

TWO DREAMS & OTHER TALES

TALE #1. PASSING THROUGH

Texas, August 2013

You could tell how hot it was by looking at the heat rising off the highway up ahead. Temperatures often topped 100 degrees on the Texas plains during this part of summer. Many times, those baking conditions gave way in the afternoon to storms sweeping in from the west with rain, lightning, and the occasional twister. On this day, however, it was sunny and hot with no forecast of bad weather.

I was traveling east on State Highway 631, about an hour east of Dallas. My destination was a small town called Hillman, which was the seat of a county of the same name. Hillman sits in the middle of an extensive area of large farms and oil fields worked by small, independent operators. The land is flat and devoid of trees, making it possible to see for miles in all directions. Along that stretch of highway that day, what I saw the most of was wheat and the occasional oil field. In many of the fields, the derricks were not only silent, but abandoned. It was a troubling sign that the small operators had pulled out and didn't even take their equipment with them.

I passed a sign informing me I was six miles from my destination. Just barely visible was the water tower that dominated the sky at the northern end of town, right where this same highway crossed over Main Street. Signs of life began to appear. I passed a grain elevator on the right, followed by a heavy equipment depot full of large farming and earth-moving trucks, tractors, and other vehicles. A few minutes later, I saw trees and houses. As I came to the town limits, I passed a sign that said:

WELCOME TO HILLMAN

Population: 897

It seemed unlikely that the population of the town had not changed in the fourteen years since I had last been there. Perhaps the locals had more pressing matters to deal with than keeping that sign up to date. It was there at the town limits that State Highway 631 became Huntington Avenue. I passed a couple of small businesses and a side street with a residential

TWO DREAMS & OTHER TALES

Passing Through

neighborhood as I approached Main Street. I would need to get gas before heading back to Dallas, so I stopped at the convenience mart at the corner of Huntington and Main and pulled over to the pumps.

As the gas flowed, I looked around me, taking in some old familiar sights. It felt strange to be back in my hometown, a place I once thought I would never see again. The county public works garage stood on the opposite corner of the intersection. It was home to the crews and equipment that maintained county roads, the municipal water district, and the grounds of public facilities like the courthouse and the schools. Next door to the garage was one of three county fire stations. What was not visible from where I stood was the fenced-in area behind the garage where the water tower stood. It rose through the trees high enough to make it visible along the full length of Main Street. I recalled that this tower, which bore the name HILLMAN, was also visible from my bedroom window when I was a boy. My childhood home—which was no longer standing—had been close by.

I was born in Hillman in February 1981, the eldest child of George and Patty Welles. My given name is George Jr., but to avoid confusion over identities, my family called me Byron. My father, George Sr., was a machinist by trade. He worked oil rigs, grain elevators, heavy equipment depots, factories, and other places where machine and metal work needed doing. During my childhood years, he had many regular jobs and many temporary jobs, occasionally followed by layoffs and varying periods of unemployment. He made good money when he was working, but even then, we lived frugally to prepare for the lean times. Despite these limitations, my father was a good man and a good provider. The one thing about him I had a difficult time with was his personality. My father grew up in a family that did not share verbal and physical affection. He was a cold fish who never smiled, and I got no genuine affection from him. I never doubted he loved me, but it always hurt that he wouldn't say it.

My mother, Patty, was a tragic figure. Raised in a very religious family, she was a faithful believer. A devoted member and regular volunteer at First Baptist Church of Hillman, she practically worshipped our pastor, Reverend Doctor J. D. McCollough. She was also a good wife and mother. The tragedy of her life was that she was sick much of the time. I never

TWO DREAMS & OTHER TALES

Passing Through

understood exactly what her problem was, but she was always suffering from something. I was five years old when the word “hypochondriac” was first whispered in my presence. At first, I wasn’t old enough to understand what that word meant. By the time I was, I was also old enough to understand why I did not believe that about my mother. First, she never asked for or accepted anyone's sympathy, and never used her condition to control other people. In addition, hypochondria wouldn’t explain the three miscarriages she suffered during the decade that followed my birth. It was these losses that convinced me I would forever be an only child.

My mother surprised us all by giving birth to a daughter in May 1994. We named my baby sister Marcy. She was a very sweet child with an infectious laugh and a headful of red hair. Since her birth was difficult, Momma was determined that we would all protect her like she was a fragile flower. I did my part, often caring for her when my mother was out. By age three, she still could not pronounce the letter “r” so she called me “By-By.” This amused everyone because they always thought she was telling me to go away. I made a joke of it, giving her the pet’s name “May-May.” We were always very close, despite the thirteen-year difference in our ages.

My childhood was that of an ordinary Texas youngster. Hillman was a fairly quiet place, but like kids everywhere, my friends and I always found ways to get into mischief. As a child, I was mostly a dabbler. I tried my hand at music, but couldn't hold a tune, and didn't have the discipline to master a musical instrument. I built various collections—baseball cards, stamps, coins—but eventually lost interest in each. My mother insisted that her children take part in church activities, so I faithfully attended First Baptist and took part in the youth group throughout my childhood. I took an interest in girls, but never stayed interested in any one for long. In high school, I tried athletics. But after two full seasons on the bench, I decided that football wasn't for me. It was right after football season during my sophomore year that I got a job at Fuller's Supermarket, stocking shelves, bagging groceries, and other general labor. This one stuck. Bob Fuller, my boss, was a third-generation grocer, operating the store on Main Street founded by his grandfather in 1948. I stayed with that job through the rest of high school and well into the summer that followed graduation.

TWO DREAMS & OTHER TALES

Passing Through

I was traveling south along Main Street, taking in more familiar sights. It amazed me how little the town had changed, like a snapshot in time held in place. A few of the old businesses were obviously closed—no doubt because of the economic downturn—but the storefronts were still there since nobody else had moved in. It pleased me that the local movie theatre was still running the latest films. My friends and I spent many Friday and Saturday nights there. I stopped at the light where Main Street intersects the aptly name School Street. Looking in one direction and then the other, I saw both of my alma maters, Hillman Primary School, and Hillman High School.

Once on the move again, I kept my gaze primarily to the right, watching for my destination. Once I saw it, I pulled into a parking space on the street out front. It was a large brick building that bore a red, white, and blue sign that identified it as the United States Post Office for Hillman, Texas. Out front, a flagpole rose from the lawn with the U.S. flag flying aloft. This is it, I told myself. Shortly after I conclude my business in there, everyone will know Byron Welles is back in town.