

I'll Cry Later rev 7/5/21 (was Eighty-Eight Miles)

©2008 Gary Gladstone

Draft 7/14/08

7/7/21 5:30 PM

Remo  
HOTL 9/4/21 JWA

On this grey April afternoon, the few remaining patches of melting snow lie trapped in the shadows of rocks and bushes around our pink stucco house like wisps of ocean foam marooned by retreating waves.

It's 1952 and I'm walking at an angle, leaning to the right, hauling my schoolbooks in the customary student one-arm carry. Five text books are piled on top of a blue fabric covered three-ring notebook, tucked under my arm and resting on the ledge of my left hip. I trot up the stairs and down the hall towards my bedroom, counting, in my head, the number of days until my sixteenth birthday when I can apply for a driver learner's permit. Just thinking of being a legal driver makes my heart pump harder. Mom was an ambulance driver in the war so she teaches me to drive. Soon, I will be officially licensed to become the captain of an automobile. My head fills with images of me, in full command of the big Pontiac, with my arm resting on the open window while scenery whizzes past.

In this daydream, I'll cruise cross-town, past the busy school playground, to pick up my envious friends.

I shift the heavy books higher on my hip, holding them with my wrist so I can extend the fingers to tally up the remaining days until I can be legal. I've counted three times during this walk home from school. It's still seventy-nine days to go.

The house is quiet. My sister, Gale's door is open, a sure sign that she's not home. I pass the open door of my parent's bedroom, swing the load of textbooks into my room and dump the pile on my bed.

There's a queasy quietness in the house, a faint humming echo of fresh silence, like the sound of the school's auditorium after everybody has filed out

I look across the narrow hall into my parent's bedroom. It's normal that no one is home at this hour but something feels wrong. I walk into their bedroom.

My eyes are drawn to Mom's bed and night table. There are small things missing. The ashtray and tiny flowered porcelain pillbox are not there.

I see her top dresser drawer, opened slightly. It's strange because that's the drawer that she keeps her prized box of chocolates hidden under her folded nightgowns. Leaving that drawer open is like leaving the store cash register drawer open at an unattended counter. Without looking for the chocolates, my gaze moves on to Dad's tall dresser. I see a folded piece of ivory notepaper leaning against the leather-covered cup in which he keeps his combs and pipe-smoking tools. The note is half open. In the fold I see Mom's familiar scrawling handwriting. I snoop.

"Milton:

I'm leaving you.

I won't be back. I'm going home to Philadelphia.

Burnice"

My heart bangs against my breastbone. The room tilts as my thoughts race. Leaving? Forever? What happened? Are we now alone? Will she come back for Gale and me? Where will we live? How will we live? Who will fix dinner tonight? Who will take care of Gale and me? Who will fix dinner tonight? Is this because I never picked up my clothes or got such bad grades?

Will she call me or Gale and tell us what happened and how we can fix it? Can Dad cook? Who will fix dinner tonight?

Questions spin around in my head. Tears begin to trickle down my cheeks. My arms feel weak and they are quivering. I feel panic and fear as I stare at the note, turning it over, looking for answers but there are only those two sentences that lead nowhere. I feel an overwhelmingly urgent need to talk with Mom.

I close my eyes to stop the rush of jumbled frightening fears and questions. Slowly I begin thinking about how I can speak with Mom. I'm open-mouthed with astonishment. Whirling fragments in my head, bump together into a hasty plan. Replacing the note on Dad's dresser, I move into action and run downstairs towards the garage. Pausing in the kitchen to empty the cup holding the milkman's money, I snatch the extra car key hanging inside the cellar door and jump into our new cream and brown Pontiac Catalina.

I am forbidden to drive the car alone but, fortified with recent driving lessons from Mom, toll money and a vague recollection of the sequence of turns to my Grandfather's house outside of Philadelphia, I start the engine.

**My heart pounds** as I back out of the garage then lurch down our narrow road and onto the Bronx River Parkway toward New York City.

