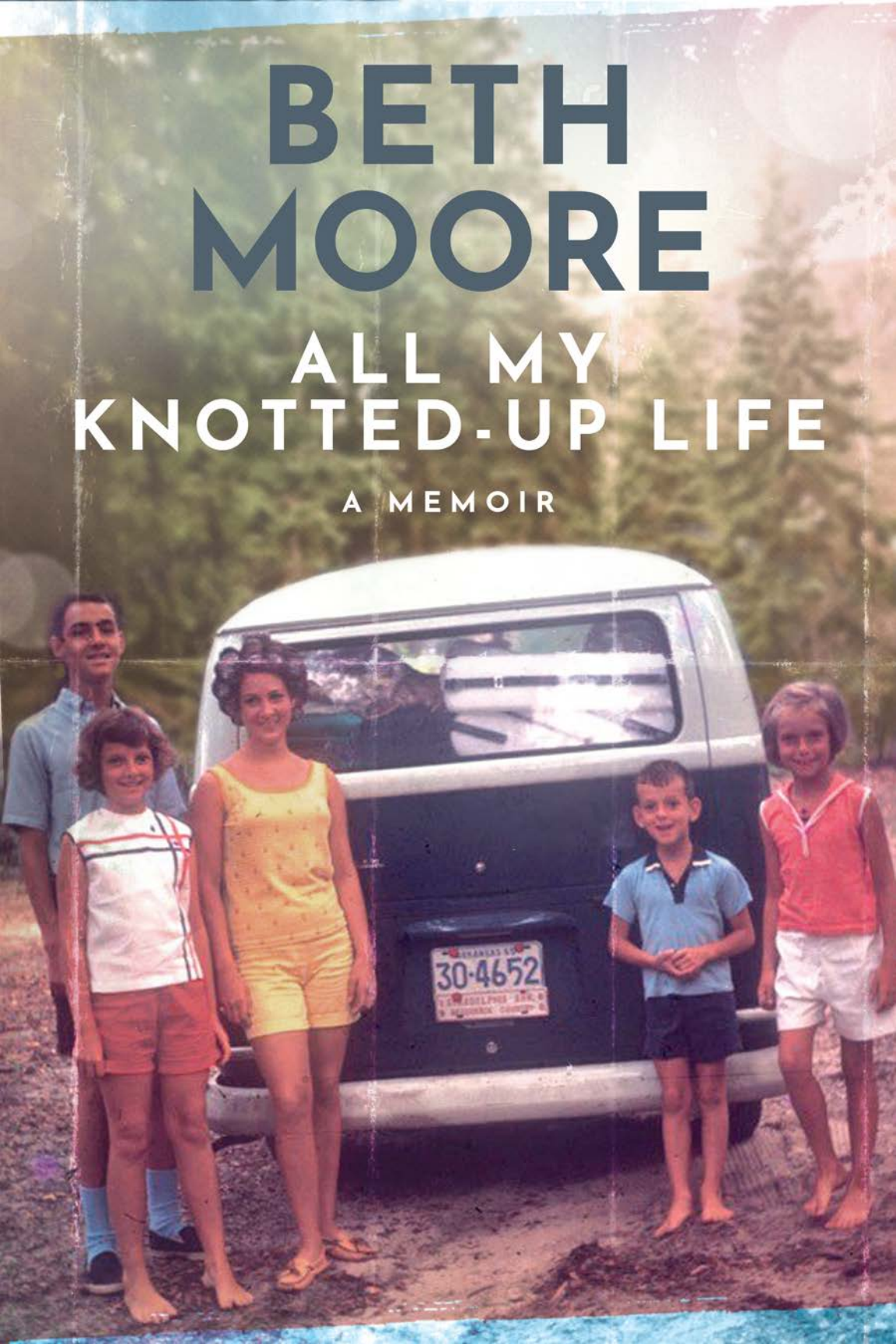
BETH MOORE

ALL MY KNOTTED-UP LIFE

A MEMOIR



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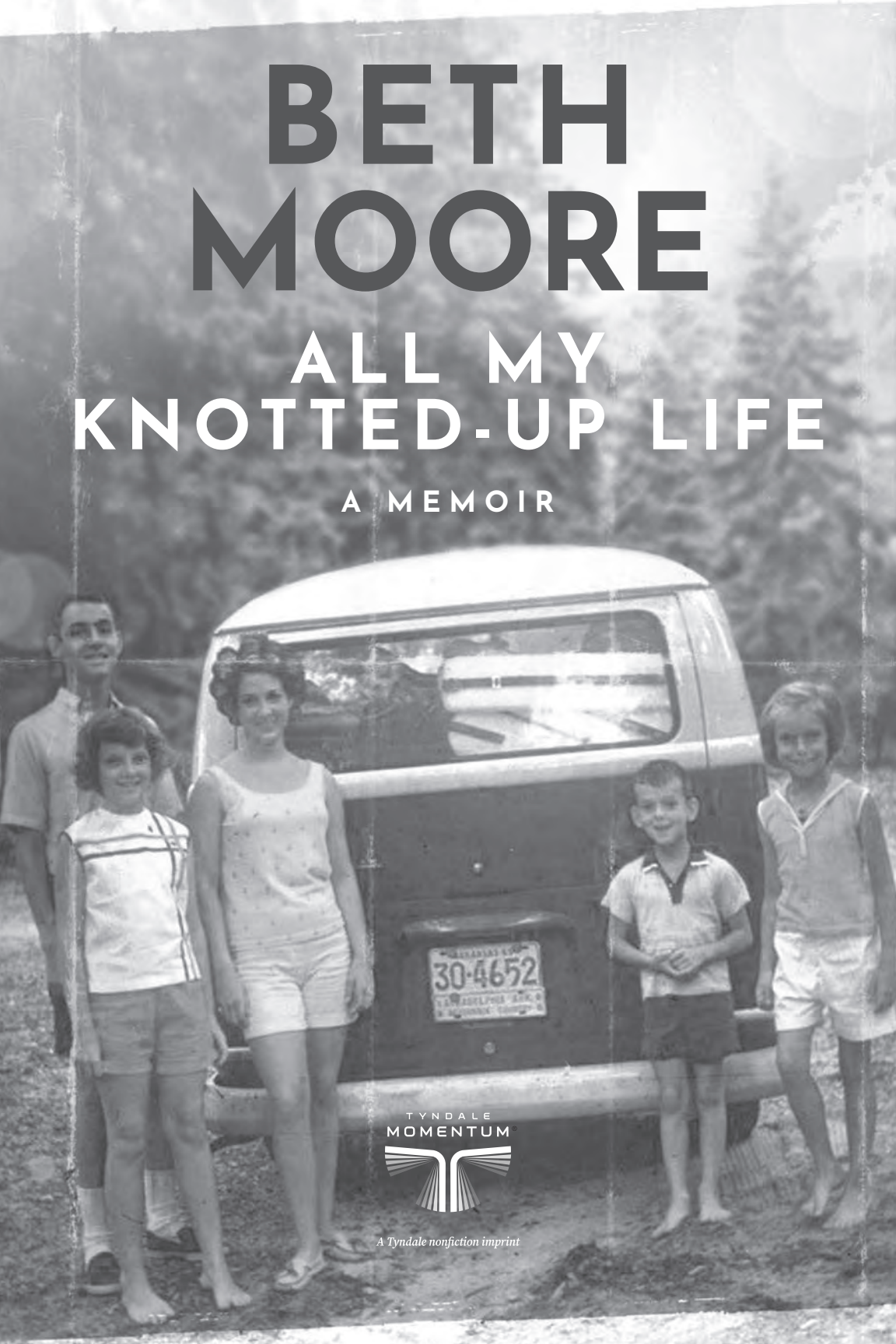

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All My Knotted-Up Life: A Memoir

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To Keith:
Through the fire,
through the flood,
God has been faithful to us.
I love you.

With deep gratitude to my siblings,
in the order of appearance on the cover,
Wayne, Gay, Sandra, and Tony.
I do not take lightly your willingness
to allow me to invite a public view
into my corner of our private lives.
I love you all.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

The burden in telling our individual story is ironically the same thing that made it bearable: we were not alone in it. Perhaps we felt we were, but the truth is, the threads of other people's lives are inevitably knotted into ours even if only by their conspicuous absence. Who, after all, plays a bigger part in our story than one who—whether by sickness, injury, dozing, distraction, occupation, brokenness, divorce, or death—didn't show up? Every life story entails a community of individuals who share one precarious common denominator in the narrative: *you*. Good or bad, *you*. Right or wrong, *you*. The responsibility is immense and, to anyone with a whit of sense, terribly intimidating.

I love a story told, and I love the actual storytelling, but I have not been in a hurry to write a memoir. I think I've been waiting for everything to work out neatly and cleanly. Sensibly. Politely. You hold this book in your hands in large part because I gave up on that. But in a way, the giving up feels more like relief than resignation. I suppose I've also been scared to see the pieces of my story tied together. Scared to discover that what made the whole of it hardest of all was me.

