

# LINDA'S STORY

1988–1993



Grandma Fannie died when I was five, but now I get word that she is still alive. I hop in my car, unfold the maps, look for the road from my city life to her creekside home. I drive to the road's end, park the car. I won't need the maps anymore. I'll have to find the rest of the way on my own.

I search for the path carefully, balance neatly on the stones across the rushing creek. I come to the house, hidden by tall weeds and saplings. I push through the overgrown bushes, step through the tangled vine that creeps over the stone path, come to the door. I am here, and Fannie is inside.

I raise my hand to knock, then stop. What if she doesn't want to see me? If she'd wanted to, she could have found me. Maybe I'm not wanted here.

No matter. If she's here, I have to see her. I lift my hand again. I knock, first timidly, then louder. No voices inside, no birds calling in the trees, no animals rustling in the bush. Nothing.

I knock again. This time, the door swings open. "Hello!" I call as I poke my head just inside. No answer.

I step into the dark house. Where a family might have been is just empty space—no furniture, no belongings, nothing on the walls. I make my way through a labyrinth of endless halls, push open doors into countless rooms. "Hello! Is anybody home?" I call. But around every corner there's nothing.

I step into the kitchen, stand on the worn linoleum. I see the sink, the ice-box, the table covered with oilcloth. Across the room, nearly hidden in shadow, is an old woman, hunched on a three-legged stool, her feet planted on stone. Her back to me, she works at the mouth of an ancient fireplace. She pours batter into an iron skillet, stirs a pot of stew.

“Grandma?” I say in a tiny voice.

She hangs up her spoon, settles the lid back on the pot, wipes her hands on her apron, and then, only then, turns to look at me.

It’s her. It’s Fannie. It’s her face, the face I have longed to see. And there are her hands, the hands I have wanted so much to hold in my own.

“Who are you?” She peers at me with narrowed eyes, her face a hard wall.

I wait for her to know me, to see her eyes open with surprise and delight.

“Who are you?” she asks again, this time sharply.

My heart races, joy replaced so soon by fear.

“I’m your Dancing Bear, your Linda.” I call each name slowly. “We used to dance together in this kitchen. You taught me to make cornbread. You held me in your lap and rocked me. Don’t you know me?”

Tracing the lines of my face, she takes my measure. “I had a sweet girl baby once,” she says. “She’s been gone from me a long time. A long time.” She studies my face a moment more. “You look nothing like her,” she says, her mouth set in a grim line. “No. I don’t see her in you.”

The old woman’s face falls back to stone. Her gaze drops. She turns to the fire, her silent back the only message left for me to read.

Sun poured in the window, and I knew it would be a cold day. Brilliant light, arctic air. Warm and cozy in bed, I drifted in and out of sleep, wishing that I could make the dream come out differently, that I could make Fannie recognize me.

She was forever visiting my dreams, teasing at the edges of my heart, a shadow flickering faintly just beyond the line of sight. Now in the stark light of a Wisconsin winter morning, she’d already flown away again. There was no bringing her back.

The jarring cold brought me back to the day at hand. As I headed into the kitchen to make a cup of tea, I ticked over my schedule. Two classes to teach, a graduate seminar to attend, a paper I needed to finish for tomorrow. Life as a graduate student was full, busy, exhausting—no time to linger over memories of Fannie.

That evening, as I unlocked the front door, walked the few steps to the kitchen to put the groceries away, and started the water for ramen noodles, my thoughts returned to Fannie.

Though she died when I was only five, we shared a sweetness unlike any other I knew at that age. We'd make root beer floats, play out in the yard, have a good time, laugh and imagine together. We'd dance in her kitchen, Grandma clogging to hillbilly tunes on the radio, my feet even then itching to move when music started playing. Grandma would laugh and say to my parents, "You're never going to keep that girl from dancing," and that passion, as well as my delight in running around in the buff, earned me the lifelong nickname Dancing Bear. She and Grandpa had chosen me as their special one. He'd died when I was only two years old—too young to mourn him. But in those years after his passing, it seemed like Grandma loved me even more, held me that much closer to her. Oh, the tales she would tell of all that we'd do together when she saved enough money, when I'd get a little bit older. She'd tell me about the Smoky Mountains, the Cherokee country of east Tennessee. It was her favorite place, the place where she felt like herself. She'd take me there someday, she said.

