few weeks but then I am going to leave. You should be asking Gwen not me.” Elizabeth said as she bent over her luggage and began unpacking. “Why do I really have to stay?”

Her felt her body shaking and tears blind her sight. The reality of her father’s illness and her mother’s vulnerable state was too much to handle.

“Your sister is recently married and she is pregnant with the twins.” Martha said. “I would have asked her if I could. I know how badly you wanted to leave. I just need to here now with me.”

Each of Martha’s children was unique; they handled the news of her husband illness differently.

Franklin was the first born and the closest with his father. He had gotten teary eyed and tried to console her. Then there was Burt who did not answer his phone. Burt never saw eye to eye with his father and had to find out by a voicemail about his father’s illness. Burt never returned Martha’s call.

The oldest daughter, Gwen, was the splitting image of her mother. Gwen’s ambitions in life were consumed with thoughts of marriage and love. She had been successful at those two goals so far.

Finally, Lizzy, the baby, was the most difficult to understand. Martha blamed the age different but even as a youngest child, her daughter was the mischievous and difficult one. Lizzy had a heart of gold but lacked direction.

Martha was always at odds with her youngest daughter and it pained her. She wanted Lizzy to become her pillar of strength. Instead, Martha was confronted with a daughter in tears who solely wanted to leave town.

Lizzy felt a hand of reassurance touch her on her back. She looked into her mother’s eyes. She felt her mother wrap her arms around her sobbing body.

“Dad will get better mom. I promise you.” Lizzy said confidently while calming down her crying.

Martha wiped away tears and attempted a smile for her daughter’s sake.

In the days that followed, after her father diagnosis, people in Treefall talked.

Their words were as deadly as the disapproving looks. Instead of support from the community, Lizzy's family became isolated. The locals of Treefall were insulted and felt ostracized by not being told about the cancer earlier.

Often Lizzy got dirty looks for being single and unmarried. Now the family name was in jeopardy. It was something that ailed Martha but did not phase Lizzy.

Grandmothers spent their mornings wasting away at Bethany's Coffee House, on the corner of Maple and Central Street, talking about Elizabeth's father.

Bethany had hired Elizabeth in high school to be a waitress. Now Lizzy practically ran the shop. She knew all the orders of the locals and tried her best to always have a smile. She was quick as lightning about cleaning tables. No job was below her and she was confident in her abilities.

The old ladies of Treefall were oblivious to the fact that Elizabeth heard every word of their gossip. She was sweet to their faces. Often, it took every ounce of her being to not say something and come unglued. She held her tongue because she needed the job to pay the rent and the health benefits.

As Lizzy poured one of the ladies refills, she noticed a young man walk into the shop. He was tall, gorgeous and wearing a military uniform. At first she thought her eyes were deceiving her but when she got a better view her whole face lit up. The siblings locked eyes and Lizzy practically dropped the coffee pitcher.

"Burt, you're home!" Lizzy said before tackling her older brother.

"Hiya lil Sis, how is my favorite Warner?" he said while hugging Lizzy's small form.

"I'm doing okay Burt. Have you gone to see mom and dad yet?" she asked.

He shrugged and shook his head. "You were the first person I have seen since I got off the greyhound."

Now it was the older ladies turn to listen in on her conversation with Burt. Lizzy looked in their general direction and the women quickly picked up another gossip piece. She grabbed her brothers shoulder and pushed him towards the back of the store.

"Let's go the back of the store and catch up."

Burt laughed and followed Lizzy back behind the counter. "I have missed you Lizzy."

Both Warner siblings sat down on the floor facing each other behind the register. Burt talked about his military leave due to their father's illness. Lizzy explained how she

almost got out of town. Then they both considered what would be the best way to tell their mother that Burt was in town.

“She’s been bad Burt. I cannot even make her smile much. Dad’s lost his sarcastic side,” Lizzy said while playing with the edge of her apron. “It is so hard to see Dad hooked up to all those machines at the hospital. Gwen, Franklin and I have been taking shifts sitting with father.”

“I guess I need to do what I can while I have the time with dad.” Burt said softly. “Do you think he will be okay?”

