

Little Paper Boats

Justin Morris

Bonnie Lee Miller was a coffee bean of a lady. Petite, yet within her was an explosively vibrant person who spoke her words with razors edge but was always heard with the ease of smooth, melted butter. Her insults were her most sincere compliments, and her compliments, her most obvious insincerities. She insulted those she loved and talked up those to whom she was indifferent.

It wasn't the words she used, but the way she said them: with an overexaggerated and bombastic irreverence so that none, not even the insulted, could escape laughter. Bonnie could get away saying just about anything unscathed – a fact to which she was not the least bit indifferent.

She'd look over a casket lip and say, "My God! They've made her up to be a harlot!" And draw no ire from those around. No one would rebuke her insolence or question her disrespect. Nor would they try to pull her away from the body to prevent any further attacks on the dead's memory.

She'd offended no one, not even the deceased. In fact, people would laugh. They couldn't stop themselves. They'd laugh and chuckle and snicker through the tears that ran down their faces, coagulating just above their jawlines.

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Bonnie was born in April of 1923 and grew up in Cleveland, Georgia during the Great Depression. Tough times made all the more tough for Bonnie with her mother's death in 1932, leaving her the eldest of the Miller children and solely responsible for all six of her siblings as her father had left home to look for work towards the beginning of the Depression. With only a single trickle of income to care for such a large family, money was tight. And because of this, Bonnie was a stingy lady; she could make a dollar stretch thin, so to speak. She had to. Everyone had to in the Depression, Bonnie even more so.

Even long after the Depression had ended, Bonnie was still hesitant to spend any unnecessary money. She kept her purse close to her at all times, not only figuratively, but literally. It was never separate from her; it was almost like an extension of her arm.

After her daughter Janice's wedding in 1963, all the ladies of the family gathered to take a large group photo at the church altar. All of them had set their purses off in the pews. All except Bonnie.

"Mama, you can't be the only one holding your purse, it'll look odd. Go put it down in one of the pews" Janice demanded.

Bonnie silently responded with a raise of an eyebrow and an unfaltering stare that seemed to jet deep into the black of Janice's eyes. The two were locked in a stalemate for all but ten seconds until Janice, knowing her mother well, conceded.

"Fine."

They all posed and took the picture. Photographed were three descending rows of ladies, some wearing white dresses, others blue and others, still, wore red. Some smiled with wide, teathy grins and others with subtle smirks. But they all clung tight to their purses with both hands.

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“Where am I?”

The room around Toby felt wholly unfamiliar. The beige walls, the bed with the sickly pink spread, the speckled tile floor, the stucco ceiling. None of it sparked even the slightest flicker of remembrance. Hung on the wall to the right of the bed was a framed painting of a beach. In the surf stood an elephant with calloused, grey skin that covered its snake-like trunk which held firm to a small paper boat. Further out in the water were even more of these boats, which seemed to float in peace upon the serene waters. Toby looked at the picture with a gaze that held within it a slight tinge of memory but was broken when she burst into a fit of labored coughs.

She turned her head from the painting and straight on to a large mirror that extended up from the floor and up to the crease of the ceiling. The mirror reflected the image of a wheelchair-bound, hunched and grey-haired lady wearing a white hospital gown. Toby blinked, so did the reflection. She rolled herself closer to the mirror and the reflection moved closer to her. She rolled herself as to nearly touch noses with image. Deeply, she stared into the reflection’s faded eyes. Toby’s lower jaw began to quiver, and a tear was set free from the reflections eye.

“That’s not me” Toby said, softly.

“That’s not me” she repeated, slightly louder.

She repeated herself again, and again, and on and on until her voice had made a crescendo from a whisper to a shout that would curdle an alligator's blood and send a shiver down the back of Satan.

“Stop it! Stop it!” she screamed at the mirror, begging it to reflect anything but that wrinkled lady. She kicked the mirror violently until a crack shot up from the bottom to half-way up its face like a bolt of lightning.

Outside the room, nurses heard Toby's screams and made their way to her room with a slow pace which accelerated to a run upon hearing the busting of glass.

Toby fought violently as nurses pressed her down firm against the pink spread. They tried to get her to breathe but she was much too worked up.

“I really hate to do this again, but you she won't calm down otherwise.”

Toby felt a sharp pain in her left upper arm as a needle broke her skin and sedative shot into her vein. She suddenly felt the fight ease out of her as her muscles relaxed and drowsiness set in. Her neck went limp, and her head flopped over to face the painting on the wall. With half opened eyes, Toby set her gaze intently upon the elephant standing in the surf. In her last moments of consciousness, she imagined the elephant folding the paper boats and setting them to sail atop the calm waters. One of the boats began to drift but the elephant took hold of it with her trunk just before it was out of her reach. She pulled it to shore and held it up to her eyes. Toby felt a jolt of clarity, but only for a brief moment.

