

Lone Wolf, Oklahoma

— AN ESSAY BY —

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I never knew my maternal grandmother—she died just days after I was born—and because the man she married, a Presbyterian minister whose Calvinist streak and patriarchal ways tended toward overshadow, lived until I was in my mid-teens, I never heard much about her. But the couple of things I did know about her made her seem exotic.

The first: she came from Lone Wolf, Oklahoma. My grandfather the preacher had been born in South Carolina but came to his senses and moved at an early age across the state line to Gastonia, North Carolina. My people on my father's side had been in North Carolina since their arrival in America, as far as anyone can tell—they weren't great record keepers and they had a talent for disappearing. (My great-uncle Charlie stole a train idling on a siding by a sawmill, drove it to the end of the tracks, and was never seen nor heard from again. There is speculation that he was shot dead by a man whose daughter he had gotten in the family way, or that he went to Texas, fates that are always delivered as if they are equal.)

Oklahoma brought to mind, of course, the musical, but once I got over that association—and got the corny song out of my head—I thought of dust storms and sod houses, treeless prairie and wronged Cherokee. I grew up in Eastern North Carolina on the edge of the Little Coharie swamp. In late spring the piney woods came alarmingly alive with scrub and weed, so lush that shoots and tendrils seemed to creep into the yard while I watched. Land was cleared for tobacco and produce, but beyond the cultivation, the dark mouth of forest loomed. Woods were everywhere and shadowy with secrets and hideouts. An Oklahoma vista seemed lunar.

The second thing my mother told me about her mother was even more evocative. In the harsh winters of the prairie, with nothing but fence posts for thousands of miles to stop the wind, my great-grandmother sent my

grandmother and her older sister to school on the back of a horse, pinning heavy blankets around them and slapping the horse, who knew the way to the school. When they got there, the teacher would unpin them, stable the horse, and re-pin them in their cocoon for the trip home, if the weather necessitated it.

I knew a couple of other things about my grandmother—she and her sister had both gone to college, a rarity for women in those days, and they had paid for it by taking turns, one working while the other studied, so that it took them eight years to graduate. My grandmother met my grandfather, who had been sent to Oklahoma after seminary, in church. She played and taught piano. Her sister, my great-aunt, answered an ad for schoolteachers in Wyoming, where she met and married a rancher. She remained in Wyoming for the rest of her life. The one time she came east to visit her sister, who had moved to Lenoir, North Carolina, where my grandfather preached for forty years, she had to leave early because, she said, the trees (those trees! That dense Eastern forest!) gave her claustrophobia.

But it was the horse that stuck with me. I wrote a three-page story about it and published it in a book of similarly short stories, but it was the only story in that collection that I felt needed to be longer. Then a couple of people said to me, “That story about the two girls on the back of the horse needs to be longer.” It’s easy to ignore such criticism from one reader, but two? That would be critical mass.

I had no clue, however, that I was writing a novel about the relationship between two sisters, even as the anecdote dictated it. I just put the girls back on the horse, and I made it snow. Soon it was a blizzard (both on the page and in the accumulation of pages, for the first draft came quickly; I wrote three hundred pages in five weeks) and both sisters had fallen for the teacher who unpinned them from the horse. The novel began in Oklahoma and ended up (perhaps like my doomed great-uncle) in Texas, stopping off very briefly in North Carolina before a stint in Wyoming.

But it is Lone Wolf, Oklahoma—a place I’d never visited until after I wrote the first draft—that shapes the sensibility of the sisters, and therefore the novel. The shared sensibility of siblings, and the forces that emerge to disrupt it as we age—politics, religion, geography, other people—is something that I’ve written about before, but not with such focus. The blanket

the two girls share becomes a solar system whose stars are ever present above, even though the girls become women and mothers themselves and settle thousands of miles apart. They need only look up to see the same twinkling planets. But looking up—remembering with the vigilance of the childhood imagination a familiarity weakened by time, by choices, by circumstances—is difficult for all of us.

I stopped through Lone Wolf on my way from Texas to Wyoming in the fall of 2017. It was September, high summer still, and dry. In the Panhandle, tractors and combines worked the roadside fields, followed by billowing parachutes of dust. My GPS asked me to take a left not far outside of Lone Wolf. I always do what that crisp voice tells me to, and I ended up on a dirt road in the middle of a cotton field. Town appeared in the distance—a few blocks of low buildings and modest, vinyl-sided houses. I parked my car in front of a diner that had gone out of business with dishes still on the table. Midmorning and crazy hot, there was no one in sight. Finally a car chugged up from the west. I kept window-shopping along the mostly abandoned storefronts, but I heard the car brake. I looked over. A woman about my age was rolling down her window by hand. She was smoking the longest cigarette I've ever seen. When the window was three-quarters open she leaned over and said, "Well, are you here?"

Had I the slightest doubt, still, that this novel should have remained its original three pages, it disappeared in that second.

"My grandmother is from here," I said, after telling her that I was, indeed and blissfully, in Lone Wolf, Oklahoma.

"What's your grandmama's name?"

"She moved away in 1918."

"But what's her name?"

"Hallie Hall."

"Knew her well."

THIS WAS BEYOND IMPOSSIBLE. But it made sense in the spirit of the novel I'd written, in which two sisters have a bond so tight—despite an event that leads to their decades-long estrangement—that they believe in things with a fervency that makes those things, if not exactly true, their own inviolable truth.