

## How Unlucky Are the Dead

The Pensacola drive-in-theater flea market that looked out over the Gulf of Mexico was one place. Books brought home from there were handpicked by my grandma Bish and uncle Jess. But most our books came from Tallahassee, Florida, in pokes from library book sales or in unexamined boxes bought at auction. Other books were dropped off, used, by “neighbors” who lived as far away as Valdosta, Georgia. There was some pride in that—folks giving us their books, even the ones decorated on the inside covers with curlicues of affections and with notes scribbled in their margins. Word was Naomi Bishop on Bread and Butter Road had more books than the state of Georgia, and folks seemed to like her for that.

True. Grandma Bish was book crazy. She used book backs to even out table legs, book jackets to insulate walls and shade windows, book pages to wrap up jelly glasses to stop their breaking. She piled books high to put up her feet. And, she liked reading. Her thrift and jelly store was the nearest thing to Pavo County, Georgia, having a library. Even though the books she’d gathered were up for sale, she was happy enough when customers sat and read for free. Many times folks filled the HERE WE HAVE IT, hands resting on old *Reader’s Digest* Book Club anthologies, laughing and amen-ing and swapping stories.

But, truth was, not all the best stories came straight from those books. Those with the up-close troubles came from my grandma’s deep knowledge of the folks of Pavo County, and it went along those lines with strangers too. Bish was the county’s undisputed diviner of need. She could see into you. Knew what was lacking. What comforted and inspired. So when she sold you something, anything at all, even something that seemed so simple as a used book or a glass of homemade jelly, she’d done you a good deed. She hardly ever held back with her goodness. The one thing, though, was that she didn’t let a book leave with its book jacket. And all of Pavo knew this. When a

book left the HERE WE HAVE IT, it left stripped down, shrouded in brown paper.

## §

The day the New York woman came looking for Grandma Bish, a dark wind pressed down the road, jumped the culvert and side-winded toward us, lifting and reversing the garden rows until it caught up and tossed the woman against our door. As she stumbled into my grandma's thrift and jelly store, she must have thought the store itself spun her around. Jammed full with old chairs and sofas, dry aquariums and empty cages, tables of glassware and knick-knacks, with a display case of curiosities on the faraway wall, the HERE WE HAVE IT was labyrinth-style disorganized.

"What fresh hell is this?" the woman said, reminding me of my surprise when I'd first landed in that incomprehensible mélange—not a word I knew back then—of used goods and found objects.

The New York woman, wearing a cotton print sundress with martini glasses and olives wheeling in circles, its skirt sticky from the Georgia heat, seemed otherwise ordinary and small. She had a deep voice kept modulated low. Words crackled on her tongue. We leaned in to hear, as we might to a staticky old radio, suspecting her every word might later be debated.

At first she said she was just needing to find a book to read on vacation with her husband. And Mr. Peck, the chicken farmer who lived down the road, stepped up to help. "Books everywhere," he said with a broad gesture that took into account the piles that held the former church in place. A chorus rose from the other store regulars: "Lots of good reading ... Find anything you want ..."

"What kind of book you after?" asked Mr. Peck. He was the most outgoing of them all. How strangers took to him could be a little funny. Maybe they didn't like the look of his beard, the way it unraveled over the bib of his overalls. Or maybe it was his laugh. His laugh pierced your thoughts like a thorn. "We've got a pile here," he said, and heehawed the word, "fresh."

The New York woman turned. Did her eyes stab Mr. Peck? I can't swear it. But with her head held high, she walked wide the fresh pile of books to run a hand over the glassware without looking to see it. She fixed her gaze to the cathedral window, streaks of heat lightning penetrating the book jackets taped flat against the glass.

Outside, a hundred tiger lilies floated on four-foot stems. Raised high to heaven, their long, pale orange buds thrust back and forth like a congregation of wagging fingers. And then they commenced to rapping, rapping, rapping, *banging* against our window. Were the lady

fingers waving us to come on out to the churchyard or to stay put within? Either way, admonition is the word that comes to mind.

“How lucky are the dead,” she said.

We were all knocked back by that. Mr. Peck, Ma Devereux, Augie Bone, and all us others held our breath as the New York woman nudged past. A word or two more sizzled on her tongue, but nothing we could make out. Then my grandma called from the back of the store and the woman shot a hot look in her direction. Without my being told, I went to pour a sweet tea for Grandma Bish to offer.

Just then, Aug Bone’s bloodhound started to wail in the bed of Aug’s pickup truck. That blood dog’s woeful cries wobbled across the Georgia fields, then jumped back at us between claps of thunder. This caused Bish’s cat to roll off the jelly cupboard. Thud, and he’d landed between the governor chairs and the New York woman’s feet.