I've waited to write a memoir until my reasons to do so finally exceeded my reasons to refrain. Time had to pass. People had to pass. Others had to age enough to no longer care much what people think. I've worried about hurting people. I've wondered if the kinder thing to do for those who have known my family might be to leave them with better impressions. I lament that telling my story might imply more about the experiences of my family members than either they or I would wish. I've asked their permission and received their blessing and tried my best to leave the most vulnerable parts of their stories to them, but I'm not blind to the cost of showing up in someone else's book. I wince knowing that a story, once told, cannot be untold.

I've attempted, by the grace of God, to untie some knots in these pages. Several of these knots I've kept clenched in a sweaty fist all my life. They needed air and light perhaps even more than understanding. The same distance that can clarify a story can also cloud it. The trick in writing a memoir is knowing which is which. Am I ready to tell it because it is clearer now or because it is less clear? My deep hope, my determined intention, is the former, but the lens of human perception is inevitably impaired.

Few things are more unnerving than writing a memoir of your life with an unknown measure of it yet unlived. For instance, what if the good parts go belly-up before the book even hits a shelf? Publishing a book is always an act of faith. It's a way of saying, "Dear Reader, here is what I'm thinking right now—what I believe to be true and long to be of value to you—but would you forgive me and not hold it against the God of whom I speak if time or divine Providence proves me wrong or woefully deficient?"

And now, if you'll entrust to me a bit of your time, I'll entrust to you a bit of my story.

PROLOGUE

Don't let go. Whatever you do, don't let go. I crumpled my eyelids in two tight knots then cracked them open enough to get my bearings. The current was milky with sand like someone had topped off a big glass of water with a splash of buttermilk. A clod of seaweed grazed my forehead then tumbled off my nose, and water shot through my head, foamy and thick with brine, meeting no apparent barrier and whirlpooling between my ringing ears.

Forcing an eyeshot behind me, I caught sight of my dad's foot. His skin appeared translucent beneath the water, the noon sun turning his purple veins an anemic lilac. We'd been standing beside one another in the surf seconds earlier. We'd inched further out without even moving somehow. The watermark reached the waist of my red one-piece, but he was little more than knee deep. And he was my dad. He'd know where to stop. I dangled my hands just below the surface, palms forward and fingers outstretched, making rivulets in the curl of the calm waves, dazzled by their constancy. This was my maiden voyage to the sea, the first I'd felt the curious tickle of a shifting floor of sand between my toes.

Then, out of nowhere, I was underwater. My arms were instantly taut, elbowless, jerking my shoulders until they swore they'd snap. *Grab me, Dad, before I let go.* My fingers were laced around his right ankle, knuckles locked. My spine stretched into a thin strip of taffy. At the pull of an unheard trigger, I was a bullet of skin clinging to the end of a barrel, begging not to be shot out to sea.

As swiftly as the undertow had sucked my feet out from under me, the current shifted and I swung around, unbending, like the second hand of a clock dropping from 12 to 6, face planted in the sand. My father's sudden yank on my arms snapped my hand-lock from his ankle and I swung like a rag doll to my feet, coughing up a salt mine, a mud-pie patch over one eye. I bit my lip to keep from crying.

I don't remember what Dad said. Perhaps something like, "You're okay. You're okay." It would have been true enough. My arms were limp, but they weren't torn away from my shoulders the way I'd pictured. No sea monsters had managed to drive me out to the open sea and into the gullets of great fish with ten-inch teeth. But *something* had happened, and I wanted to know what. I wanted to know what took him so long. I wanted to know if it scared him that the water tried to swallow me. And I wanted him to say he was sorry, even if he couldn't have helped it. He never knew I had any such questions. I couldn't form a word.

I was turned over to my mother, who was perched on a rusty blue and green web-strap chair under a beach umbrella to shield her fair skin and her seventy-seven-year-old mother from the unfiltered rays of the Florida sun. She gently faced me forward and held me securely between her knees, still chatting with Nanny. Something about my cousin Steedy Boy. He sure was going to be tall, they agreed. The frazzled edge of a strap on the folding chair scratched and bit at the back of my leg.

"Reckon does he have a girlfriend?" My grandmother loved knowing that kind of thing. I liked that about her. I wouldn't have minded knowing the answer myself, just not that very minute.

"Well, I don't know," Mom replied to Nanny. "You'll have to ask him."

"Well, I'm asking you."