But our adventures were not to be. Grandma got sick with liver cancer, and my father brought her from her home in St. Louis to our house on London Road, in the country just outside Indianapolis. While my father was off being a Bell Labs engineer in the city, my mother, who was just twenty-five and had never tended a sick person in her life, nursed her mother-in-law and watched her die. I'd come home from kindergarten every day and run into Grandma's room, talk to her, my favorite one, until she could hold her eyes open no longer.

She died after just three weeks in our house. The picture of her stretching out her hand to me is burned on my heart. A fading skeleton there in the bed, she reached for me, asked me to hold her hand as she crossed—but I was only five and already Dancing Bear, scampering across the room.

My mother tells the story differently. She says I was at school when Grandma died, that I couldn't possibly recall her going. Perhaps my mother is right in her way. After all, she was Fannie's caretaker. She knows the facts of what happened. But that moment is marked on my heart, grieves me still, decades later. I yearn to take Fannie's hand, to close the circle. I hate to think of her dying there alone, without me there to witness her passing.

My parents took her body on the train down to Tennessee, to the cemetery where Grandpa Tate was buried. Then they turned right around and came home. It was the strangest thing, my mother said. My father and his brothers didn't put up a headstone for either of them. It was hard to understand, she said, why grown men wouldn't mark their parents' graves, wouldn't leave behind monuments to honor them. Try as she would, she never could remember where in Tennessee they had left my father's parents, couldn't remember the name of the cemetery, the town, not even the part of that whole long state where they put

them in the ground. Where we ought to have been leaving flowers and telling old family stories, there was just an empty place, a missing spot on the map.

Not long after Fannie died, my parents divorced. My mother and my brother and I moved back to St. Louis, my parents' hometown. My father stayed in Indiana, in the house on London Road, stayed with his job at Bell Labs. He'd visit twice a year, then once a year, then not at all. After that last visit when I was only twelve, he didn't call, just sent a postcard once every year or two. In turning away from us, he took with him the road back to Fannie's past, to my past. I was left with nothing but memories and questions, heart longings and slender shards of story.

I knew next to nothing about Fannie's childhood, just knew the solitary fact of her past she'd chant again and again: "My mama was a little Indian." I knew she'd married at a young age to an older man who beat her mercilessly, knew she'd run for her life. She'd had to leave behind her three little girls—and oh, I thought, that must have broken her heart. I knew she'd found life and love when she met my grandfather on a Mississippi River tugboat and raised up a new family, my father and his two younger brothers. And even though she'd spent her last twenty years living in the city, I knew she'd kept her country ways. She'd stand on her back stoop and shoot squirrels, make her cornbread and squirrel stew right there in her St. Louis house. Fannie must have been a woman of great courage and strength, I thought, to do the things she'd done.

Like Fannie, I'd roamed around a bit, explored the world. I'd worked two summers in a national park in Alaska and gone on my share of cross-country road trips. But in so many other ways, I had a life Fannie could never have imagined. I'd been the first in my family to go to college. I'd left St. Louis to work on my doctorate in English. I was preparing for a career as a college professor.

At night, alone in my bed, when I'd search for Fannie yet again, she didn't know me. I'd work so hard looking for her, but each time the prize I sought—her love returned—was just out of reach.

Her memory haunted me. In the dead of that Wisconsin winter, on those long, dark nights, I thought about the places where I might find her. I'd open the atlas, study the map of Tennessee. I tried to picture Fannie somewhere on that map, tried to think where she might belong. My mother couldn't tell me Fannie's hometown, couldn't say where she and Grandpa were buried. All she could remember was that Fannie loved the Smoky Mountains, talked all the time about wanting to go there. If there were a place to look for her, I thought, that was it.

Hectic days at school, restless nights dreaming of Fannie had left me tired, dispirited, weary. Longing for a respite from school, I began to yearn for travel,

an adventure that would revitalize me. When the national parks job newsletter arrived each month, I studied the listings, fantasized about escaping into another place, another life. That winter, in the midst of all these dreams about Fannie, I saw an ad for a hiking lodge in the Smoky Mountains.

I mailed in my application, was offered the job, took a leave of absence from school, put my things in storage, sublet my apartment, and headed to Tennessee. My friends and family thought I was crazy to take off that way, but I knew it was just the thing I needed.