“That’s it! That’s it!” the woman cried, pointing high at the cathedral window.

## §

Dizzying is the word for it. Bending your ears into your shoulder bones and laddering your eyes all the way up the cathedral window and down and up again, stepping side to side, eyeballs rolling over a crazy quilt of book jackets—seeing everything and not seeing, not seeing the illustration Hazel Morse aimed a pretty finger at. For that was the name she gave herself: Hazel Morse, Mrs. Morse, born in New Jersey, and once she’d told us that much, her eyelids puffed up like blowfish under her penciled brows. It seemed her man, who sold ladies’ gloves to department stores, had set off for Birmingham and Biloxi and Gulfport and New Orleans, in no particular order, and left her waiting in a rooming house. He’d paid the rent all right and given her a book he knew she’d prize. He was banking on it to keep her waiting until he could get back for their reunion.

“I used to bite my fingernails,” she said to Bish, “but I don’t even do that anymore.”

## §

By now the regulars were staring up. But the cat refused to budge, so we strained from where we stood and held a collective breath that burst, soon enough, into inspiring puffs of spittle: *Agatha Christie* (the world’s favorite writer), *Graham Green* (still alive there in England), *Flannery O’Connor* (who had lived with her peacocks just up the road), *Mario Puzo* (who lived faraway-different), *J.D. Salinger* (whose own children didn’t know where to look for him), and *Philip K. Dick* (who Bish had determined, for sure, lived in *The Crack in Space*). And so it

went, a repertory of authors forever bent on funneling us up and out of Pavo County, Georgia, into a tornado of colliding expectations. Flashes of stories riddled our splanchnic—a word I'd come to love—as quick as the lightning that jabbed at the window.

Yet not one of us, aside from Grandma Bish, could see the coveted book jacket and know the bleak urges it stirred in Mrs. Morse.

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Once she'd stopped talking about herself—Mrs. Morse being a charter member of the Algonquin Round Table Society, and all that—she circled down her finger. My thought was she'd tired out her arm, but as Bish could see, there was meaning in that finger's spiral. Next, Mrs. Morse dropped into a deep cushioned chair the color of artificial grass and pinched off a high-heeled shoe. That book jacket was rightfully hers, she said. Alan had purchased the book, and she had a right to its jacket. Then she quick-rubbed out a fit of New York tears.

“How like me to put all my eggs in one bastard,” she wept.

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Bish signaled me to bring out the jelly and biscuits. The biscuits, cold since breakfast, were hard nuggets. Dough beaten by Uncle Jess with a hatchet on a tree stump just out the kitchen door. Cut into circles and baked. Best served with ham.

No matter that. Bish's store was an emporium of homemade jellies that could satisfy a tongue as well as turn a mood. I took my time deciding. Which Depression glass best complemented our choices? Finally, I spooned the cherry jelly into a sugar bowl tinted the color of cobalt blue and ladled the peach preserves into an amber-tinted tureen. There was a tray, a delicate pink with air bubbles trapped deep in its glass, and I used it for the carrying.

When I offered our guest from New York a biscuit, she paid me no mind. So I blew the dust off a saucer that held the thin yellow glow of uranium green, and I handed it to her with a hard little biscuit on it. By that time, the regulars were catcalling: “Pass the biscuits! Pass the jelly!” But Bish bucked me up with a nod—so I took the time needed to spoon the jellies to the sides of her biscuit. That biscuit was for sopping the jelly.

Mrs. Morse, fixed on the window, ignored the jelly and set upon the biscuit with her red polished nails. Biscuit crumbs dropped like pebbles.

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Before my grandma's dark hair had salted and her old pappy, Pastor Ernest Bishop, had passed away, the store church window had been, "by the grace of God," said Grandma Bish, "ablaze with pure heavenly light": vivid shades of blue and jewel-like greens with grays and browns and sparkling reds, with Jesus of Nazareth embracing a bitty white lamb. As Grandma Bish said, it made a pretty picture, but she confessed it blocked her view up Bread and Butter Road and was worth more to her in trade. She'd swapped it out for clear glass and a truck load of jelly paraphernalia—her word not mine—and built herself a business selling jellies so refreshing as to turn a sour person sweet-tempered, or so peppery as to freeze a hateful tongue. Once she'd got that going, she and Uncle Jess were no longer dependent on prayers and a collection plate. She'd re-established the Bread and Butter Zion Baptist Church as the HERE WE HAVE IT, a welcoming destination on the Georgia State Tourism Map. That's how Mrs. Morse, and Alan, had come to find us.