"Well, Mother, I don't know."

"Well, *why* don't you know?"

My teeth chattered so hard I thought they'd crack, and my throat stung from the saltwater rush like a potato peeler had been taken to it. As Mom toweled off my shivering six-year-old frame, she asked quizzically, "You cold, honey?" I paused a moment trying to figure out if, somewhere beneath the scared, I was just plain-old ordinary cold. Maybe so. I nodded. She rubbed my arms briskly with a turquoise towel that had a blue and yellow turtle on it. "Let me warm you up!" I still couldn't get a word out. I don't know why, exactly. She would have let me tell her that I thought I was drowning. She wouldn't have made me feel silly. She would have pulled me into her lap and let me cry, and I just know she'd have been hopping mad at my dad. But I couldn't tell her any of it. Never did. My grandmother's question just hung in the air. "Well, why don't you know?"

CHAPTER ONE

We were river people. River people don't have any business going to the sea. The state of Arkansas is an innard in the abdomen of North America, a gallbladder maybe or a spleen. Our arteries pool with visible edges. Arkansas waters are crossable, bridgeable, cushioned on every bank. My hometown of Arkadelphia rests at the bumpy toes of the Ouachita Mountains where two rivers converge. The Ouachita, some six hundred miles total, gathers up the shorter Caddo just north of town, and together they run green and curvy down the city's east side on their lazy way to Louisiana.

With my dad's recent purchase of a blue and white Volkswagen bus, we Greens finally had a vehicle with a wide enough mouth for all eight of us. Since we all fit, why not drive for days on end, packed tighter than my great-grandmother Miss Ruthie's chewing

tobacco, from our small college town all the way to our cousins in north Florida?

"What's a few more miles?" Dad said, taking a red felt-tip to the map and tracing an additional eight-hour jaunt due south to Miami Beach. He, Major Albert B. Green, took charge of the wheel. My mother, Esther Aletha Rountree Green, rode shotgun, with my four-year-old brother, Tony, wiggling like a caged spider monkey between them.

My maternal grandmother, Minnie Ola Rountree, whom we called Nanny, took a lion's share of the middle seat. She was not a small woman, swore she never had been nor did I ever want her to be. Nanny was squooshy, ample-bosomed, pillowy for napping against. The middle seat was a slightly abbreviated version of the back bench seat, and Nanny bounced on its wealth of springs between my nine-year-old sister, Gay, and me. Born three years apart, we two Green girls were thick as thieves and would prove to be precisely as trustworthy.

Named Aletha Gay after our mom, she favored her in appearance, sharing her pecan-brown hair, fair skin, and fetching swathe of freckles across her cheeks. I, the lone blonde in the family, was told from the time I could walk that I favored a different wing of the family. In an era when laboring moms were knocked out for delivery, I came with a bit of a rush, causing my mom to forego the usual protocol and keeping her wide awake for every contraction. Still woozy-headed from the furious ordeal, she took one look at me and bellowed with clear astonishment, "She looks just like my brother-in-law!" This declaration invited all manner of mischief from the nursing staff, who made eyes at her when my dad visited the hospital then winked at her when he came to drive us home.

Two years later, Tony came along looking a good bit more like

Dad and the singular one of us born in our hometown. Gay and I were the only built-in playmates the poor little guy had. He could, therefore, either play what we were playing or play alone. Since we mostly played dolls and he refused to be shut out, he had no recourse but to join us. Tony possessed the maternal touch of a Mack truck, so we assigned him a lesser-cherished baby doll and one durable enough to withstand him. He promptly stuck it all the way to the toe of a long white sock of Dad's and carried it around by the ribbed cuff each time we played. Watching him knock it clumsily against table legs, doorframes, and tree trunks day in and day out caused Gay and me considerable consternation.

Tony was the baby of a three-generation family well-versed in children, so he was warmly humored. "Whatcha got there, Tony?" the adults and big kids would ask. "Oh, this old thing?" he'd say, shrugging his bony little shoulders. "Just a plain ole doll." This was, henceforth, the name it bore. We were forbidden to take any toys bigger than our palms on our summer vacation in the VW bus. One can't be entirely certain that Dad hadn't contrived such a rule in hopes of leaving Plain Ole Doll home in a sock where he believed it belonged. Luckily, two Matchbox cars fit perfectly in Tony's palms, so he made motor sounds and crash noises every waking moment of the trip.

