



An Excerpt from *Out of Loneliness*

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A picture of Bev Waugh on the front page of a yellowed newspaper prompted my journey to this modest courthouse of blond bricks and black trim where I hoped to find a transcript of a murder trial.

The photo captured the image of a woman with delicate features, the contours of her face soft, her skin unblemished, shoulders and waist narrow. “My tiny one,” Gina called her referring to her size-six boots and diminutive frame. My words for Bev were brawny, masculine, and fierce, a maverick in cowboy boots and western shirt. Seeing Bev’s photo prompted feelings of fear mixed with confusion. How could I reconcile my memories with the tiny woman in the photo, a woman my cousin Leo described as having the

potential to be “drop-dead beautiful, a real knock out?” Perhaps what matters most is not my faulty recollections but the reasons for my distortions of her. Why? That’s a question I needed to ask, the itch I needed to scratch.

I discovered the paper on a steamy July day in 1999 while cleaning out my mother’s home in Chamberlain following her move to an assisted living facility. The air conditioner had been turned off, and the heat and the dust in the carpet and drapes triggered a migraine. I soaked a piece of paper towel, pressed it to my forehead, and collapsed on the worn carpet in the living room surrounded by garbage bags filled with magazines, tattered linens and dish rags, out-of-date calendars, and cookbooks. My brothers had

already loaded trucks with furniture including my mother's upright piano and Wurlitzer organ, the two material possessions that most defined her. As I watched them drive away, I felt utterly alone. I had never spent a day in this house without hearing my mother play ragtime on her piano. Now all that could be heard was the wailing of the wind, nature's muted saxophone blowing against the window screens. At the end of the day, what remained was silence and a withered balloon dangling from the ceiling, the word *Grandmother* collapsed in wrinkles of latex.

My mother had tucked the newspaper with Bev's photo in a stack of magazines piled in a corner on our front porch. Why? Mother took little pride in a tidy house so she may have misplaced it in the room's clutter. More likely, she hid it during the trial because the story revealed sexual details too salacious for her children to read. I sometimes imagine my Irish Catholic mother creeping into the room after her children had gone to bed and reading of a sexual expression that I assumed shocked her.

I sat cross-legged in her now empty house, a newspaper over my knees. Carefully unfolding it to keep the fragile crease from tearing, I scanned the article and read a portion of the testimony in which the prosecuting attorney asked, "What did you and Bev do when you parked at the river?"

"We talked."

Above me, dust motes shimmered as they swirled in the sunlight streaming through the windows. Most of my memories involved the shock of an "inverted" love affair that led to violence. How could I have known or thought so little about the love story behind it? I had never imagined a conversation between the women. Was it possible that they, lesbians, might flirt and date the way "normal" people did?

Another question: How was it that Gina

an attractive honor student, cheerleader, and teacher's pet, could be in a relationship with Bev, an awkward loner who flunked a grade; who after her eighth-grade year turned sixteen and dropped out of school. Thoughts of the mismatch between Bev and Gina brought to mind the novel *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, by Carson McCullers. She writes of a love triangle involving Miss Amelia, a tall, masculine, and eccentric woman; her cousin Lyman, a short, hump-backed schemer, and her former husband, co-worker, and ex-con Marvin Macy. The community regards the triangle that the lovers formed as grotesque in the way that some townspeople considered the relationship between Bev and Gina to be freakish. McCullers doesn't try to make sense of or to judge their attraction. She simply accepts the incongruities and often pain of being in love. "There are the lover and the beloved, but those two come from different countries."

In truth, Bev's masculine clothing and hair style had disturbed me because I was a tomboy, more comfortable in cut-off jeans and sloppy pony tail than skirt and lacquered hair. Unlike some transgender males, I never longed to a boy. I just wanted to do what boys could do and not be constrained by social expectations. Still the gossip about Bev triggered a brief bout of teenage angst over my own sexuality and reshaped Bev into my extreme opposite—muscular and middle-aged. This thought reassured me that I wasn't "one of them," whatever that meant. Fifty years later, a photo challenged my long-held assumptions of Bev Waugh. Who was she? Grasping an answer to that question was capturing gossamer threads of dust—one image slipping through my fingers as another floated by. I tucked the newspaper in my purse and turned the key to the lock to Mother's house for the last time, closing the door on one version of the story and opening the door to another.