## §

As a preacher's kid, little Naomi Bishop surely had been filled with cautionary wisdom, for in adulthood she was a vessel. Not only able to quote from the Bible, as were most our neighbors, she had her own turns of phrase. "We all have our blind spots," she was fond to say—and was just as fond to add, "There's just so much our eyes can see, and we make up the rest." This had particular meaning, both when it came to the smallness of our pronouncing judgment upon one another and to the divining of needs. As a thirteen-year-old on my first summer visit and now again in my twenties, it was the divining of needs that had my interest. How did she come to know the rest she couldn't see? And, to the contrary, she'd advise in her practical way, "There're times when the leaves on trees will turn up their backsides to you—to give you warning—and then the storm will clean up and blow away." And there was hope in that. But that's not what happened the day Mrs. Morse came looking for her book jacket. On that day, the storm fixing outside was also fixing within.

One irregular *ping* at a time, a smattering of *drop-pings* jangled the tin roof until it was set upon by sledgehammers. And not one of the regulars thought to head home. Not even Aug Bone, whose ancient blood dog, roped so as not to run off, would nearly drown in the bed of Aug's truck. And, well, Mrs. Morse had less of a place to go than any of them, and she certainly hadn't settled her business.

## §

At the top of the window, edged off to the side, a dull brown book jacket was taped 'twixt those with colorful illustrations and promising titles, like *The Outsiders and Others* by H.P. Lovecraft and *Tender is the Night* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. The Lovecraft jacket was a deep violet blue with silver illustration: a mash-up of five-pointed-stars, each cradling an alien creature—or the one, if you knew how to look, could be seen was a naked lady—all with a flood of stars spotting the distant sky. Fitzgerald's jacket was reds, oranges, and greens, lush vegetation and rosy roof tops, a curve of blue water floating up, a private cove strapped to the jacket by trees. The next jab of lightning brought Mrs. Morse's book jacket briefly to view. "There, you do see it!" she cried.

And in a blink, Lucky, the jelly store cat, leapt from Mrs. Morse's empty high-heeled shoe and up the cathedral window. The woman's voice had set him off. The cat had *extra* perception—as well as extra toes. Lots of extra toes. Twice as many as a normal cat—thirty-six toes with thirty-six claws sharp and curved as quilting needles. Lucky was a Hemingway cat who'd wandered up from the Keys, which said something right there about his determination. A wince passed among us.

"Wherever I've gone, including here," coughed Mrs. Morse, "it's been against my better judgment."

## §

Including Mrs. Morse—being of flesh and blood—characters had a right to come and go. No disagreeing that. Books piled into the HERE WE HAVE IT were carried out again. No regrets. But book jackets stayed *in memoriam*, a term Aug Bone, who was county coroner, was fond to use. He preached that even the most unlikeable of characters was meant to be remembered. Some might argue it. Bish did not.

Though not a one of us had read *all* those books that fit into those empty jackets, we possessed *la mémoire collective*, said Bish, who had been educated all the way up and through the eighth grade. Those jackets called to mind all the characters who had passed among us. How else might we recall the children in *The Five Little Peppers and How They Grew* and how their widowed mother, Mrs. Pepper, struggled to support them? Characters reminded us of who we were—or thought we were—and who we ought not to be.

So while I figured Mrs. Morse wouldn't get what she'd confessed to want, a look up at the window occasioned new concerns.

## §

Spread out, no place to go, Lucky looked like a wall ornament.

Hard to say who or what that cat was looking at. Cats' eyes are funny that way. Even when they stare close at you, their eyes seem set to distance. So it might have been that Lucky was just eyeballing the drop instead of eyeballing Mrs. Morse.

For the longest while no one said a word, not even Mr. Peck, who was known to drop a cent or two at times he shouldn't. Then Grandma Bish started chanting in her *here kitty* voice and the cat blinked back to life. He worked his toes. He worked his toes and worked his toes. Book jackets puffed in and out. He shifted his weight from one paw to another, as if thinking his way down. Lucky let out a first *meow*. It was a pitiful little cry from such a handsome, confident cat that had hiked his way from Florida.

Uncle Jess set off to get the ladder, but quicker than he could squeeze back, jackets came crashing. As would the cat.

## §

As the storm centered itself over the jelly store steeple, Lucky tightened himself to the window frame. His tail began to jerk. Jackets rattled. His black and white spots stood on end. He bunched his shoulders. Twitched. Hissed. Spat. Spun his head like an owl. Stared up at the ceiling. Cussed. Spun his head down at us. Sucked out all our breath. Yanked hard his toes. Yeowled. Bunched and yanked hard again. One fat paw flew loose. Lucky flopped sideways, panting. Hung half-rolled over, the jelly store cat beat his body against the window glass and cried like a baby.

Despite all claims that Lucky's extrasensory perceptions had got him to the *HERE WE HAVE IT*, seemed he'd lost his foresight. He'd put himself in this pickle and didn't even know that Uncle Jess was fetching the ladder.