Since Tony's head only popped into view when we hit a pothole, Nanny, who'd never procured a license nor once been behind a wheel, had a clear view to aid my father vociferously in his driving from her perch in the middle seat. Her second advantage was full range of motion to swat anyone who proved worthy of it. Old as she was, she aimed more than struck, so the sibling next to the offender may as well have been complicit. Whoever coined the idiom *hitting two birds with one stone* was looking square at the arm of my nanny. The generous amount of flesh that hung from

her upper arm flapped winglike when she swung. I figure this was the secret to her momentum.

Riding caboose in the VW bus were the oldest two of us five Green kids. My sister, Sandra, was an exotic eighteen. She knew how to do good hair and makeup, and she had a college-aged boyfriend. Gay and I were in awe of her and had high hopes of her turning out to be deliciously scandalous. She never delivered, but we set the bar low enough for scandal that any drama at all satisfied, and if the Greens were good at anything, it was drama. Next to her in the back seat was my dreamy big brother, Wayne. He was fourteen, the uncontested crush of my entire young life, and through my hazel eyes, Paul McCartney's identical twin. And he was musical. Who on earth would think this a coincidence? Sandra and Wayne were inarguably in their prime because they knew how to dance. They could put a stack of 45s on the record player at home, shake and swing like they were on Dick Clark, then flip those records over and do it all again to another set of songs. They may as well have been hippies.

We were told to pack light, so a mishmash of no less than ten pieces of luggage was strapped hillbilly-like to the top of the van alongside our brand-new tent from the Sears and Roebuck, still in its packaging. None of us had ever camped before except the major, of course, on battlefields in World War II and Korea, though we hoped for a different ambience. Motel expenses for a voluminous family on summer vacation were out of the question on an Army budget. Our kind of people didn't take destination vacations anyhow. We only went to see relatives on account of cheaper food and lodging. It wasn't until much later, after we moved to Houston, that I'd ever hear anyone say, "We're going snow skiing for spring break." *What kin live there?* "Who's Ken?" they'd say. *I didn't say Ken. I said kin. Your relatives.* Texans didn't

have the vocabulary God gave a groundhog. "Well, none," they'd say. *Well, why are you going?* "To ski," they'd say.

Since I have no vivid memory when this wasn't so, I don't think it's too soon to say that Albert and Aletha were not as fond of one another as one might hope on a two-week vacation or, for that matter, what would turn out to be a fifty-something-year-long marriage. I could offer a good many reasons why this was true, but for now, only one is needful: my father drove with both feet, his right sole on the accelerator and his left on the brake, even when he was privileged to be at the wheel of an automatic.

The erratic spasms of Dad's two-foot driving made a catnap particularly challenging for passengers on a protracted trip. My mother was the anxious type, at which I, a woman of like ilk, choose to cast no stone. I mean only to paint the picture of my parents, Albert and Aletha, in the front seat of a VW bus for hours. She kept her left arm stretched over my little brother at all times and her right hand braced on the dashboard with a lit cigarette between her index and middle fingers, catching a drag when catch could. And catch always could.

I was raised in a cloudy pillar by day and a lighter by night. To this day, I nurse a fondness for the sound of a match head combusting against the striking strip of a small rectangular box—*tet-szzzzoooo* like a petite bottle rocket on the Fourth of July—and for the pitchy quick-fading scent of sulfur dioxide.

The real work on that summer vacation began when we stopped for the night at the Fort Walton Beach campsite. I suspect saving the expense of motel stays might not have been the solitary reason for the tent purchase. My cousins were campers in the same way ants are insects. They were the sort that could have started a fire rubbing dandelions together, and lost in a forest, weeks of wild

berries, grasshoppers, and deer milk would have left them no less robust.

We were more the Piggly Wiggly type. It was never said, "How hard could putting up a tent be?" But what did go without saying was that my father never missed a chance to compete, and my uncle, whom we'd see shortly, was a formidable foe. He was the only one in the entire extended family whose record in the armed services came close to Dad's, and let no one suppose that a competition's being "friendly" makes it a whit less serious. Dad didn't use a lot of profanity, but he had a way of making perfectly respectable slang words sound brazen. He found little aid from the written instructions that came with the tent packaging and what appeared to be no aid at all from the audible instructions that came with Nanny. On the average day, an impressive number of Nanny's sentences began with the words *Well, why don't you . . . ?* On this trip, as far as I could tell, she was clocking at a record 98 percent.

Dad was tricolored by now, his face deep red against that one narrow strip of white in a head full of hair that was otherwise the color of cocoa. I'd always thought that one shock of white looked like someone dribbled a tablespoon of trimming paint on his head and, feeling something wet, he'd run his little finger from forehead to crown to wipe it off. I'd been wrong all along. It was as clear as a bell now exactly what it looked like: a single strike of lightning. This was not so much frightening as it was factual.