“Oh, unseen angels...” Then all went black.

Bonnie's singing voice sounded like salt being rubbed rough between pieces of sandpaper and she could hardly keep hold of a tune better than oil-covered hands could hold a new-born. Nonetheless, every Sunday, she was among the Damascus City Church choir belting out hymns with fiery passion.

From Amazing Grace to In Christ Alone, one would be pressed to find a hymn that Bonnie didn't know by heart, and one that she didn't love to sing. But of all the hymns, her favorite was by far Precious Memories. The choir would sing it every Sunday, despite the choir director's distaste for the song and the congregation's annoyance at having heard the song every week for as far back as they could recall.

Everyone in the church would sing the hymn in a fatigued monotone, except for Bonnie. She would belt out the lyrics at a near scream and with terrifying intensity. The words would echo and re-echo around the sanctuary.

Precious memories, how they linger

How they ever flood my soul

In the stillness, of the midnight

Precious sacred scenes unfold

Even the pack of young recruits gathered outside of the church edifice could hear Bonnie's voice, only slightly muffled by the church walls.

America's entrance into the Second World War saw a lot of high school boys drop out to enter the war effort. After enlisting and awaiting their report date, the new recruits spent their

days trying to find that special girl that the dream of one day returning home could push them to fight harder and keep the will to survive strong. They had at once lost the large selection they were privy to upon dropping out of school, so they took to setting up ambushes for church-going girls outside of the church on Sunday mornings, heckling them and catcalling them as soon as they stepped through the church threshold.

Bonnie had learned to ignore the boy's advances. But one Sunday, she must have been wearing a dress the boys found particularly attractive, for she found herself surrounded by an abnormally large group of would-be suitors. She tried pushing past them, but they had formed an impenetrable wall of meat, muscle and raging hormones. She tried to stave them off with her biting sarcasm, the only defense mechanism she had in her repertoire.

"Now if you just fight the Nazis with this same ferocity as you fight for my affection, the war'll be over in no time!"

The sardonic witticism bounced off the group, eliciting no more of a response than a few nasty snickers from a couple of the boys. Bonnie's only defense had failed and left her entirely vulnerable. The group slowly encroached upon her, closing in on her tighter with every passing second.

"Let me by!"

One of the recruits took hold of her arm which she yanked away and slapped his hand. Suddenly, another boy – who was much smaller than the others – punched through the crowd and placed his arm across Bonnie's shoulders.

"Back off fellas, she's taken" he said sternly to the pack of recruits.

All was quiet and motionless for a moment as the smaller boy stared with stern resolve at the group. The quiet was ended when the group dispersed with disappointed mutters and spread out among the other girls who were still around.

“I’ll walk you home” the smaller boy said to Bonnie. And he did. He left Bonnie at the porch of her house and without a word, walked back in the direction that they had come. Bonnie watched him closely as he strolled down the sidewalk back towards the church.

“Strange boy” she thought to herself. She thought the same thing when he showed back up on her porch the next morning to ask her on a date. His name was James Ivy Toler, and their marriage made her Bonnie Lee Toler.

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Toby lied prone under the tight covers of a hospital bed, glancing wide-eyed around the room. The beige walls, the stucco ceiling, the sickly pink bedspread, the cracked mirror. None of it felt familiar. She turned her head towards the framed painting on the wall next to her.

“How beautiful,” she thought, “how beautiful it is for the elephant, all of its little boats floating close-by and still upon heavenly waters that neither push out nor pull under. All of it so real and tangible and within trunks reach. It need only reach out into the waters for its little paper boats to remember what it’s done, the things it’s created, and the purpose of it all.

My waters are troubled. My waters are not peaceful. My boats have all gone away, pushed out by blaspheming winds. Pulled under by the jolting, restless waves that crumble everything I’ve done and steal my capacity to do anything further, leaving me with the asinine and banal present moment that is entirely meaningless and out of context. It’s as though my brain

has died but forgot to tell my body to do the same on its way out leaving me in this hellish purgatory with no remembrance of any possible respite or future heaven. Lord, take me out of this. Take me from this hell. Oh, God. Oh my God..."

Panic set in quickly in Toby's mind. Her breathing picked up and her limbs became restless. She jerked wildly but was restricted by the pressure of the tightly made bedsheets. Tears billowed up and fell down from her eyes. She opened her mouth to scream.

However, she was cut off before making a noise by another voice that came from the corner of the room.

"She said she wanted it to be at Alexander's" spoke a light, elderly female voice. Toby's panic was quenched by curiosity. She calmly pushed her upper body up to see an older man and woman seated at a table with their backs to her and facing one another. Toby hadn't noticed them before.