With nothing for us to do, save shut our ears and say our prayers, Grandma Bish, Mrs. Morse, Ma Devereaux, Mr. Peck, Aug Bone, and me—we all watched as Fate exacted her lesson.

Then Ma Devereaux said in a voice both irritated and sad, "What's he trying to do? Kill himself?"

But then Aug Bone, who had authority when it came to dying, calmed us down, saying not to worry. "Even the usual cat has nine lives."

So how does a cat fall?

Folks who've seen a cat fly out the loft of a burning barn will tell you a cat always lands on its feet. But what happens when a cat backslides from church? The hip cat will head straight towards Hell—nose dive, quick twist its bottom, and kick its back legs up to its belly.

Otherwise that cat will somersault and not stop somersaulting until something gets in his way.

When Lucky tumbled tail-first, book jackets shook off the big window like apples off a tree. Then, *crack!* and Lucky's somersault was broke by the checker table. Checkers bounced off and rolled about the store. Lucky bumped off the table, thunked his head on an ugly jug, and disappeared.

Anguish showed all-around. Even on Uncle Jess. Straightaway, he went to crawling, poking between the piles of books and boxes, under sofas stacked three deep, until he'd plucked up all the checkers. Finally, he grabbed hold of Lucky's fat paws and dragged him out. A book jacket had ruffled itself to his claws.

"Flapper verse," muttered Grandma Bish before pointing the toes of the unconscious cat at Mrs. Morse. "This what you was after?"

Disconsolate crackling came from the woman's lips.

Soon as we'd picked his claws clean, Lucky opened his eyes. "Lucky enough," Ma Devereaux said; whereupon, Lucky went to napping in Mrs. Morse's lap. As the cat snored, lightning creased the darkened corners of the store, the wind howled like a drowning dog, and rain splintered the panes of window glass. And Bish set to sorting the book jacket straight.

It wasn't long before she said she saw the big picture and asked us to Scotch it together: A bold 25¢ at the jacket's top left was opposite a pale yellow line at the jacket's top right—a loop that somehow looked a lot like a noose. The tail of that noose curled down the book's cover, slipped under the book title, then dropped to the book author's name.

Enough  
Rope  
by Dorothy Parker

By now the sound of lady fingers was only a faint, persistent thud, a drip on the splintered panes of glass. A gentle tap on the shoulder. True. A book didn't *leave* with its jacket. But what about a book that *had already left* and the one to read it came *storming back* for its jacket?

As Grandma Bish and Mrs. Morse contemplated each other in silence, we were left to stare at the book jacket with its dire implications and to wonder what is left to *la mémoire* after death. Then Bish said, "I don't know if there are books in Eternity, but it'd be mighty unlucky to go where there are no troubles to talk about." That's when we knew, for sure, no matter what, that the jacket, which had been ripped to shreds and put together again, was on its way back



up that window. How better to recollect Mrs. Morse, the big blonde from New York who was small in stature and had short mousey brown hair and a gin bottle of man trouble?

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A decade before Mrs. Morse dropped in to stake her claim, I'd spent my first summer on Bread and Butter Road reading and falling in love. First with the blue birds that lived in the fence post boxes, then with the moths that fluttered through the store and then the bees in the honey trunk, and then-and-forever with the polysyllabic words that tumbled across book pages with revelations tangled in their meanings. All that and then Heathcliff. And once I'd set him aside, a line of others followed.

Uncle Jess carried pokes of used books into the thrift and jelly each week. There were the books about English lords and ne'er-do-wells, sharecroppers and murderers, presidents and saints. Old favorites, like the book about Mrs. Pepper and her orphaned children, Ben, Polly, Joel, Davie, and Phronsie. I counted six copies. And crazy books, like *Animal Farm* and *Ten Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. There was even a book about a spider named Charlotte. And some kinds of books surely begged to be carried out in brown wrappers. So it was only a little wrongheaded what the regulars had pressed the New York woman to believe: that she'd get what she was after.

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At the close of that troubled afternoon of biscuit eating and jacket patching, Aug Bone found his half-drowned dog and carried him inside for Bish to bring back to life and offered the New York woman a ride in his truck: first to her rooming house and then to the Tallahassee train station. At the rooming house, she left a goodbye note for Alan and stuffed her belongings into the large sweet grass basket she'd bought at our store. Inside that basket, she'd find a glass of jalapeno pepper jelly and a book by Erica Jong. Deeper in, sleeping comfortably, a cat was resting up for a new life. Lucky was on his way to New York.

As for Grandma Bish and how she knew what the Big Blonde needed, I'd never know for sure. That knowledge, she explained, had come to her like a huge thunderclap in a soft rain.