In March, I found myself on a snow-covered trail in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. That morning, I'd met the other half-dozen crew members at the Alum Cave trailhead. All of them had spent time at the lodge; several of them, in fact, had worked there the year before. I was the only one of the group who had never been to Mount Le Conte. All of us were reporting for work that day, and when we got to the top, we'd be spending two weeks preparing Le Conte Lodge for its season opening.

As we set out, the other crew members chatted and raced ahead. I was content to lag behind and lose myself in my musing. I assured them that I was fine on my own. The first mile of the trail was winding, serene, an idyllic path curving next to the creek it followed up the mountain. The snow was coming down in thick, heavy flakes, muffling the mountain sounds, and the chill of the cold air on my face was bracing. I set a steady pace, one foot in front of the other. I was thrilled that I was finally here. Maybe at last I'd find Fannie, I told myself, learn my place in the generations that unfolded behind me. I would reclaim Fannie's spirit, feel the stories we could've shared had there been time, know myself in a way I never had before. In these ancient mountains, I hoped, I would find my way home.

When I hit Alum Cave, I literally stopped in my tracks, thoughts of Fannie gone in an instant. The snow was falling so hard that all the footprints were filled in, and I couldn't see how the others had made their way past this overhanging cliff. I could make out only two ways to go: up underneath the cliff or up over a tangled mess of tree roots. The ground underneath the cliff was treacherously steep, and I could not imagine taking that path. The tree roots were encrusted with thick ice, and that way looked equally precarious. Just to the left of the trail, on the opposite side from the cliff path, the mountain dropped off precipitously. One misstep would be the end of me.

After much deliberation, I decided to pull myself up over the tree roots, something, I was told later, no one in her right mind would do. The cliff path, the other crew members said, was the only way to go. Wise choice or not, after a thirty-minute ordeal, I made it back to the trail.

The way became steeper and steeper, the sheer drop-offs more and more numerous, ice-slicked cable handholds appearing regularly now. Still I had to keep on. The daylight was fading, and the snow was growing thicker. Finally, I spotted buildings in the distance, and after a few hundred more yards, I was welcomed with hearty cheers and a steaming cup of hot chocolate. It was eight degrees below zero, the other crew members reported, and eight inches of snow had fallen while we hiked up the mountain.

That night, settled into my cabin, snuggled into my down sleeping bag, listening to the flames licking the inside of the black kerosene stove, I looked forward to spending the next six months on this mountain. As I drifted off to sleep that night, I thought of how pleased Fannie would be that I was making this long-overdue journey to the land of our Cherokee ancestors.

It didn't take me long to merge with the Smoky Mountains, to drink in their ancient and quiet beauty. The days grew warmer, and the mountain thawed. When I wasn't busy cooking and cleaning for the guests who would hike up each day and spend the night in rustic cabins, I began to tramp around. Some days, I'd sit with my writing tablet at Myrtle Point or Rocky Spur, gazing at ridge after ridge rolling out in blues and purples. Other days, I sat on my cabin porch and immersed myself in reading about the Smoky Mountains, Cherokee history, Appalachian families and folklore. On days off, I explored Cherokee, North Carolina. I visited the museum and living history village, looked through tribal archives, attended the outdoor play that dramatically retells the story of the Trail of Tears, imagined how my family might have lived, what might have happened to them during removal. On the mountain and off, I pored over maps, ran my fingers over the names of Tennessee towns, wondered where my family had called home, where my grandparents were buried, where I might find their bones.

No matter how I searched, I could find no clues to Fannie's past. She remained as elusive as ever. I had come back to the source, I thought, the ancestral homeland. But though I was living in these mountains she'd longed for, she'd mysteriously left me behind. She'd haunted my Wisconsin nights, but in these mountains I'd wake up each morning and realize that, once again, she hadn't visited my dreams.

Sitting out on my cabin porch one afternoon, reading yet another book on Cherokee history, I puzzled over Fannie, tried to think of how else I might find her. I looked out to the valley, where I could see the Sevierville lights on clear nights. The solution was obvious, but I'd been avoiding it for months. If I wanted to find Fannie, I was going to have to ask for my father's help. He was the only link between us.

He was a shaky link at best. Eight years earlier, when I was twenty, I'd been curious about him—we'd had almost no contact for so long. I'd written to him, and he'd invited me to come see him in Georgia, to meet his girlfriend Jackie. The visit was a disaster. Jackie was nice, but she joined us only briefly. When it was just the two of us, my father picked at me, criticized me, ridiculed me. When I tried to tell him about my life, he'd push back at me with tales of how his life was better than mine. And if I tried to ask him about his family, he'd sulk up, make clear he would not talk about them.

