

SOUTHERN STATES

By September of 1962, the beginning of my second college year, Scott's and my world had turned upside down. Infact it was a new world altogether for the Gentling family - or what was left of it. So much had happened that it was hard to believe only three months had passed since Scott and I had returned from New Orleans and our freshman year at Tulane University.

Mother and younger sister Suzie, a highschool sophomore, greeted us then at the T. & P. train station near downtown Fort Worth. As soon as Scott and I sat down in the back seat of mom's oldsmobile and ^{MOM} mother began to pull out of the parking lot, Suzie turned, looked over her shoulder and announced with gritted teeth and forced smile, "Guess what?" she said. "Mother's sold the house and we are all moving to Little Rock!"

From that moment on, ~~what remained~~ of our lives at 5109 Bryce, our home for twelve years was over. Even as our parents' long deteriorating marriage resulted in their separation in 1960 and dad's landing a great job that required him to move to Little Rock, Arkansas, our home on ~~Bryce Avenue~~ had been a secure haven against the knawing uncertainties of that separation. Life was better, even pleasant, after the tensions between mom and dad were no longer a daily fact of life. But even as we kids made our adjustments to the new modus vivendi all we never harbored any illusions about our parents ever reconciling successfully.

So you can well imagine the surprize, shock really, of Suzie's announcement. Both Scott and I felt like we had been hit in the chest by a thirty-two pounder canon ball. And we had not had the slightest warning. ^{Did our older brother Peter know?} I especially worried about Suzie who would be leaving high school and all the special

friends of her childhood for a completely new scene. Without even asking her I knew that somehow she was thinking of some way to stay in Fort Worth to finish school. Scott and I would have to be at our new home only for summers and for important holidays so I was sure that even before mom turned into our driveway Scott, like me, was privately thinking of ways to eventually stay in Fort Worth as well.

All of us thought mother had lost her mind. That evening as we sat in the living room amid the depressing scene of half-packed shipping boxes and reams of wrapping paper we discussed the future. There was some reason for hope. Scott and I did extract a promise from her. If for any reason the new move and reconciliation did not work out, she would pull up stakes immediately and return to Fort Worth and file for divorce. We believed that we would all be returning to live in Fort Worth probably sooner than later. It was a shame, though. In order for mother to be brought to her senses in Little Rock we had to lose our family home at 5109 Bryce Avenue. All for nothing.

The Arkansas experiment did fail. It took about six weeks. During that time I found some relief from Little Rock by traveling with high school friend Bill Gordon for a couple of week's visit to his grandparents' rented villa in Cuernavaca, Mexico. But before Cuernavaca there was Mexico City for a few days, my first visit to the former Aztec Capital and a chance to see the downtown archaeological site of the Templo Mayor as well as the old National Museum of Anthropology and History before its move to wonderful new quarters in Chapultepec Park.

Scott stayed in Little Rock in the ample apartment that Dad had rented for him, Suzie and me. He did some painting and drawing, but mostly he listened to classical music and emersed himself in re-reading Faulkner's short stories and novels and bided his time. Both Scott and I had loved Faulkner's work since

high school. Scott had even done a beautiful small conte crayon portrait of the Mississippi ^N nobel laureate. Somehow I ^{recall} remember that Bennett Cerf, Faulkner's publisher at Random House, found out about the drawing and wanted to publish it, but Scott never did anything about it.

There was a Faulkner book that both he and I had long thought was his best and one of the greatest of American novels, "Absolom, Absolom," a difficult work that read more like an epic poem than a novel. From the time we had first read "Absolom" Scott dreamed about one day doing a suite of etchings based on the work. He had even made a number of drawing studies with "Absolom, Absolom" in mind when we made our Audubon research trips through Mississippi and nearby southern states. Although he didn't think that "To Kill A Mockingbird" was quite in the same league as Faulkner's best books, Scott was also captivated by Harper Lee's hugely popular novel and he likewise toyed with the idea of someday illustrating it with a series of etchings.

Scott's sketches for these novels never did result in etchings though he continued to develop an ever deeper interest in that art form. Etching had fascinated him since high school days. He read all the books he could get on three artist-etchers in particular, Rembrandt, Goya and Edward Hopper. He had even tried his hand at the craft while at Tulane but his art school curriculum only allowed time for brief experimentation.

Whether he felt ready for Faulkner or not, Scott always wanted to do subjects from his southern experiences and try to capture in prints something of the palpable light and spirit that was so deeply a part of the land he had explored in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia. There was a silveriness to southern winter light that was made for etching, he thought. Both Scott and I had talked about that wonderful light since we first saw Jean Renoir's remarkable film of Faulkner's "Intruder in the Dust" as children, still by far

the best movie ever done of William Faulkner's world.