Lizzy blinked back tears. “I’m glad you’re here Burt. I don’t know how much long he has. I’m just a mess. Crying seems to be my main profession these days.”

“Well, I am going to the hospital now. I know you got to still work.” Burt said confidently. “I’ll stop by afterwards.”

Lizzy nodded and slowly got up. “I should get back to work.”

Burt stood up and hugged his little sister. “I’ll see you later.”

Lizzy watched her older brother walk out of the shop. She turned to the coffee pot and went back to pouring refills. The older ladies of Treefall watched Lizzy move around the shop. All their eyes focused on her every move. Grandmother Dotty got the courage to raise her hand for Lizzy’s attention. She had ordered tea and needed a refill.

As Lizzy took her cup, Dotty placed her hand on Lizzy’s arm.

“Darling, we are praying for your family.” Grandmother Dotty said while placing her tea cup in Lizzy’s hand.

Lizzy bit her tongue and nodded in appreciation. In the past, she had been notorious for calling out someone who was being lying to her face. However, she decided for her mother’s reputation and sanity that she would not say anything.

“Thank you Grandmother Dotty. The fact that your group of friends are even thinking of my family is encouraging.” Lizzy said slyly.

Dotty seemed satisfied with Lizzy’s response.

A few hours passed at the coffee shop. Lizzy had seen the older ladies of Treefall come and go. Relief washed over Lizzy as she saw her mother walk into the shop with a big smile on her face.

“Darling, guess who came into the hospital this morning?” Martha asked.

Lizzy stopped cleaning a table and turned to face her mother. "Let me guess their name starts with a B and ends with a T."

"You saw him too?" Martha asked. "Did he come here first?"

Lizzy nodded as she went back to cleaning the table. "He wanted to ask me how dad was before he went to go see him."

"Well thank you for encouraging him Lizzy. You know that your father has been asking to see Burt." Martha said while playing with the edge of her purse. "He's been asking for you."

"Well, I don't get off work till late tonight mom." Lizzy said.

"I think Bethany would understand." Martha said sadly. "I don't think you father wants to keep doing treatments. He's giving up."

"It's only been a few weeks. Burt is back." Lizzy confidently said while rearranging the coffee lids on the table. "If anything this should make him stronger."

"Your father doesn't work that way Lizzy. All he's wanted was his family all here when he died."

Lizzy stopped dead in her tracks. Fresh tears sprang up in her eyes and she tried her best to stay strong. Martha looked at her daughter's pained face and went for a hug.

"I know honey. It's going to be okay." Martha said in a muffled voice while hugging.

Lizzy sighed and nodded. "I don't want dad to die."

"Nobody wants that outcome for him." Martha said.

The two stood there in a quiet way. It was the first time that both women were loss of words and afraid for their futures together.

"I should go back to working mom. I'll see you tonight maybe?" Lizzy said while rubbing her mother's shoulder.

"You should go see your father tonight. All your other siblings will be going." Martha said calmly while walking out the door of the shop.

"That's like signing dad's death certificate." Lizzy said softly to herself.

She stood in the middle of the shop. Tears wiped from her face and the feeling of complete helplessness consuming her.

Lizzy had come to the full realization that if she went to say goodbye her father would give up. It was something that Lizzy could not wrap her mind around. If Burt had never come home maybe dad would not be giving up.

At the tail end of Lizzy's shift, Burt was frowning as he walked into the coffee shop. Franklin and Gwen had ganged up on him at the hospital and his father had been in and out of consciousness the whole afternoon. Also, the breathing venerator had been hooked up that afternoon.

"Lizzy, we need to talk." Burt said calmly.

Lizzy was making a latte for a customer and trying to ignore what she already knew her brother would say and telling her.

"I am not going to the hospital Burt." Lizzy blurted out after finishing her customers order. "If I don't go it means that father cannot give up."

"The doctors put him on a violator this afternoon. He wants all us to come say goodbye."

"Why did you have to come back? Seriously, now father wants to give up."