One evening, after one too many questions from me, he blew up. "All this stuff about family heritage, finding your roots, your past," he said with a sneer, "all of that stuff is bullshit." Red in the face, breath heaving in and out, he was going to tell me the way things were once and for all. "It doesn't matter where you're from. It's where you are now that counts, what you make of yourself today. That's what you need to focus on. Forget about the past."

Scraped raw by this man who was my father, I couldn't wait to get on the plane to fly home. I'd kept my distance ever since. Once in a blue moon he'd call, always throwing me off my stride for days after. He and Jackie came to my college graduation party just before I left St. Louis. I was friendly and polite but on edge the whole time. And on the Wisconsin morning two years earlier when I got a call saying that my father had had a major stroke and might not live, I hung up the phone, then stood paralyzed and numb. I didn't go to see him, didn't speak to him, but in the weeks that followed, Jackie would give me news now and then of his tenuous survival, his slow rehab. In the two years since the stroke, my father and I had spoken briefly once, maybe twice.

Did I really want to find Fannie badly enough to deal with my father? Did it matter that much if I knew where she and my grandfather had come from, whether they were actually Indians, where they were buried? It's true: my desire to know about them was deep, and I did long to find Fannie, reclaim the sweet friend of my childhood. But I hated the thought of facing up to my father.

I brooded for days. I couldn't see any other way to learn about my grandparents, couldn't see any other path back to Fannie. If I wrote to my father, what would I say? Would he throw my letter away and never respond? Would he write back, ridicule me, laugh at me?

In the end, desire overcame fear. I worked for days, drafted and redrafted, carefully weighing each word. I told my father that something was missing in my life, that I needed to know about his family, his parents, my lineage, that I was hoping he'd be willing to share information with me. The next time I was off the mountain, I went to the post office in Cherokee and, with a deep breath, dropped the letter in the mailbox.

A few days later, the lodge mail included an envelope addressed to me.

When I saw that it was from Georgia, I tucked the letter in my pocket and ran to the privacy of my cabin. Trembling, I took the letter out and read my father's words. Not only would he answer my questions, he said, but he'd love to come and visit. Would it be all right if he and Jackie, now his wife, hiked up to see me?

I wrote back immediately, said yes, it would be fine if they came to Le Conte. A visit seemed a high price to pay, but I wanted answers to my questions.

In the days just after I mailed my reply, I was elated. Finally, I'd have a way back to the past—I would know the truth about my grandparents. But as the date drew closer, I became increasingly anxious and preoccupied. I snapped at the other crew members, tossed and turned at night—just like the days leading up to every other visit I'd ever had with my father. What if this visit was as bad as the one we'd had when I was twenty?

Soon enough, I reassured myself, the visit would be over, my father would be gone, and I'd have more information. Armed with the facts, I could forget about my father and continue my research into my grandparents' lives, could resume my reading and exploring.

I was working in the kitchen the June day my father and Jackie hiked up the mountain, but as I began to get reports from other hikers who had passed my father and Jackie on the trail, I asked the manager if I could slip away from work for a time, head down the mountain so I could meet them. As I made my way along the Alum Cave trail, thoughts of my grandparents flew away, and worries about seeing my father took their place. All the things that had happened over the years went through my mind, all the ways my father could get under my skin, pull the rug out from under me, make me uncomfortable. I had never been able to be myself around him, had never felt like he saw me, Linda, only saw what he wanted to see. I'd never felt at ease, never felt safe. He'd never been around, and when he had come for a brief visit, things had always been strained and tense. So many questions, so many wounds.

I rounded a bend, and there he was. It was the first time I'd seen him since the stroke. His face was disfigured; his eyes bulged out of his head in the most peculiar way, as if he were struggling to ask a question that was just on the tip of his tongue. Jackie looked beaten. She'd always suffered from a myriad of physical ailments, and she was by no means a rugged outdoorswoman. Where my father looked quite pleased with himself, proud of hiking up this mountain, Jackie looked as if carrying the burden of a man who refused to accept his limits had just about exhausted her.

“Bear!” my father called out, his face beaming. No matter how little I’d seen of him over the years, he had always stuck by my childhood nickname. My heart leapt with joy, my grin as broad as my father’s. That day on the trail, we were together, and my father remembered me as his Dancing Bear.

