



Sarah Baker

My Tennessee Home Town

The town was populated by a thousand or so Puritanical folk who worked hard during the week and attended one of the five Protestant churches on Sundays. It was my hometown during my childhood and girlhood and I remember it well. It lay near a river, but not on it, which meant that on Saturdays a flock of cars parked along the banks of the river. On dewy summer evenings, high school petters and lovers hid on muddy roads. One particular place, called “the Hairy Hand Bridge” —a kind of Gothic name— had a reputation as dangerous. It was there that the local Baptist preacher undressed young female members of his congregation and was said to fondle them. Apparently he suggested to his youthful prey that they could come to him after they turned 30, provided they were still virgins. Then he promised that he would guide them through what he called “the Godly act of intercourse.”

At twenty-seven, our Baptist preacher who was, of course, white, fancied himself an Elvis look-alike when Elvis was all the rage. He slicked up his hair into a shiny pompadour, likely made by using copious amounts of Brylcreem (“a little dab’ll do ya”). He chose his victims carefully and only after they came to him in distress. He filled roles that were, in more progressive communities, performed by psychologists and medical doctors. Often, he took girls for a drive to discuss their problems. When he had heard them out, he leaned forward and kissed them on the mouth. So I heard tell. Most swooned; many had never been kissed, and certainly not in his way.

Parents never discussed sex with their sons and daughters; we learned on our own through experimentation: exploring members of the opposite sex in Sunday School rooms; reading pamphlets that came with boxes of menstrual pads; looking at “dirty” magazines; or gathering around a stray copy of *The Joy of Sex* found hidden in a parent’s bedroom.

Perhaps the most surprising event to happen in school regarding the subject of sex happened in 1954, when the state added sex education to the grade school curriculum. Sixth graders, herded into an upstairs classroom in the ancient brick building, giggled nervously while an old woman, who most likely had never experienced anything close to intimacy, instructed us about how babies were made. She showed us pictures of ovaries and talked about something called “gonads.”

Of course, as was bound to happen, my classmates found their voices and began to ask questions such as “can you get pregnant if a boy comes on the outside of your panties,” which jolted the teacher into a red-faced expression and caused a couple of smart-alecks to be expelled from the room.

When the bell rang at the end of the day, five days a week, squealing, laughing children poured out of classrooms, down the oily stairs, and landed on floors black and smelly from years of grease and dirt ground underfoot. They streamed outside to play in red clay dirt, jumped on jungle gyms and merry-go-rounds until big yellow buses arrived. Many of the rural children climbed aboard and sometimes for an hour traveled on backroads carved into the woods before they reached their homes. Once there, chores had to be done: animals fed, supper cooked, floors swept, eggs gathered, and games played: jacks, parcheesi, monopoly, and canasta, though some parents would not allow cards in the house.

Men tended to refer to each other as “Brother”: Brother Smith, Brother James, Brother Mcphail, Brother Bowman, Brother Burton and so on. The brothers were deacons in the churches where the difference between the doctrines of the Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Pentecostals were slight. The wives were known as Mrs. Bowman, Mrs. Smith, and so on. If you sent a card or letter to a woman, it was addressed to Mrs. Bill Smith, or Mrs. Elbert Bowman. Women were rarely known by their own first names, except Mrs. Millar, who owned a beauty shop called “Lorraine’s.” Everyone called her “Lorraine.” Most of the women in town, including my mother, went to Lorraine’s to get their hair “fixed” before Sunday church service. Many had standing appointments for Saturdays, after which they wrapped their heads in toilet paper and put on a hair net before they went to bed to keep the curls in place, exactly as Lorraine had fixed them.

Much of the town gossip circulated through Lorraine's Beauty Shop. Yes, there were a couple of other beauty shops, but they were situated in someone's house, usually in a front room, while Lorraine's occupied a separate building on Main Street. Lorraine was the best hair fixer in town, from permanents to dyeing. Plus, Lorraine was glamorous. She kept her hair in a voluptuous bun on the top of her head, and always, always wore a fabulous shade of apple red lipstick. On her face were perched fashionable, large black-framed glasses, setting off her mascaraed lashes and complimenting her dark brown eyes. She was a big woman with a square jaw--an imposing figure in elegant clothes which she bought at a shop in the nearest city.

The other place to see and be seen in town was Nola's Cafe, attached conveniently to the lone movie theater. I went there often, as it was my favorite for burgers. Nola, the chief cook, bottle washer, and owner, held the distinction of being unaffiliated with any church. She opened the cafe on the Lord's Day, which was frowned upon by many. Still, you would see townspeople there after church, both for lunch and dinner, Sundays. Nola was stocky and wide, always wore an apron, and kept a keen eye out for foolishness from children, which she would report to parents when needed.

Not the only cafe in town, Nola's competed with the Do-Drop-In, which was frequented by kids on their way home from school. Cokes, mostly, and if they had money, they could buy a hot dog or hamburger there, though the burgers were no match for Nola's. The Do-Drop-In maintained its edge by installing miniature juke boxes in the booths, which brought Sam Cooke, Brook Benton, Ray Charles, Brenda Lee, and, of course, Elvis to the ears of white teenagers and thrilled them as they jostled each other to feed quarters into the brightly lit boxes.

In the spring, Mrs. Blankenship's Flower Garden on Main Street brought oglers from all over, as every square inch of her one-acre property was covered with blooming peonies, irises, dahlias, bachelor buttons, lilies, snowball bushes, butterfly bushes, gardenias, verbena and roses. The apple and plum trees blossomed into masses of pink, and partnered with the blue sky.

At prom time, southern belles in their borrowed evening dresses spread themselves out on lawns, resembling giant ice cream sundaes. They had their pictures taken no doubt so they could display them on walls when they had families of their own. Hardly anyone in my home town went to college. Then, the prevailing belief was that a daughter would end up getting married, so of what use was an education? Boys became farmers and auto mechanics. They made a good honest living, and money was to be had immediately after high school graduation, rather than after four years of college and having to move away. Generations of families lived on the same piece of land, sometimes in the very same house for their entire lives.

Those who went away for higher education rarely returned, except for funerals. Once they left, and caught a glimpse of the outside world with its temptations, the little town seemed quaint and old fashioned at best. It was not a place where you could be yourself. If you went away, you would be rebuked for getting above your station in life. Best to move on and find another place in the world where gossip held less sway over your life.

And so it was that I came to leave and to search for different ways from those that I obtained in my hometown near the river with its churches and its beauty parlors and Mr. and Mrs.

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