"You sound like Gwen and Franklin. I didn't know this is what he wanted," Burt said angrily. "I checked with the doctors. His health has been going south for a few days now."

Lizzy bit her lip and looked around the coffee shop. Her brother looked like he was going to break down. She fished out some to go cups, walked to the remaining customers with refill orders and told them that due to an emergency she had to close up early.

After some grumbling from the customers, the last of them left the shop. She locked up and followed her brother down the street.

"Burt, why do you have to show up telling me all of this?" Lizzy asked nearly coming unglued as her words tumbled out of her mouth.

"Because of all the people in our family, I thought I could turn to you."

"Well Burt, you were mistaken. During all of this, I have had to hold this family together," Lizzy yelled. "I'm done. I've done my share of supporting and at this point I cannot do anything more."

"Mom seems pretty happy with you." Burt said while slowly sitting in a couch. He gestured to her to sit down next to him. "You'll regret not saying goodbye Elizabeth. Being in the military, I know firsthand the awfulness of not telling someone how much you care."

Lizzy rubbed the back of her neck and sat across from her brother and looked at her watch.

“I’ve thought it over. I’m going to pack my bags and take the greyhound to Memphis tonight.”

“You’re making a mistake by running after all of this.” Burt answered

“I cannot handle dad dying.” She said while adjusting her watch. “I said my goodbyes a long time ago.”

Burt knew his sister had made her decision. If anything he had learned over the years that once she had made a decision she never looked back.

“Will you at least go to the hospital and say goodbye to Franklin, Gwen and mom?”

Lizzy nodded. “I am only doing this because you asked Burt.”

He nodded and helped her gather her things behind the register. They locked up the store and walked down the street to her apartment. After packing up one suitcase, she gave the keys to Burt.

“You should stay here while you’re still in town.” She said.

Burt nodded. “Let’s go see the family.”

As they approached the hospital, the tears began pouring from Lizzy’s eyes. Burt wrapped his arm around her small shoulders and tried to get her to smile.

Gwen, Franklin and Martha sat restlessly in the waiting room of the cancer wing. They all had tired sad looks on their faces. As Burt and Lizzy walked into the room, three sets of eyes looked up. The walls of the room were bare and empty looking. The smell and stench of death lingered just beyond what her nostrils could smell.

Martha eyed the suitcase in Lizzy’s hands. She was angry at the sight of the bag. It represented her daughter’s freedom from Treefall. Martha thought it was wrong that Lizzy wanted to runaway.

“Lizzy and Burt, thank goodness you are here.” Martha said to both children coolly. “Lizzy, why are you carrying a suitcase to the hospital?”

Lizzy bit her lower lip in frustration and turned to look at Burt. She was a loss of words and did not have an acceptable answer for her mother at that moment. Luckily, Burt stepped in for her.

“Mother, Lizzy decided it would be best to leave tonight for Memphis. She doesn’t want to say goodbye to father or see him pass,” Burt said.

Lizzy gripped the suitcase holder tighter as her mother shook her head. She could feel that anger pulsating from her mother.

“No, Elizabeth Mildred Warner you will not get away with this.” Martha yelled.

“At least I had the decency to say goodbye to you.” Lizzy said.

Gwen stood up next to mother and shook her head at Lizzy. “I don’t want to pick sides Lizzy but mother has a point.”

“You would side with mother Gwen.” Lizzy grumbled.

Franklin stood up and placed his hands on Lizzy and his mother. “Come on everyone, let’s go see father together.”

Lizzy felt Burt lock hands with her. She hated the fighting. It had been worse in high school. When the siblings got involved in mother’s and Lizzy’s spats it meant things were bad. In a time that the family should be unbreakable they couldn’t get anything together.

“Come on sis, I’ll be there with you.”

At that moment, a nurse walked into the room. She looked sad and her voice was shaky as she asked for Martha. She touched Martha’s hand and shook her head in a sad way. All eyes landed on Martha. The nurse pulled her aside and placed a hand on Martha’s back.

“I’m so sorry but your husband stopped breathing on his own and his heart and lungs gave out.”