"Aw, hell. She'll be dead, why does she care where the funeral is held? Just send her to Barrett's. It'd be so much cheaper." the old man said, leaning back in his seat.

"Oh, be quiet, Bobby. You're going to wake her up if you keep on like that," the lady responded, "Now, I told you, she specifically asked for Alexander's. She said that Barrett's makes their women look like harlots. Now, it may not make a difference to her once she's dead, but it does to me."

The old man shook his head and let out a labored sigh. "Fine, then."

Toby couldn't put a name either of the pair, but she felt a glimmer of warmth while looking at the lady. There was something about her that she did recognize, not a physical recognition, but an emotional pull. A warm feeling in her gut that told her that the lady was someone to be loved and cared for. Toby wished she could remember the lady's name. But she

couldn't. There was a block of mental entanglements that prevented the name and facts of the lady from coming to consciousness, but the jungle of memory shards could not stop emotional remembrance from sneaking through, though only slightly. Toby held her face in her hands, tears pooled up in her palms and a whimper escaped from her lungs.

"Mama..." the lady, noticing Toby's whimper, placed her hand, benevolently on her hunched back.

"I don't know who you are, but I know I am supposed to love you."

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James and Bonnie had two children together: Marcel and Janice. Marcel was the youngest. After her birth, the two moved out of Cleveland and onto a farm right outside of Atlanta. During the day, James would do his farming while Bonnie went off into the city to her job at a cloth bag manufacturing plant, leaving Janice and Marcel home with a sitter. Though she was by no means rich and had two children to care for, Bonnie still sent a bit of her paycheck back home each week to help care for her siblings who, at that point, were all mostly old enough to care for themselves. Regardless, Bonnie still felt she had some level of responsibility to help them in any way she could.

Bonnie disliked working in the factory. The women were required by dress code to wear skirts. Bonnie hated skirts; she always wore jeans – which she called "dungarees." She loved living on the farm, however. On the farm, she could wear her dungarees all she wanted. She also loved animals, particularly one cow that lived on the farm named Polly. Bonnie would always go out to the pasture to complain to Polly about dress codes, her children's disobedience, among

other grievances while petting Polly or brushing her brown hair. There was nothing particularly special about Polly, she was really just another cow. But Bonnie loved her all the same.

One night, Bonnie was sitting inside at the dinner table with Janice and Marcel, each with hot plates of food set in front of them and a fourth set in front of an empty chair. They were waiting for James to come in so they could start eating.

Eventually, he did come inside, but with a stern but flustered look on his face as he marched past the dinner table and into the next room over. Bonnie called to him, “James, honey, what’s the matter?”

“Something must’ve scared Polly. She’s tipped over belly-up in the feeding trough and I can’t get her out.”

“Polly?” Bonnie asked concerned, “Well, what do you plan on doing?”

The pump of James’s shotgun was her answer.

Bonnie ran out the door and tore frantically ahead of James to the feeding trough where sure enough, Polly’s legs stuck straight out and kicking wildly like grass being whipped around by a strong wind.

James walked out of the house and began his slow approach towards Bonnie and Polly. Bonnie pulled on the cow, trying with all her strength to pull her out of the trough, but Polly was much too heavy. Bonnie tried to plead with Polly.

“Oh, Polly, please! Please get out! Please, he’s going to shoot you if you don’t! Oh, Polly, please!” she wailed. And still, Polly did not get out.

The next night Bonnie, Marcel, and Janice all sat around the dinner table, this time with James present. They'd just finished their prayer and were about to eat when James noticed Bonnie's perturbed eyes casting rays of furious flame on him.

"C'mon, Bon. Eat."

"No."

"Look, there's no point in letting her death be in vain, it's what Polly would've wanted."

With a huff, Bonnie jolted up from the table, yanked her plate of steak from the tabletop and dumped it into the trashcan as she stormed out of the dining room.

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Life, as it seemed, was going well for Bonnie, albeit at an alarming pace. There came a slight hint and suggestion of encroaching death that began to haunt the tail-end of all her thoughts. She wished to go back to a time in which her memories were not marred by melancholy and longing, a time in which her memories were not colored with a hue of blue that reminded her of how far in the past her memories were and spoiled by the approaching end. She wanted to go back to a time when her only desire was for time only to stay still or else move forward slowly, never looking back and desiring what once was. A time that did not pass her by so quickly. And once, time did slow down, though not in the way she had hoped.

It was the evening of a hard-worked day. James had taken Janice out with him to the farmer's market, leaving Bonnie home alone with Marcel, who was three years old at that point. Bonnie decided to put Marcel to bed early so she could unwind for the rest of the evening. She

took Marcel to her room, turned off the lights, and left her to fall asleep, leaving the door slightly cracked so that she could better hear Marcel if she started crying. She went to her bathroom and drew a warm bath for herself. Before getting in, she went to the kitchen to pour herself a glass of a fine merlot to further ease the strains of the day.

