
The Fields that Bind

by Caroline Anderson

I slammed my foot on the gas and the truck surged forward. I could see out of the corner of my eye that my grandpa looked less than comfortable in the passenger seat. It's as if he was trying to telepathically communicate with me. I could hear him grumbling in his head, *Slow Down Caroline, this isn't your get away car*. Maybe not, but it was the closest form of escapism that I could conjure up at the time. Those open fields were my own adventure, an adventure free of harsh opinions and unfair assumptions. They were fields of endless thoughts and suppositions.

The sunlight hit the window as the truck jumped across another muddy ditch and maneuvered around another bale of hay. I tried to ease my foot off the gas pedal to smooth the worry lines of concern off of his pale face. The years of farm labor had hardened his appearance. Lines of worry were permanently etched onto his skin. Whether they were a result of years of working outside or being married to my grandmother remained unclear.

The sun slowly sank beneath the pine trees and he seemed to automatically relax, as if he was suddenly remembering that I was the only other sensible member of our family, even if I was only eight. Besides the time I drove his John Deere straight into a tree, my driving record was impeccable. But then again, how could I be blamed for that? Who lets a six-year-old drive a utility vehicle unsupervised anyway? I was much more equipped to handle an automatic transmission.

And he was crazy enough to let me try again.

When I begged him to let me have the keys, he didn't question me, but rather accepted the inevitable. If my grandma wanted to drive an hour and a half to Augusta to shop, he didn't argue. If my mom needed him to cut down yet another tree, he was there rain or shine.

As I gripped the steering wheel, my foot lightly on the pedals, my eyes alight with righteous indignation from the previous family incursion, Papa and I easily sat in one another's company blissfully unaware of the continuous verbal assaults going on at home. We were equally glad to be among the open field of hay, the hay that lacked the capacity to fight and argue with the other. Although my feet could barely touch the floor, we both seemed to relax in each other's presence with the radio softly crooning in the background. Papa sat in

the passenger seat with his hands clasped on his lap looking out at the tall grass in front of him. He was a quiet man and I always knew he loved being out here because of the overwhelming tranquility, that transcendental quality of nature. It gave him a place to think and embrace his thoughts rather than the hostility of emotions ever present in the house.

I slowly turned up the volume of the radio. Surprisingly, he didn't object.

Family events were a common occurrence in the latter years of my childhood. From the age of eight to fourteen, I was as eager to go to them as I was for them to end. Whenever we were at the dinner table, my mom, as well as my uncles or grandmother, had a knack for bringing up a subject that flamed the nerve of another or every individual at the table.

Trust me, it's not hard to do.

As time progressed, I was usually that individual: the instigator or the inflicted. But if I'm being honest, I was a sensitive child and could argue my case with the best of them. The conversation followed in one of two manners:

Option One: One particular individual at my grandmother's dining room table tentatively asks about a shared acquaintance as food is at the midway point in between plate and mouth.

My grandmother asks: "So did you hear about Cassondra? Apparently, she's leaving her husband and taking all of his money to build stables for her horses in Wagenet."

Here we go. I roll my eyes.

"Not surprised," someone responds.

My grandfather ignores all comments and proceeds to eat with caution.

Thus began the discussion on the statistics of failed marriages, the outcome of children with single parents, and how in reality it's somehow the government's fault. It's always the government's fault.

No matter the theme of localized scandal, my response was always the same.

"For God's sake, who cares?" I would ask.

I never got an answer.

Option Two: Immediate family drama. I.E. my great grandmother's hoarding addiction.

"Have you been to her house this week? I couldn't even walk through the front door without six cats and twenty pill bottles falling on top of me."

This was nothing new.

My great grandmother's house was something of a spectacle. She was 95 years old living in a white house by the side of a railroad track in Trenton, South Carolina. Her house was surrounded by overgrown grass, dozens of flowerbeds, a storm cellar, and depending on the season, five to ten cats. A lot of people liked to use the excuse that she grew up during the Great Depression and therefore hoarding was a manifestation of her fear for lacking basic necessities.

I can tell you, that was not the case for Granny Lott.

Her parents, aunts, and uncles controlled the railroads along the Savannah River. They weren't losing money. They were making it, along with a few other political scandals.

"Well she's your mother, it's your responsibility to take care of her," my uncles would argue whenever her "estate" came up.

Granny Lott's hoarding tendencies were always a hot topic of tension in the Trotter household. Her "legacy," or rather monetary value, was a constant source of debate up to and after her passing. Sometimes she would even propagate the argument: "Well when I die, it's up to you to make sure John Howard doesn't get that safe."