Martha began shaking with sobs. All four children rushed to their mother’s side.

The choice had been taken away from all of them. Their father made the final decision. When things finally had calmed down, Lizzy went to the nurse to ask if she could see her father one last time.

After some convincing, the nurse agreed to a minute visit.

As Lizzy stepped down the hall she could still hear her mother’s sobs and her siblings comforting words.

Each of them went to say goodbye to their father. Lizzy took the longest of them all. Her father was a great man who tried to encourage her to be something more than a citizen of Treefall.

She took the handle of her father's hospital room in one hand and pushed open the door. The room was stark like the waiting room. It was no indication of whom her father was a person. He lay there quietly like he was sleeping. Lizzy stepped in and took her father's cold hand. She hoped he would open his eyes but she knew better.

"I'm sorry." She said quietly. "I am so sorry."

Nobody would understand Lizzy's reasoning. As she stood by her father, she did not have to wipe away her tears. Lizzy realized an important lesson. The lesson was to hold on to the ones you love and live life to the fullest. Lizzy wondered if her family learned the same lesson. After that day, she became a stronger person. She cried less, loved more and took on the world. Lizzy kept a bit of her father and mother on her heart at all times.

Sometimes it's easier to live with your eyes closed rather than open. Ignorance is sometimes bliss.

## Self Reflection: The Madness, The Process, and All That Jazz

Creative writing is an art form. It can be tackled in many different ways and can be considered a life long journey. Stories can be developed over months and while others are created in a matter of hours. My honors thesis journey was a series of high and lows. I fell in and out of love with my characters. I tackled some topics that were too close to my heart while other stories were out of my comfort zone. I attempted a lofty five stories but feel short with only three. I can go on forever about the things I have learned from this experience. Instead, I have decided to make a list to sum it all up.

For my reflection section, I will make a list of top 10 things I've learned the creative writing process and tying it in with an honors thesis.

**1. First and Foremost: Time is your best friend.**

This was my first mistake. I thought like a journalist instead of a creative writer. I had a deadline and it was a rat race. I wrote here and there but rushed at the very end. My thoughts and development struggled to shine. Thankfully, I had an exceptional support system of professors and friends. I could have done a better piece if I had given myself more time and the circumstances of my spring semester had been different. Of course, all I can do now is look back and learn from my mistakes. If you are going to attempt a creative writing piece with a journalistic mindset, let me warn you now it will be difficult. **Very difficult.** As a creative writer, you don't just mention the character walking by a bed of flowers. Rather you describe the smell, color and how many were surviving in that bed.

**2. Attention to detail**

This was another pitfall of my journalistic tendencies. I have been trained for all my years in college to only notice the little things in small segments of time. Focus only on the questions of who, what, when, where and why than make the deadline. I had to work on my attention to details. I would recommend to creative writers to people watch and learn to write about how your food tasted. It helped to do short writing exercises to relearn my creative descriptive tendencies.

### **3. Finding a Voice**

All of us have a literary voice. Some are rough around the edges while others are refined to a point. This is the time to experiment. Create a character's perspective that is familiar to your own and another time try something unfamiliar. It can get tricky. I managed to surprise myself on this topic. I have always been able to find my voice in a story. When I develop stories, I have a tendency of always taking on the voice of a female. I was told in the past that I would never be able to grasp the inner thinking of a male. So why try?

I laugh now at my own stupidity. It's that mental slap I want to give myself when I realize that the answer was always in front of me. I write a better male character than a female one. My point for you reader is find your voice and write constantly.

### **4. Thinking Out of the Cliché Box**

The guy wins the girl. The sunset ends on the happy couple. It was after all the perfect love story. Everyone loves a good cliché. It's why we watch movies and read books that have predictable endings. Honestly, it was tempting to write these kinds of endings. I struggled with how all my stories ended. Some were easier to write while others I could not manage a strong conclusion. Personally, I want my readers to get something from my stories. When deciding to write the ending of a story, consider the reader and your own personal reasons. Always remember it is okay to step out of the box of clichés.

