

Growing up in Greensboro

November 23, 1957, Okinawa

My Dearest Darling Wife,

I just live for the day when I will get off that plane at Greensboro and into your arms. I lay and think about it at night a long time before I go to sleep. You are the only one for me, darling.

WHEN DADDY WROTE THESE LINES TO MOTHER, he was dreaming of Greensboro, not because it was “home,” but because it was where his wife and son were, and he hadn’t seen them for five months of what would be a fourteen-month separation. For me, though, who grew up in places often far away, Greensboro had meaning as the place where our grandmothers lived, where we went to spend time with them, and aunts, uncles, and cousins during the summer, where we arrived only after a trip in the car that seemed like it would never end.

My brother and I would start out in the back seat together. He would try to explain to me how he, being five years older and considerably bigger, needed more space. He would draw an invisible line down the back seat, granting me about a quarter of the available area, and tell me to stay on my feebly small side. Right, I thought. I may have been five years younger, but I was not stupid. I knew I had tools in my small but well-used toolkit to combat this extreme injustice.

“Daddy, Jeff’s being rouge!” I knew the word was supposed to be *rude* but the four of us still said it this way as a nod to my cuteness factor as a toddler. A girl has to hold on to what she can when her brother has five years on her.

“Boy, you’d better behave,” Daddy would direct at Jeff. “You do *not* want me to stop this car.” More like it, neither Jeff nor I wanted Mother to stop the car. Our mother was the epitome of Southern graciousness and ladylike hospitality, but boy howdy, you did not want to get that woman’s dander up. One stop of the car on a particularly long drive to Greensboro had taught Jeff and me where the line was. We had fussed and argued and gotten on her very last nerve until she saw an open field, told Daddy to stop the car, and instructed us to get out and run in circles around the field until she said we could stop. Jeff and I looked at each other in disbelief and then looked back at Mother. “RUN!” she yelled. We did not have to be told three times. I didn’t even consider appealing to Daddy. He kept his mouth shut, thinking he might get the raised eyebrow and be asked if he wanted to join us. So we ran in circles. I lost a flip flop at one point, hopped along feebly but still ended up stepping on a briar. (I’ve always been a bit of a klutz.) I looked up hopefully at Mother, but she was unrelenting. “RUN!” she yelled again in that same, insistent tone. At some point, Daddy pulled out the 8mm camera and started filming, preserving the moment for a good family story and just in case we ever forgot the consequences of annoying behavior on long road trips. We got back in the car, exhausted, and were miraculously pleasant to one another for the remainder of the trip.

Once in Greensboro, we headed straight to our Nana’s. We always stayed with our mother’s mother, whose house was not large but a bit bigger than Grandma Mimmie’s. Both of our grandmothers lived alone after our grandfathers died, and they only lived about a block and a half apart. Within thirty minutes or so of our arrival, Daddy would announce, “I’m going over to Mama’s for a bit.” Being a daddy’s girl, I would always ask to tag along. Being my daddy, he would always say yes. There was not a lot to do at Grandma Mimmie’s, but with any luck, my Uncle Mickey, Daddy’s older brother, would be there watching TV. We always

seemed to arrive right around the time *The Lone Ranger* was about to come on. I loved that show. Mostly, I think I just loved my uncle, and if that's what he was watching, then I was all in.

So after hugging my grandmother, I would crawl up into my Uncle Mickey's lap, settle into his chest, lay my head onto his smoke-infused blue work shirt, and bask in another exciting episode of the exploits of the Lone Ranger and his Native American side-kick, Tonto. That was before I knew things, like the thrilling theme song was from Rossini's *William Tell Overture*, or that Tonto's broken English had racist overtones, or that the reason my uncle was usually home in the afternoon instead of at work was that he was an alcoholic. But in that moment, I wouldn't choose to be anywhere else.

That our grandmothers lived so closely to one another was something I took for granted. It made sense. I had always understood that our parents had grown up together. Surely, these must be the houses that they had grown up in. Sure, I had heard our parents mention any number of times "the house on Boren Street," which turned out to be a house where Mother had lived with her parents and younger brother, but that was some abstract place that held little meaning for me. Plus, I could be a little dense sometimes.

So I think I was an adult before I discovered that our parents were not even born in Greensboro, but rather in small towns in North Carolina, Daddy in Central Falls, about 30 miles south of Greensboro, and Mother in Four Oaks, a little over an hour to the southeast of the city. Blips on a map, really. My friend Peter, who I came to know in my mid-20s, had grown up not far from our mother's hometown. He delighted in telling her they always referred to the nearby town as "Three Oaks and a Stump." Mother would smile and chuckle at the jab. I discovered years later that if you take I-95 through North Carolina there is an exit for Four Oaks off the interstate. Well now, take that, Peter!