One beautiful afternoon near the end of my stay at the villa in Cuernavaca, a maid brought a newly-arrived copy of the New York times out to the patio. Bill was napping. Bill's grandfather and I were lounging in the shade of the garden loggia completely fixated on trying to catch visiting great-tailed grackles with a snare made of a few strands of wire and a long string. Joe Hogsett was "Mr. Hogsett" to me. In his seventies, he was a self-made Fort Worth millionaire of legendary acumen. He firmly held the string and rarely took his eyes off the trap which was baited with a small piece of a borillo.

What a change from a few days before when he ridiculed with great humor my strange garden activity which I was doing simply to pass the time on lazy afternoons when we were not sightseeing. The grackles seemed so easy to catch that it was not long before he asked me if he could try his hand. After he caught his first grackle he was hooked. I can remember seeing him several times reclined on a comfortable lounge chair, not dressed for a mexican vacation but in slacks, no coat but starched white shirt and tie, talking business on the telephone with the grackle string firmly in his grip.

Mr. Hogsett handed me the string when the maid brought the "Times." He continued to talk to me but somewhat absent mindedly as he perused the newspaper. He stopped at an article and was silent for a moment.

"William Faulkner has died," he said.

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When I returned to Little Rock I was surprized that Scott had already heard the bad news about Faulkner, since he was not a current events person. Both he and Suzie had more bad news - or good news - depending how you looked at it. Our

parents' reconciliation was not going well. Mom had called and wanted to come down to our suite and talk to us early the next morning.

Our mother had her faults and her weaknesses where our father was concerned but when she made a promise to us, I mean really promised, she always kept her word. She asked us for two more weeks. We agreed. Later she told me that she had already called the movers and had been told that she would have to wait that long before they could get to us. Those were two of the longest weeks of our lives. I remember that We hardly left the apartment to venture out in the hot and humid Arkansas summer except to go to the movies. Back home at the apartment Scott and I continued listening to classical music most of the day. I read Faulkner's "Light in August" for the first time and all of Tennessee William's plays. I remember writing a few short stories or at least beginning to write them. They are in a box in the attic to this day, unread by me since I wrote them. It was definitely a waiting time,

Even though we knew that mom's venture was ill-starred, what worried us, I hate to confess, was that events in those two weeks might at the last minute encourage her to linger for another month or two. We all were being selfish. Our lives had been completely uprooted and we wanted to make them right again. We had even left Mandy our pet cocker-poodle of ten years, a real member of our family, back in the care of the people who had bought our house.

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It was almost evening as we turned off Fort Worth's east-west freeway to University Drive where the Forest Park Motel was waiting for us. It was hot, but it was a dry heat that, bad as it was, seemed healthier than the cloying humid

air of Little Rock. Though we were glad to be back in town, it was depressing not to be going home to our comfortable beds at 5109 Bryce.

We unloaded our bags while mother got on the phone to let Caro MacDonald, Eve MacFarland and Sis Rigg know that we had arrived safely. These ladies were the same dear friends who found a house for us when we returned to Fort Worth in 1950 from a bad year in California. Mom was cheered that they had already found a few places to look at first thing in the morning.

Scott and I didn't wait around, We immediately drove out to 5109 Bryce. It was almost dark when we parked in front of our house and got out of the car and started calling for Mandy. Mandy, ^{early on} black as coal, the stump of her tail wagging uncontrollably, jumped out from the camelia bushes, her favorite cool spot under the living room windows, and ran toward us and flung herself against Scott in a feeble attempt to leap into his arms. We couldn't believe that we had allowed Mandy to be left behind. We picked her up and put her in the car and left.

By the time we got back to the motel two of mother's friends, Helen Cox and the artist Emily Guthrie Smith, were there mixing drinks and having a party. Mother was being a good sport about it all and genuinely trying to be festive even though I knew that her heart was broken. At our entrance with Mandy everybody cheered.

At 9:00 o'clock the next morning Mother, Scott and I left the motel to look at a house on Crestline Avenue, only four or five blocks from our old house. We knew the place, at least from the outside. It was smaller than what we had been living in, but it bordered the Rivercrest Country Club golf course and was definitely part of our old neighborhood. Mom's friends Caro and Eve were there to meet us. We had hardly stepped through the front doorway when mother said "We'll take it!"

The house was charming, but really, really small. Scott and I had to share a bedroom off the kitchen. There was barely room enough for our two beds. It must have been a TV room or a study at one time. There were no closets, but we were able somehow to squeeze two portable cardboard clothes boxes next to the beds. And there was space for a small television set. It wasn't much but it was home and after years of emotional limbo as far as mom and dad's marriage was concerned, it offered a hope that this might be the beginning of a new life and a possibility of genuinely moving forward for all of us.