Everyone rolls their eyes. Like we would've been able to find it anyway.

But the best way to solve my great grandmother's hoarding problem?

"Easy. Bulldoze it all, problem solved," I'd explain with my eyes resolutely on the plate in front of me. It was a simple solution.

Their response, "Shh Caroline, calm down."

Apparently my sense of humor was less than appreciated.

Family meals were simultaneously a time for fellowship as well as an episode of nuclear fallout even on trivial matters. The inevitable mediator of World War III invariably fell on Papa, the voice of undeniable reason. He was able to settle disputes and dissolve the flames of verbal outrage and indignation that were constantly threatening to overwhelm the house. I'm not quite sure how he was able to do it, but whatever the discussion, it didn't faze him. Nothing did.

Today, it's a miracle the house is still standing. Only in the past couple years since his passing, have I been able to notice the signs of disrepair: The roof leaks, the grass grows through the cracks of the sidewalk, and my grandma's green house is filled with unacknowledged life. Despite my grandmother's attempts to reinvent and remodel, even physical structures wear thin from exhaustion. The house has been through too much. There are no more hay bales

in the field and the sky always shines gray.

Somehow, Papa was always able to cool the mood without using the techniques my mom and grandma were, and still are, so fond of: yelling, passive aggressive comments, and tongue biting that turns their cheeks into swollen red balloons. My uncles' marks of disagreement were similar. Instead of tongue biting, they would gesture with their hands like they were handles of an axe. The disagreements were always the same:

Mental Illness? "It's a personal problem."

Economic difficulties? "You caused it yourself."

Somehow he was able to divert everyone's attention to the weather or the birds that sat on the feeder outside the window looking in on the chaos. Nature was my grandfather's escape. Once the storm calmed, we would leave to explore the healing powers of four muddy tires, the open field, and a blue sky.

A small world that rested on the outskirts of predisposed verbal outrage and excessive energy.

Many people believe that in order to create a connection with another person, language is necessary. But in those moments, we didn't need to speak to understand what the other was thinking. I undoubtedly knew that he enjoyed being there as much as I did even if there was the slight possibility of a head on collision with a hay bale.

Larry James Trotter was the foundation of our family. He was the guiding force that prevented an avalanche from trampling over us all. When words were threatening, his silence spoke volumes. He kept us in balance whether we wanted it or not. He was the one who gave my uncles the power to be independent, my mom the strength to uphold her beliefs, and my grandma the courage to carry on. And when I was in that truck with him, he gave me a sense of fearlessness.

I didn't question myself.

But when the time came for us to stop with the petty quarrels and give him the strength to guide him through the ditches of medical fallout, we found ourselves lost, still looking to him for guidance.

2008 was the year of transition. I began my first year of high school, my mom started a new job, and my uncle got engaged to a girl he'd been dating since high school. We were all so wrapped up in our own worlds that we didn't recognize the signs. My grandma refused to believe that he was actually sick and when my mom finally convinced him to go to the doctor, the only explanation they could come up with was an allergic reaction to a tick bite.

A creature that sucks the life out of you until you have nothing left to give. After a couple of rides in ambulances and several other trips to the hospital, my grandfather had had enough. Medical bills were piling up, and my grandmother refused to accept the reality—their lives were changing. She began to realize that her comfort came at a price. He knew that and he didn't want to be a burden any longer.

I didn't know much about that day, but as time went on I started to realize that some details were better left unknown. I was only fourteen when he committed suicide and I was too concerned with a new school and what others thought of me to be worried about the troubles at home.

I was selfish.

I thought he would pull through.

He was Larry James Trotter.

If the effects of life had overtaken him, how were the rest of us supposed to survive?

August 21, 2008 was the day I realized I was no longer exempt from the world's cruelty.

I was no longer fearless; I was constantly afraid. Afraid for my grandmother and afraid for everything he was going to miss.

He wouldn't be there to watch my uncle get married.

He wouldn't be there when I learned how to legally drive a car.

He wouldn't be there when my uncle had his first son.

He wouldn't be there when I graduated from high school.

He wouldn't be the one to help me move in and out of college.

He left us, but I couldn't blame him for what he did. Instead I chose to blame everyone else.

I blamed myself for being the one to answer the phone that afternoon and hearing my grandmother's panicked voice on the other end.

I blamed my dad for telling me what I had already expected in the car on the way home from school.

I blamed myself for not seeing it coming.

I blamed us all for being selfish.

For years, I didn't care to listen to anyone about anything, but I could never quite block out his obvious presence in my thoughts and surroundings. Whenever I would garner the courage and ask my mom about what happened, she would talk and I would mentally shut down. I laid in constant fear of