## **5. Writing the Familiar**

Since I was a kid, I was told to write what I know. It is all about combing the familiar and the comfortable. I dare you to challenge that aspect of your writing tool box. I struggled with expanding my comfort zone. It is okay to follow what ifs and the how might of the writing world. Think about Tolkien, Rowling, and writers of fictitious lands. I want to be able to do that someday. I want my voice and characters to discover another world behind a bedroom wall or in a forest.

Writing the familiar is a great starting point but I have learned to challenge myself beyond that point. I would recommend that you attempt to do the same.

## **6. Being Too Close to Your Subject Matter**

This was my biggest struggle of all my writing ups and downs. I mixed writing what I knew with something that was painfully close to my heart. In the months leading up to my thesis defense, I had a friend die too young. As a result, two of the three short stories took a darker path. On one hand it was therapeutic for me to develop and craft these stories. However the biggest pitfall was not going beyond the familiar. If you reader struggle with something on your thesis journey, I recommend that you strive to write something beyond the familiar.

## **7. Development is Essential**

I have to say this rule applies to creative writers and journalists alike. Some stories were better at development while others tanked in that department. Like a good feature article, you got to have the broccoli with the ice cream. My professor

taught me to keep the attention of the reader you got to give them everything and the moon. Sounds simple enough but sometimes the development gets lost in the translation from your mind to paper. You miss a detail that leaves the reader going HUH? Anyways, be mindful of development. It really can make or break a short story.

## **8. Taking Time to Step Away**

This one was easy for me. I could write a ton of paragraphs and then go grab dinner or go to sleep. Now I will tie in the time aspect again. Sometimes I didn't give myself enough time to step away. The time outs were not long enough. If I did it all over again I would step away more often. Even if it you simply go for a walk or just a mind distracter. I would recommend taking the time to let the story come together. That's how the best writers do it after all.

## **9. Visualization**

I love this part of the creative process. This is when I can draw, cut out pictures in magazines and search all over Google. I create both a paper and PowerPoint visualization of my stories. During the process, one of the coolest aspects of the learning process was seeing how my visualization changed over time. In my stories, the central characters were from the same small town of TreeFall, Mississippi. In my early drafts, Treefall was in the middle of the state. Then it turned out to be on the coast. My characters changed looks and developed different stories. Sadly two of them never got their stories told. I like seeing who I

am writing about. It helps the whole process become alive in a way. My recommendation would be to always at least think of all the little details. It helps with descriptions and development. So my point is to not be afraid to visual.

## **10. Success On the Horizon**

There is always a silver lining. A light at the end of the tunnel and in my own personal case I managed to survive. I hope that the reader of this reflection has learned a lot from my short list of tips, tools and rambles. I love to learn, teach and do better. I believe I managed to reach the horizon of my own successes. It was a struggle and the journey was long. My recommendation would be to tackle the art of creative writing. Come up with a plan and go from there. Dare to strive for the success on the horizon line. If anything you know you'll learn a lot from the journey.

## **All that Jazz and The Rest of My Ramblings...**

I'll be honest, I could have done better. What is better really? Simply put I could have written more stories. Since I did not I have to focus on the valuable knowledge I learned. Each story taught me something different. I know that every time I write a story I will strive to take the skills I learned and write better than before. That is the least I can do in this situation. My imagination will grow and my voice more refined.

The beauty of this reflection is that I have realized that it is okay if there are bumps in the journey. Yes, I shot for the moon and miscalculated. However I landed among the stars and I got to say that's not a bad place to be. I would do a few things differently. I would take more time, be obsessed with my stories and constantly be developing my voice. I know it may sound like I am rambling but I want to make this clear. Essentially, I know more than when I started.

The last thing I learned was that the creative process as a whole is a fickle beast. There is a lot gray area and room to grow. There are guidelines but no hard rules like in journalism. If you dare to tackle this beast, I hope that you find a successful path and let your imagination go wild.

As one of my favorite writers, Ernest Hemingway concludes my thesis best.

*"I learned never to empty the well of my writing, but always to stop when there was still something there in the deep part of the well, and let it refill at night from the springs that fed it."*