It was mostly a happy household on Crestline the rest of that summer. After we had finally settled in, I remember that it always seemed to be full of people. Suzie's friends. Scott's and my friends. Mother's friends. Scott and I spent long evenings sitting on our beds discussing what we were going to do in the fall when he was scheduled to enter the Pennsylvania Academy in far away Philadelphia and I to return to Tulane and New Orleans. The art school curriculum that Scott had suffered through at Tulane his freshman year was totally oriented to fledgling artists just beginning their explorations of painting techniques. Since Scott had been painting for five years, he already knew how to paint well enough to resent that he was being held back.

To be sure, my brother well knew that the next year at the academy would be full of experimenting and the exploration of other artistic styles and techniques inspite of the progress he had made toward mastering watercolor in his paintings of birds with increasingly complex botanical backgrounds and in his other nature studies. He was also excited by his increasing skill in portrait art, both drawings and portrait work in oils. It was still too early, however, to connect his improving abilities with with the kind of definite direction which might define a career.

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It certainly wasn't as clear to me then as it seems now, but Scott's and my deep interest in the south, its history and fauna and its sense of place, largely stimulated by our study of John James Audubon's life and art, would offer both of us a world around which we could begin to develop our skills as artists, Scott as a painter and me as a writer. The South simply offered a rich mine of images and stories to explore. Scott had been making noticeable improvements in his skills as a representational painter especially since 1960. His efforts began an exciting focus and sense of direction when he started doing still life painting that year in evening classes under John Chumley at the Fort Worth Art Center.

Chumley, who would later become a prominent Virginia artist with a national following, not only painted in oils and tempera but was a gifted drybrush watercolorist who relished the colors and intricate textures of an intense kind of realism that has since become associated with Andrew Wyeth. Scott's efforts with Chumley were in drybrush watercolor. For him the Chumley drybrush landscapes and still lifes then on view at Fort Worth's Carlin Gallery exerted the strongest influence on his early watercolors and not the work of Wyeth which he barely knew from a single "American Artist" magazine.

Chumley was clearly a Wyeth disciple of sorts. The two artists were friends. Chumley was an alumni of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts which had long been associated with artists of the so-called Brandywine School of which Wyeth was the most famous exponent. But it was Chumley's work that first fired Scott's imagination. It explored a traditional kind of a primarily American realism going back to the work of Eakins, Homer and Hopper that Scott and I had begun to study in the few art books available to us at that time.

I occasionally accompanied Scott to the Chumley classes. I remember one evening when John told Scott that there really

wasn't much that he could teach him, that infact he was afraid to say too much to influence his development. It was not that Scott didn't have a lot to learn, but that he was clearly on his own artistic trajectory, and John did not want to interfere. When Electra Carlin informed Chumley of Scott's acceptance at the Pennsylvania Academy he called him to offer congratulations and wish him well. And he told Scott and interesting story. Many years ago, when John's father, a young physician, was doing his residency at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota where Scott and I were born, the family rented rooms in our grandmother Johnson's house where our mother had grown up.

In the early sixties traditional realism was tolerated at the Pennsylvania Academy in a way that it was not at other art academies and especially college art schools. I have noted that at Tulane Scott had felt like a second class citizen. He also was not as tolerant as he should have been of the curriculum there. He felt that it was forcing him into artistic directions that he had already decided were not for him.

By the end of his first semester in New Orleans Scott was determined to quit college and apply to a major art school. New York City's Cooper Union had been suggested. He wrote them and was invited to come for an interview and to take a test. Dad financed the trip for us which we took at spring break in April of 1962, our first New York visit. We stayed in luxury at the St. Regis Hotel. I explored the Metropolitan Museum while Scott went to take a test at the Cooper Union School in Grenwich Village. For two Texas boys New York was quite another, almost foreign world, that neither one of us felt comfortable in. We returned to Tulane somewhat depressed by the experience, but Scott was determined to make any adjustments necessary, even in that alien world, if that was what was needed to learn his craft.

As a complete surprise, one day after we returned from

New York Scott got a telephone call from artist Walter Stuemfig who was a prominent teacher at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia. He had ~~been~~^{just} been in Fort Worth when we were in New York. He had been invited to judge the Tarrant County Annual Art Show held at the Fort Worth Art Center. Scott had no entries in the exhibition, but our family friend, Emily Guthrie Smith, who was a well-known Texas artist in her own right, took two of Scott's bird paintings down to the museum to show Stuemfig.

Stuemfig was so impressed that when he returned to Philadelphia he called a few friends on the Academy's Board of Regents and persuaded them to allow him to invite Scott to attend the school! The invitation could not have come at a better time. Scott knew little about The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts except what John Chumley had told him. Chumley made the point again to Scott that the Academy, North America's oldest and most prestigious art school, was one of the few institutions where the painting of realism was tolerated and even respected. From the moment he talked to Stuemfig Scott never looked back, At Stuemfig's request he sent a portfolio of past work to the school and he received his formal acceptance a few weeks later.

Just knowing that he was bound for the Pennsylvania Academy helped him to endure the Little Rock days and the loss of our boyhood home.