They stayed on the mountain for a couple of days. My father regaled the crew with stories and jokes, while Jackie sat quietly, off to the side. All of my co-workers took to my father right away. “He’s such a great guy, so much fun, so full of life,” one said to me. “I can’t imagine what he’s done to you that makes you so scared of him.”

After that reunion on Mount Le Conte, I stayed in touch with my father and Jackie. I returned to Madison, focused on finishing my dissertation, but I’d occasionally visit their home on the shores of Georgia’s Lake Lanier. Their sprawling home was part of a pristine development, well-manicured lawns set among remnants of the Georgia pines. A huge yard sloped down from the three-story house to the boat dock, where they kept their speedboat and the houseboat my father had built by hand years before.

My father and Jackie made me feel welcome in their home. My father joked that the house was so big that “Jackie and I are like two BBs in a boxcar,” said they liked having me there to keep them company, to help them fill up the empty space. Every chance he got, my father introduced me to his friends, told them about my PhD. “I love showing you off, Bear,” he’d say. “I like to play the proud papa.” My job was to act the part of dutiful daughter. I’d make his breakfast while he waited, smiling, at the dining room table. I’d read the newspaper aloud when his jumping left eye couldn’t stay steady long enough for him to see the words. I carefully ignored anything he said or did that unsettled me, pushed away any thoughts from the past that threatened to come rushing back.

Most of the time, we kept ourselves busy. We’d take the houseboat out, work on the computer, run errands. But whenever things quieted down a bit, I’d try to bring the conversation around to my grandparents. After all, that’s why I had written that letter to my father, why I had pushed myself to meet him again. Now that we were slowly getting used to each other, I started to test the waters.

“Where were your parents from?” I’d ask.

He’d say Kentucky, then change his mind and say Tennessee. When it came to talking about family, he hated to be pinned down, backed into a corner. “Oh, Bear,” he’d say in frustration, “what difference does any of this make? I told you it doesn’t matter where you come from.”

I’d drop the conversation, bide my time until I could once again summon up the courage to ask a question.

“What’s all this about Grandma and Grandpa being Indians?” I asked another time. “Were they Cherokee or some other tribe? Isn’t it interesting that we’re part Indian?”

As usual, I was chattering on with my questions, pestering my father for information. But this time I had clearly gone too far.

“Look, Bear,” my father said, pointing his finger at me. “You’ve got to shut up about all this Indian stuff. I got where I am in spite of being an Indian, and no one needs to know I’m an Indian.”

On the next visit, I didn’t say a word about his parents being Indians, but I wanted to know about them just the same. “What were your mom and dad like?” I asked. I figured that was a safe question, something easy for him to answer.

“My mom was a cunt, and my dad was pussy-whipped. That good enough for you?” He smirked, and I was quiet. That stopped me in my tracks, but a couple of days later I tried again.

“Didn’t your mom have a family, three daughters, before she met your dad, before she had you and Joe and Henry? Did those girls die? Where did they live? What were their names?”

“Ah, hell, Bear. Why don’t you call Henry and be done with it? Henry knows all this family bullshit, and he’s crazy enough to talk to you about it.”

Henry? I’d only met Henry a few times, and I hadn’t seen or talked to him since I was twelve. Though my father had told me about his brothers and their lives in California, Henry wasn’t a flesh-and-blood person to me. He was a character in a story I’d read a long time ago.

Excited, I insisted that we call Henry right then and there. We got him on the phone, and he and I jabbered on and on. Fannie’s daughters *were* dead, he told me sadly. But it wasn’t too late to get to know my uncle, he said. Before we were off the phone, Henry and I had hatched the idea of meeting the next summer at my father’s house. Then we could really sit down and go over all the family stuff.

“Be careful what you ask for, Linda,” Henry said, laughing good-naturedly. “I love to talk, and it might be that once you get me started, you won’t be able to stop me!”

As I drove down to Georgia the next summer, I fretted over the visit with Henry almost as much as I’d worried over the reunion with my father. When I was a girl, Henry had been nice to me, but he’d been more interested in his motorcycles than in his brother’s kids. In the years since then, I’d heard some wild stories about him and Joe, about their life in Sausalito’s boat community. It was hard for me to imagine what this rowdy hippie would be like, how I’d find a

way to talk to him. I could barely even call to mind what Henry looked like. I pictured him gangly and awkward, all arms and legs, goofy, buck-toothed, guffawing over some silly joke.