While Dad tried to figure out which side of the tent was the top, Mom emptied half a carton of Pall Malls. The more he huffed, the more she puffed. The rest of us coped with the taxing assemblage in our own ways. Wayne stood by wide-eyed, fidgeting with an edge of the canvas, scared to help and scared not to. Any second, Dad was going to say, "Are you just going to stand there?" I suspect this quickly approaching inevitability is why Sandra

suddenly volunteered to walk Gay to the campground restrooms. Tony threw rocks, which lessened neither the huffing nor the puffing, and I sucked my usual two fingers and stared at the night sky, wondering why Florida had no stars. We had stars in Arkansas.

Having finally triumphed over the tent pegs, Dad entered through the zippered door and was swallowed whole by nylon. A great flailing commenced, a ghost thrashing. Somewhere near the apparition's rotating head, the top end of a tent pole searched wretchedly for a point until it was found and affixed. Dad emerged like a slathered newborn from a heavy-labored nylon womb.

Each of us was handed an olive-green air mattress to blow up for our beds. Nanny, being elderly and all, got both an air mattress and a cot to set it on. There is an art to squeezing the mattress valve open while you blow through it that exceeds the mastery of small children. Despite the loudest of efforts, Tony's lips never did seal around the valve, meaning he primarily spit on his mattress. What was left dry, he likely wet during the night. I puffed a few thimblefuls of air into the pillow compartment of mine and grew dramatically faint. By the time we'd wrangled eight mattresses and a cot inside the tent and crawled in for the night, the choppy asthmatic breaths of oxygen-deprived blowers punctured the thick, steamy air.

• • •

Family is a heck of a thing, fierce and frightful. There we are, all zipped up inside the unknown together and not always voluntarily. It can be dark in there, trying to get through the night. We can feel utterly alone, singular and isolated, while crushed and crowded and so close in body that our sweat mingles and we inhale what they exhale, unfiltered. We want to touch, to hold hands, on

our own terms, which is our right and ought to be our right, but most times we don't. We go from knowing each other better than we know ourselves, to barely sure if we know each other at all, to precisely sure that we don't. And truth be told, we don't know one another in the same way outsiders might. We know too much to know each other.

Reasonable allowances have to be made amid such nearness. We want to be known but not memorized as if we cannot change. Family has a way of freezing its constituents in time, for better or for worse, confident that what was true twenty years ago is true now and will be true in twenty more. Unchecked, we lose sight of one another's otherness. We're amoebas, constantly swallowing one another or splitting off, simultaneously demanding singularity and intimacy.

These are my people. My original loves, my flesh and my bones. I know their jokes. I know their quirks. We have the same noses. Different slices of the same secrets are on our plates. We've survived the same blows. We speak in strange tongues, syllables of a run-on sentence that began in our infancies, untranslatable to casual visitors.

All my knotted-up life I've longed for the sanity and simplicity of knowing who's good and who's bad. I've wanted to know this about myself as much as anyone. I needed God to clean up the mess, divide the room, sort the mail so all of us can just get on with it and be who we are. Go where we're bent. This was not theological. It was strictly relational. God could do what he wanted with eternity. I was just trying to make it here in the meantime, and what I thought would help me make it was for people to be one thing or the other, good or bad. Keep it simple. As benevolent as he has been in a myriad of ways, God has remained aloof on this uncomplicated request.

Take my dad's grandmother, Miss Ruthie, for example. She was a hard woman to watch, chewing all that tobacco. At times the foaming saliva was as thick and brown as molasses and, instead of committing to the task with a resolute and plosive *puh*, she seemed perfectly happy to let it hang. A quarter teaspoon would suspend from her lower lip like it had no place to go. She held onto her spit can like an old country preacher hanging on to his King James. If she got up, she carried it around with her, sloshing. By *it*, I mean the spit can, not that a Bible can't slosh on occasion. She stuck the whole thing in a brown paper bag with the edges rolled down like nobody would know what was in it. I never once saw her without her hair in a tight knot right on top of her head like a large white spool. I cannot think the topknot was unrelated to the spit can. No woman wants her hair dangling in her chaw.

This was Miss Ruthie, plain as day. We knew all we needed to know about her. She was one thing, not two. Then my brother Wayne told me, "I spent the night with Miss Ruthie one time, and when she took all those pins out of her hair and leaned forward in her chair to brush it, her hair fell all the way to the floor, silky and beautiful. I was fascinated." My whole family—well, for the most part—is like this. Spitting in a can, all spool-headed, one minute. Sleek and lovely and mesmerizing the next.