After ten years of watching my parents make this 88-mile drive for family visits, I'm nervously confident I will remember the way. I settle into a series of memories of past trips. The left turns and right turns enter my head with comforting familiarity. I'm on autopilot, hypnotically mumbling the remembered route out loud. "Turn left off the West Side Highway onto Canal Street then into the Holland Tunnel, then stay right on the Jersey side for Route 1. It goes under a mile-long dark overhead structure before jumping into the full daylight of the Pulaski Skyway where I will begin looking for for Route 22. The terrible disorienting panic subsides. It's a comfort to be so busy.

I'm in New Jersey at Summerville's big traffic circle, where we always stop at the orange-roofed Howard Johnson's for hot dogs with mustard and relish. Today, it's not a happy sight. I wonder again, "Who will fix dinner tonight?"

I'm not crying. My senses are focused on this mission.

The need to remember all the rules of driving dulls surging swells of fear that I've been abandoned. I'm wondering what I will find when I arrive.

On the quieter stretches of road, one question haunts me: Why did this happen? My parents fight and yell only occasionally. I remember two times when Gale and I huddled together in her room with the door shut listening to terribly loud screaming and stomping coming from our parent's room. We hugged each other until the storm stopped. Then, we tiptoed to their bedroom, opening the door a crack and found the two of them in Mom's bed, smiling bashfully. As terrifying as these storms are, they never seem to leave any lasting debris.

Now, my eyes are red from tears. They sting from the wind blowing in my open window. Comforted by the sight of the familiar round turret on one end of my Grandparent's grey stone house, I turn into the wide, manicured driveway. There are a number of unfamiliar cars parked randomly around the entrance next to the leaded glass windows of the living room. I stop near the front door and pull the handbrake. Stepping from the Pontiac I walk hesitantly toward the front door, past the haphazardly parked group of cars.

I can feel the collective heat radiating from their hoods. They must have just arrived.

**My heart is racing** as I approach the familiar heavy grey stone arch that makes the massive front door look like it belongs to a castle's entrance in the movies. Behind me I hear the "tink" sound of heated metal engine parts cooling and contracting in the cars. Breathing short breaths, I'm wondering what I will find behind the front door. Will my mother be happy to see me? Will she be angry that I took the car without asking? Will she be proud that I drove this great distance all by myself? Will she want to come home with me? Maybe she'll drive us both back. I'm almost dizzy with questions. I stand looking at the two narrow cathedral-shaped stained glass windows that flank the heavy door. I know the window on the right is a tiny lavatory because when I visit, I use that room and always wonder if someone can see me through the lighter pieces of stained glass. Now, I wish I could see in through the stained glass because I want to know what's going on inside. I know I'm stalling. I'm scared to open the main door. Then, I remember the note on Dad's dresser and my stomach tightens and reminds me why I'm here. I grab the heavy wrought iron handle and push the door open.

A puff of house air, scented with polished wood and old carpet, fills my nostrils. I push the door wider and hear the chatter of men and women talking. I walk in and turn towards the voices in the living room. I see my mother, in a dressy blue skirt and green sweater, sitting on the edge of the couch cushion surrounded by seven or eight people. They are sitting in a semi-circle on both sides of her. I am so focused on her face that I don't see exactly who the other people are but I recognize the familiar voices of aunts and uncles. I only look at Mom's face and interrupt blurting, "Mom, what happened?" She raises her head and the room falls silent. She stares at me with a look of surprise and then embarrassment. With a tinge of annoyance, she turns her eyes away and says, in a low voice from the side of her mouth, "You shouldn't be here now. We are talking about some important things. You had better go home."

People are staring at me. Someone says "This isn't a good time for your mother, Gary." I don't speak. I must look shocked because the group drops their gaze and all look at the floor. No one speaks. The silence is a command for me to leave. Whatever is happening does not concern me.

I turn slowly around and walk out to Dad's car, open the door and sit behind the wheel. With a numbing hurt, I start the engine and drive into the remaining daylight, the 88 miles back home. I'm so afraid I'll miss the important turns in the gathering dark that I don't cry and think only of the passing landmarks. I'll cry later.

Mom never returns home and never speaks with Gale or me about her leaving. I see Mom three times in the next 30 years but we never reclaim each other.

##