When I pulled into the driveway at Lake Lanier, my father was standing out front with a handsome, middle-aged man. Thinking he must be a friend of my father's, a neighbor who'd dropped over for a minute, I reached out to shake his hand and started to introduce myself.

"Oh, come on!" he said, reaching out his arms for me. "Aren't you going to give your old uncle a hug?"

Before I knew it, this man was wrapping me in a warm embrace, his body strong and solid, comforting and familiar. He stepped back and looked at me, a huge grin spreading across his face. "Lou! Where have you been keeping this girl? My niece! Why, this is just great!"

It was hard to take in that this good-looking guy—this confident, spirited man—was Henry. He was wearing a T-shirt and faded jeans, the big bare feet sticking out the only reminder of his gangly limbs. His beard framed his beautiful face, and his smile quickly put me at ease. The buck teeth were still there, but his self-assurance and gentle spirit seemed to make them disappear. His lively, impish eyes, rimmed as they were by crinkling laugh lines, pulled me in.

Henry and I took to each other right off the bat. Where I still made sure I kept my wits about me whenever my father was around, it didn't take long for me to let my guard down with Henry. Henry had warned me: once I got him started, there was no stopping him. He had years of family stories to tell, and I was an eager audience.

We sat in the living room and talked. We continued the conversation over dinner and over breakfast the next morning. We yakked while we went canoeing, when we took the houseboat out, when we sat on the dock. We talked and talked and talked. There was so much Henry had to tell me, so much I had to learn.

"Mom was from Kentucky," he told me. "I remember we used to visit Mom's cousins there. You remember that, Lou?"

My father just looked at his brother dumbfounded, as if he could not figure out how they'd come from the same stock. My father claimed not to have remembered a thing about his parents, where they were from, where they'd been buried. But Henry knew a ton and didn't mind telling it. I scribbled everything down as quickly as I could.

"Now, Dad was from Trimble, Tennessee," Henry said. "Mom and Dad are both buried near there."

In the days we were together, I learned that I had been mistaken in the few things I thought I'd known about my grandparents. I'd believed that Grandma

was descended from Cherokees who'd lived in the Smoky Mountains, that she'd hailed from eastern Tennessee, maybe eastern Kentucky. I'd thought Grandpa was part Indian, too, that he'd also been from the mountains.

But now Henry was charting an entirely different family map. Grandma, he said, had indeed been an Indian, though he didn't recall which tribe. And she had definitely had affection for the Smoky Mountains, had loved to travel there, had always wanted to go back. "I never did hear anything about her family *coming* from the Smoky Mountains," he said. "That just doesn't make sense, does it, Lou?" My father looked over at us for a moment, then turned back to Dan Rather on the TV. "Nope," Henry concluded. "Mom grew up there in western Kentucky. The Land Between the Lakes."

"Well, what about Grandpa? He was an Indian too, right? Did he live closer to the mountains?"

Henry looked puzzled. "I think you might have it wrong, Linda," he said, kindly. "Dad wasn't an Indian. He was Scottish. Why don't you get out the map? I think Trimble's in western Tennessee, not far from the Mississippi River."

Within just a short time, the few things I thought I'd known about my grandparents were erased. In their stead was a different set of facts, a family tree that had almost no relation to the one that had lived in my imagination since I had been a little girl. Rather than the exotic place I'd imagined, the family past was just a tributary of the Mississippi, the same river that had flowed through my childhood. Looking back at my time on Mount Le Conte, I felt foolish. There I'd been tramping around mountains that didn't have a thing to do with my family. I'd only been making believe I was reconnecting with the spirit of my ancestors. Surely my father had known how far off the mark I had been, but he'd never said a thing. He'd let me go on and on making a fool of myself.

Now Henry was pointing to Trimble on the atlas, then showing me where the Land Between the Lakes was. He wasn't laughing at me, didn't think me silly. Instead, he was open, seemed delighted that he was getting to know me, seemed to enjoy talking about his parents and their relatives.

One night, after my father and Jackie went to bed, Henry and I went downstairs to the family room and got out old family photographs. My father was a camera buff and had taken tons of pictures of us in the years we lived together. Henry and I came across one taken in our home on London Road.