That I find measurable security in clean-cut categories, in jet black and blood red and bleached white, explains why most of my life has been a slow baptism in the lukewarm waters of a silty gray Jordan.

• • •

I'm not sure how many of us had fallen asleep when the first clap of thunder came, but my mother shot up from her air mattress like she'd been electrified. The next strip of lightning was a

white-hot fillet knife, severing the starless tarp over Fort Walton Beach, dumping a pent-up lake right on top of us.

In our family, fear was a core value. We were tutored and tested on it, unapologetically indoctrinated on how to live life terrified out of our minds, hypervigilant against every threat because one truth was truer than all other truths: life would kill you. No matter what we were in the middle of doing, be it showering or making cinnamon toast, when a thunderstorm hit, everybody in the house had to scurry to the nearest spot to sit and prop our feet up, and God help you if your nearest place was next to a window. You'd be dead, seared to charcoal, in seconds, and the sight of you would scar the rest of us for life. The propping of the feet was an utmost priority because when—not if—lightning struck the house, anyone with sole of feet on wood of floor would perish. This fact was also somehow connected to why we couldn't turn a light switch on and off with one hand while holding a glass of water in the other.

The marvel of our Sears and Roebuck tent was that, in the brief wake of a long, laborious assembly, it disassembled with remarkable ease. There was no waiting around to watch the full collapse, however. Not with Mom yelling the way she was. She bellowed with such volume for us to *run!* to the VW that it's a wonder every camper within a thousand square feet didn't beat us to it. Nanny's mouth ran much faster than her legs, so she put it to use advancing our gait from behind. "Git! Didn't I say git? I did! I said git!" And we did.

To spare her dignity, I tried not to stare at Nanny once she made it into the van. She couldn't help that her hair was feathery to start with and, now that it was wet, she appeared not to have hair one. The way I knew her hair was feathery is because, every time Mom teased Nanny's hair to give it a little height, she'd say, "If your hair wasn't suh feathery . . ."

I tried to look straight ahead and mind my own affairs, only to catch a glimpse of Dad's hair in the rearview mirror. The downpour had caused his streak of lightning to slide from the top of his forehead to his eyebrow in a near perfect diagonal, dripping curiously at the tip end. He'd soon pull out his small plastic comb and correct it, but I resolved to ponder the sight for some time.

He slipped the bus into reverse and we sped away from a family-size tent, eight air mattresses, and one cot like we'd never known them. By sheer divine mercy, we happened on an open-all-night diner near Fort Walton Beach and took refuge there until the storm passed and the sun winked sleepily from the east. The diner could've used a good sweeping, but years of well-peppered hamburger meat and salty eggs and bacon sizzling on the stainless-steel grill had glazed the walls, tables, and chairs with such a layer of grease that the whole place smelled like we'd died and gone to heaven. Half a dozen crinkle-cut fries were scattered on the floor, but they looked like they'd been pretty good at some point.

Dad's mood had not improved, but the handwriting was on the wall by way of a thumbtacked menu. No way was this tent-worn family not going to eat. He pulled out his wallet and thumbed through a modest vacation's worth of dollar bills, and we kids glanced at one another with glee. He didn't say yes, but Dad's yes was when he didn't say no. We ordered the bare minimum straight from the cook. No one dared say the word *Coca-Cola*, let alone *chocolate shake*. We knew we were on our benefactor's last nerve. By the time our stomachs were full, we were sleepy and grouchy and bored, so Tony, Gay, and I had little choice but to amuse ourselves by licking the grape and strawberry jelly out of the little packets on the tables. Those were free.

The subject was bound to come up at some point and this was as good a time as any.

"I shoulda flown," Nanny said, perturbed, scooting the metal chair back from the Formica table and folding her arms across her chest. When Nanny made a definitive statement, she ended it by jutting out her jaw and swallowing her upper lip with her lower lip. This was sign language for *That's all there is to it.*

Mom jumped right in like she'd been waiting for it all day. "Flown? Momma, have you forgotten what a lather you got yourself into the last time you flew?"

"When?"

"Two years ago when you flew to Florida!"

"I don't 'member no lather."

"What do you mean, you don't remember? You don't remember packing your burial dress in your suitcase?"

"Wadn't no lather to it. Puredee common sense. I see it ain't as common as it orta be."

Mom rubbed her head.