In the kitchen, she heard the washing machine running, the hum of the refrigerator and the sound of the wine being poured into her glass. She did not hear Marcel's door squeak open. She didn't hear her daughter walk from her room into the bathroom, nor did she hear the splashing of the water as Marcel had fallen in and couldn't pull herself out.

Bonnie meandered back up into the bathroom to find her three-year-old daughter floating face down and motionless in the water that was then still. All at once, time slowed down.

Bonnie walked outside onto the porch of her house, mouth ajar with the notion of shock written across her face, wine glass still in hand. She sat down on the porch steps, eyes wide and staring out into the street. The last time her eyes had been closed, she thought to herself, she believed her daughter to still be alive. She wished to go back to that moment.

Her neighbor's car pulled into the driveway of the house next door. A mother and son got out of the car.

"Hey, Mrs. Toler!" the mom called over. Bonnie didn't respond.

"Say hello to Mrs. Toler" the mother prodded her son. The boy could never quite pronounce Bonnie's last name.

"Hello, Mrs. T... To ..." he stammered. "Hello, Mrs. Toby!"

The wine rippled lightly as silent tears dripped in and mixed with the alcohol.

It was all terrifying. All of it. The horror of jumbled words, fragments colliding and sinking and rising again only to be covered back up with a pungent film of black soot and suffocating smoke screens. Floating reveries giving way again and once again, over and over, back and forth to the corrupting fires of confusion and sense of loss with no discernable source, no signposts or written warnings of the path ahead and no sense of the existence of a road behind. Sounds blaring, bleating and beating down out from every angle. Stillness giving way to indescribable pains, mental and physical that forbode a terrible future that is entirely unknown and unknowable. Aware of nothing and yet conscious to the feeling of every shuffled moment, fallen out of sequence and experienced entirely at the whim of chaos.

Pain, completely pointless, no growing outward from nor taking in of a lesson for the one to be taught has no capacity to learn. No questioning, for there is no reason to question nor purpose to reason for. Pain for the pure sake of the sadism of the inflictor whose identity remains anonymous and sense of mystery hints that he may be a figment of a labored and confused imagination. The striving for a reason that is not there.

Smoke-blinded eyes, the brother of a nose which smells smoke that trickles up from a trunk that has been put to flame. The embers imperialize, and the trunk writhes in the air as the elephant stamps the ground underfoot and the water become agitated. The trunk is slowly turned to ash which towers up from the flame and falls off into the water like a flicked cigarette. The ash collects on the little paper boats which become too heavy to hold their own weight and are pulled under and destroyed by the labored ocean. And the elephant tries to hold on to them like a beloved purse but is helpless to do so like a cow turned utters-up in a feeding trough.

One boat manages to elude the mask of ash and pushed onto the sandy shore by the waves. A single memory provides a brief moment of respite as confusion gives way to faint clarity.

Across from Toby is a group of people, looking back at her with slight smiles that hint at melancholy rather than joy. Among them is an older lady for whom Toby feels a warm tinge and a young boy, with buzzed hair – no older than eight.

She fixes her pale eyes on him. He looks back into hers and smiles brighter than any of those around him.

“He does not understand the severity of what he sees,” she thinks to herself, “He sees me the same way I see myself: a blank-face on which others paint a vibrant personality of the past that has been stolen by a mental disease. A mental disease that has left all my memories and personality six feet underground in a hole where my body will soon go once it realizes that the time of dying has long passed.

He’s got so much ahead of him. I wish I could say the same, but yet I hardly know what is behind me. Time eludes me now. He’s got so many memories to be formed, some sweet and others bitter. He may sometimes – in the thralls of pain - wish to forgo the bitter ones, but I pray that in his better moments he would welcome the bitter. For even the most bitter of memories are sweeter than a mind void of memory. Oh, what I would give. What I would give to have even my most painful memories returned to me, for then I could at least, in my final moments, know who I once was.”

And yet, the boy stared at Toby, grinning widely with smooth skin and untroubled mind.

Toby’s eyes sunk downward and pulled her head down with them. She took in the largest breath she could manage and began to sing, hoarsely.

Precious memories, unseen angels

Sent from somewhere to my soul

How they linger, ever near me

And the sacred past unfolds

Softly, she sang the words, celebrating memories she no longer had and praising a God she could no longer remember.

“She remembers! She remembers the words!” someone said brightly. The boy with shaved-hair giggled.

Then clarity was severed, replaced with bleak confusion, senseless pain and fractured memory.