In the grainy black-and-white photo, the walls of the house look dingy, as if the house itself were dark and gloomy. My mother's eyes are closed, and she has a weary smile on her face. She has her arm around my brother, who's about three years old and who has his usual disconnected, worried look, his face shaded, darkened, his eyes almost blacked out. I have a pasted-on smile, and

I've got my arm around my mother, our stuffed dog Bruno in my other arm. I'm looking over at my brother, obvious concern in my eyes, but my frozen smile tries to suggest that everything is okay. My brother is unhappy and looking away, my mother has escaped into oblivion, and I am trying to put the best face on the whole thing. I'd studied family photographs for years, looking for clues to the past, but I'd managed to avoid seeing the truth that was there plain as day.

Now as I looked at the images again, I laughed uncomfortably. "We don't look like a very happy family in this one!"

Henry paused, looked at the photograph, then at me. "When I'd spend time with your family," he said quietly, "things seemed sad sometimes."

We sat there together, the photo album spread out before us. I traced the lines of my mother's tired face. I held my brother again in my gaze, still trying twenty-five years later to protect him, keep him safe. I wondered about my father, in but not in the photograph. What had he seem through the viewfinder? What story of us had he wanted to tell?

I swallowed, my heart pounding. All my life, I'd avoided thinking about the things that had gone wrong in my family. Now I looked back across time and saw the unsettling truth.

"Things aren't always what we wish they'd been," Henry said. "If you ever want to talk, I'll listen."

After that reunion with Henry, I returned to my new home in Shepherdstown, West Virginia. I'd finished my doctorate in Wisconsin, then taken a job as an English professor at a small liberal arts college. Though my life was filled with meaningful and productive work, though I was teaching and writing and developing good relationships with colleagues at the college, my conversations with Henry unsettled me. The questions that had drawn me to my father and then to Henry—the questions about their parents, about our family past—these questions were now replaced by the question I'd been asking myself since I'd talked with Henry. *Had* my family been happy?

Sure, life with my father hadn't been great. Sure, there had always been lots of tension between us. And yes, it was true that my father never wanted to talk about his parents, seemed to hate them, always hid himself, his past, from me. But we were trying to reconnect now, trying to be a father and a daughter in the here and now. That's what I said to myself during the day, during those hours when I was physically awake and trying to push the past from my mind.

But at night, as I lay tucked away in my one-room apartment where no one could see, my father's mocking, taunting laugh echoed through terrifying dreams that frightened and unnerved me. I'd toss and turn, worried that my father was

outside the window. He wanted to get inside, where I was, but I was vigilant, careful. Always, despite my best efforts, there inevitably came a moment when I wasn't watching closely enough, when I let my guard down. He broke in. He hurt me. I'd wake up in a sweat, panicked, pinned to my bed, immobile. I felt violated, invaded, unsafe in my own home.

And now, after a long absence, Fannie returned to my nighttime stories. Again, she beckoned. Again, she called. Over and over, I found myself driving those roads once more, walking that path, looking for her house. It seemed I'd never find her, and in the rare dream when I did make it to the kitchen, I'd stand there on the linoleum floor, gaze at her rooted there by the stone fireplace. But still, once again, she didn't know me.

Then Henry—cast as a homeless man—joined my dreams. Tending a fire, crouched next to a wall of stone, he pulled out a seemingly endless array of family photos, notes, pieces of paper, names, dates. And in my dreams, no matter how Henry and I tried to make sense of the scraps, they refused to fulfill the promise of revealing family secrets.

In the light of day, I plunged myself further and further into work. For sixty, seventy hours a week, I kept myself numb with teaching, grading, committee work, administrative duties, research, writing. But at night, alone in my farmhouse apartment, I knew something was wrong. I felt cut adrift, alone in the world. I was no longer Dancing Bear, not the woman of zest and joy and passion I wanted to be.

It was time to dig up the past, time to make peace with those old bones, bury them, mark the grave, and move on.

Armed with the clues Henry had given me during our time in Georgia, I did everything in my power to invite the ancestors into my life. The journey back to the past took me to places I had never imagined were there—whispered stories I could still hear if I could learn to listen, faces and lives, names and dates that could live again for me, play out the story of generations. All those who went before me, who extended back for generations behind my father, behind even his mother, stretching far, far back into the century before us—all those old voices were there, waiting for me.