Dad had all but turned his back to his kin by then, like we hadn't all come in together. When my father's face was only a little flushed, you could see—that is, if you knew what you were looking for—that place where they patched the left side of his face, right there between his cheekbone and his nose, after he took a bullet early in World War II. If it didn't get a good gush of blood supply, it stayed gray, looking just like Silly Putty, like it knew it belonged on a different cheek.

In my family we rightly called any private part of the body *the bunny*. We did not say *bottom*, and we certainly did not say *butt*. Well, all but Tony, who continually spelled it out loud just because he was naughty, but since he spelled it "b-o-t-t," he didn't get fussed at. Me and Gay loved snickering about how Dad's bunny was on his face, especially when we were in trouble. Mind you, I didn't get in much trouble because I was "overly sensitive" and

scared of him, but Gay wasn't scared of the devil. She stayed in a fair amount of trouble on account of her mouth, but whispering "Bunny Face" behind his back was no small consolation.

Mom and Nanny were still going at it in the all-night diner. Now, there was no one on earth my momma loved more than my nanny, but she likely knew that, if she didn't react to Nanny smarting off that she should've flown to Florida, Dad would, and then it would go from a harmless argument to something that wasn't. Everybody knows in-laws can't get away with saying what blood can.

"Who would think an old woman ort not to take a buryin' dress?" Nanny let her voice tremble a bit and feigned a most stricken look, like her feet were already resting lifeless in a casket. "My heart could give out at any time."

"Minnie Rountree," my mother said, "you know good and well taking that burial dress had nothing to do with you being an old woman. Had nothing to do with your heart, either. You said it yourself. You packed your burial dress in the likely case the Cubans planned to hijack the plane."

Things like this had to play out in my mind so I could make sense of them. I guessed the hijackers would bury Nanny in Cuba, and I wasn't sure where that was, but I knew it was a long way from Arkadelphia. I further guessed they'd fetch her burial dress out of her suitcase and put it on her before they put her in the ground in a Cuban casket.

"Load up!" Dad had gone outside and taken a good look at the sky and stuck his head back through the doorway, motioning for us. We were a disheveled bunch and red-eyed, climbing back into the VW bus. Our tires bumped and splashed through wide puddles left by the night storm as we made our way back to the campsite. There was no rescuing the tent. This was strictly a recovery

mission. Dad pulled out the cot first, then all eight air mattresses, and that's when we little kids saved the day. We hopped from one mattress to the next, marching on them, stomping on them, and turning somersaults on them with great enthusiasm while those over five feet tall held the nozzles open so they'd deflate. According to my oldest sister, Dad didn't bother with the formality of folding the tent. He wadded it up in a big hunk, then roped it to the back with a bungee cord. Sandra declared it was so heavy that every time we hit a bump, the back fender dragged on the pavement.

We drove just like that all the way into the open arms of our cousins, who had a small and spectacularly wonderful little place by the lake. We were Arkansans. We understood lakes. We had a blissful three days with our Rountree cousins whether Aunt Jewel could cook a decent pancake or not. We also managed to make it to Miami, that fast and furious town of renown, though by this time, all hopes of cruising proudly down its palm-lined boulevards proved mockingly vain. The alternator went out on our brand-new blue and white Volkswagen bus, and until we could get to a mechanic who'd extend credit, Sandra and Wayne were enlisted to push it while Dad started it. This was understandably humiliating to them both and untoward for exotics. From the middle seat directly behind Dad, I intuited, young though I was, his pinch-lipped disappointment in their lack of zeal. I tried to sit light on the seat in case it helped. Sandra's detailed memory of the way the tent was bunched up on the back came on account of it not being all that easy to find a good place to push.

The last stop on our summer vacation was the parking lot of the Sears and Roebuck. Dad, having retrieved his purchase from the bumper of the bus, was seen marching as to war through the thick glass doors with a vinyl tent big enough for eight wadded up in his arms, window flaps dangling at his knees. Our home away from

home was returned replete with leaves, sand, and a brisk request for a refund. With one last push, we made it up the hill to a modest red-brick dwelling on the outskirts of our small, familiar town.

Before Nanny could plant her foot steady on the concrete beneath the carport, Mom was turning on the water kettle, Dad was in the bathroom with a newspaper, Sandra was calling her boyfriend, Wayne was playing the piano, Gay was riding her bike, and Tony had a dog by the tail. And I? Well, I was twirling around on the burlap-bag swing hanging from the strong arm of an Arkansas pine, its golden-brown needles between my toes.