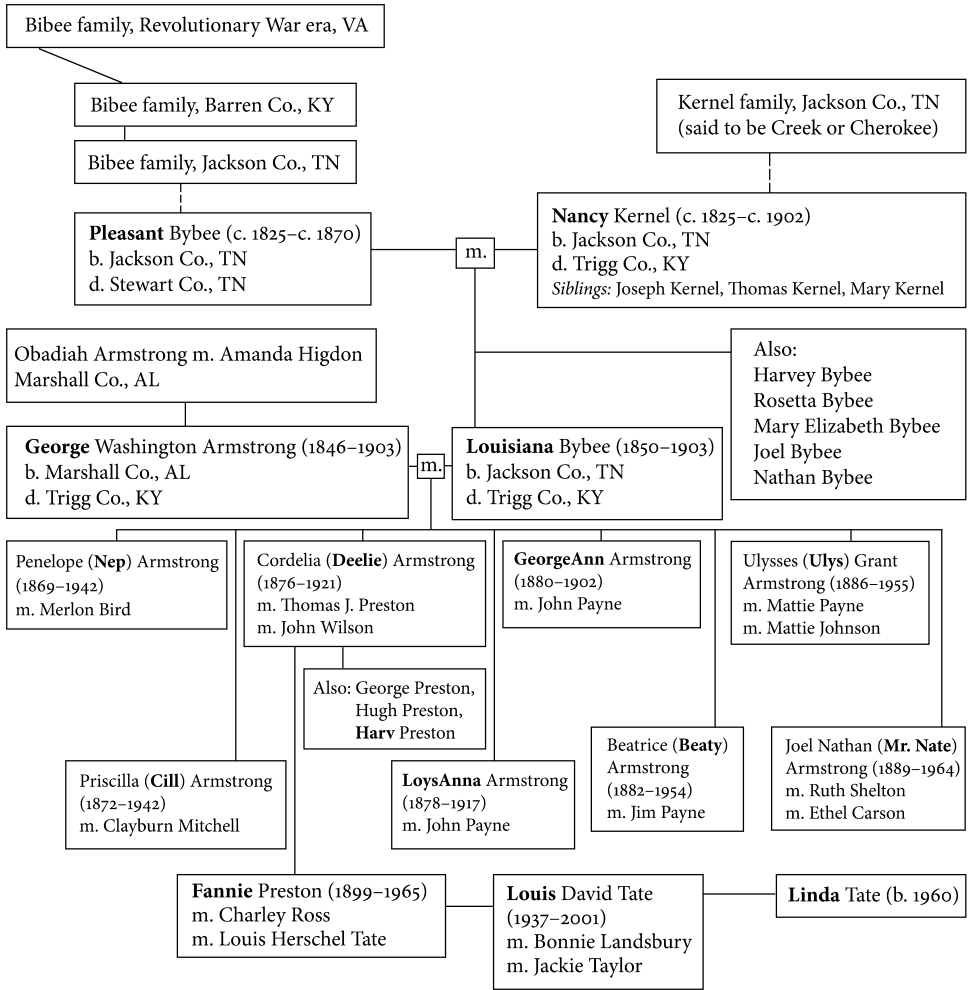
For the next several years, I traveled endless miles through Tennessee and Kentucky, Alabama and Illinois and Missouri. I burrowed into the dusty dank of archives and libraries, basement rooms in rural courthouses. I wound through countless rolls of microfilm, eyes smarting by the end of each weary workday. I tramped through cemeteries, searched out old homesites, lived for two summers near the Land Between the Lakes, the ancestral home I had nearly missed.

I met countless distant relatives who began to recall the parts of the story they knew. I gathered every piece of the puzzle I could.

And slowly, I began to hear those who went before. I listened in my mind as my great-great-grandmother Louisiana and my grandmother Fannie told their stories, the seeds of my own. My story and theirs mingle together in my mouth, a tale of pain and persistence their legacy to me. Though it was difficult to listen, to bear witness to their lives by lending my voice to theirs, in the end I put my hand in theirs, went with them to the homeplace and the cemetery, and marked the passing of their world.

“Who are you?” the old woman had asked in my dream.

“Who are *you*?” I wanted to ask her now. “Who are the people who went before you, the people who made you, the people who made me? How did I get here, so far from home?”



This genealogy chart blends actual names with fictional names and includes only those individuals relevant to this narrative. “Character” names are in bold. This chart is intended only as an aid to the reader and should not be used for research or genealogical purposes.