

ACT 5

THE STORYTELLER'S OLDWIFE'S POSTSCRIPT TALE

In my vision, now, all these years later, I'm smarter, so I should leave us all there above where we are, where in my memory we have everythin we want, or what we think we want.

But who can foretell anythin?

That summer night was too perfect to be anymore than it was, cuz, acourse, it was the start a me an Jessa-rose, but that's another story, a long one, thank you, an a private one, thank you even more, about pride an passion, an about makin real life, which is never the same as a honeymoon, work out so everybody stays comfortably happy, cuz there's no need for surrender in love me tender.

Anyway, who'da guessed that right aroun the very next Thanksgivin, on the very first anniversary a the assassination a Mister Kennedy, making November 22 ever more so double sad, Mizz Lulabelle would be killed

speedin outa her farm's gravel lane onto the icy curve a that two-lane black top; an who'da thought she'd be pregnant with another one a Wilmer's babies an kill it an Wilmer too in the same accident, with her head layin dead on the horn blowin one long last ear-splittin honk till the State Trooper took her gently by her bleachblond hair an laid her broken neck back on the seat.

Mister Henry ended up marryin Rosie. He needed help raisin John an James, so Rosie's mom, Little Rosemary, pitched in like she was their real grandma, freein up Rosie who took a big likin to workin in Mister Henry's Rexall drugstore, makin em both a lot a money, makin sure Mister Henry stopped eatin up the merchandise, cuz Rosie, who musta got it from her dad, made sure they were modern legal business partners as much as husband an wife, even if she never wanted any kids a her own to send to law school an medical school like they did John an James, except that James, halfway through bein a doctor dropped out an switched to the same pharmacy college in St. Louis where his daddy had gone an came back to be partners with Mister Henry and Rosie, who both thought it was kinda cute, an a whole lot convenient, especially Rovin Rosie, since Mister Henry was gettin older a whole lot faster n her who was less n half his age when he married her, cuz James looked a awful lot like a young Mister Henry an took after him, an after Rosie for awhile, in more ways n one, an it was him who became mayor, not his daddy.

Brian volunteered like a damn fool for the Army an got sent in 1967 to Vietnam an never made it home to Kathleen an Little Brian who moved in to live with Eustacia who framed the front page a *The Canterbury Herald* with Brian's picture smilin like a hero which maybe

he was, but who could tell lookin at his grave that Kathleen kept so manicured that people felt sorry for her.

As for Byron, his born sophistication was his escape, an he went to Chicago an graduated from the Loyola University School a Medicine, movin aroun quite a gypsy bit like doctors do, samplin the world a cities I'd never see, which made him wise by the time he landed in San Francisco, an always he kept in touch an once he wrote me an Jessarose a real wisdom letter, cuz he saw life an death everyday, that if ever anybody tried to kill our kind, or wipe out our kind somehow, it'd never work, cuz we keep comin back, croppin up everywhere. He said to me that if one day the last one a our kind should ever lay dyin in a hospital, the last thing that last one a us would hear would be the cries down the hall a the next one a us bein born, cuz there is no end to us.

I like that kinda optimism in a person.

Jessarose, by the way, that smilin summer night a the famous Fourth a July party, wasn't walkin exactly alone, happy as she was, carryin her own little secret surprise party, which in the end, made our reunion union even better right on through the years, an, in a special way kept all these people, so dead or gone, alive, particularly Mister Wilmer Fox, cuz the very next spring after Mizz Lulabelle drove em all off the two-lane black top straight into the bone orchard, Jessarose gave a real easy birth to a red-head baby we both loved so outright plain an clear we named her *Claire*, which was a real name, not some sheet-music joke like *Laydia Spain*, an thankfully nobody ever thought anythin bad about "*Clair de Lune*," cuz she was so bright an lively, an we both, with no bother from anybody, includin the PTA, melted smooth as ice cream on a perfect summer night into her two angel

mamas who were as proud a her the day a her graduation as a architect, somethin she got from me teachin her all the practicalities a keepin up a ol house, as we were the night her husband called long-distance from Chicago to congratulate Jessarose an me as the twin-grandmas a Claire's newborn baby they named *James*, after Big Jim, my dear sweet Daddy.

Things bein the way they are, even when things are happy enough, a person's just gotta keep on keepin on without imposin too much on the kindness a anybody. My Grandma Mary Kate was so full a woe an miseries an grief she drove everyone off in a thousand directions, an all thousand was away from her. Love may be eternal, but people only got so much time to listen to the blues, which is, acourse, a wisdom I got from Jessarose, and precisely the reason she gave up wandrin like a gypsy, travelin on the road, appearin nightly on stages lit so bright an smokey she couldn't tell one town from another, singin "Cry Me a River" like Mizz Julie London, an so she came back to where true love was burnin steady an keepin house.

One of those Little Sisters I usta call a the Pinched Face a Jesus, but don't anymore cuz they're just women findin their own way in the world, was celebratin a little recreation-room party for her fiftieth anniversary as a nun. She was livin in a wheelchair in the St. Joseph Home for Senior Catholics, an she remembered me from sittin in her class, cuz her mind was growin ever sharper about the past, an she was somehow the second-cousin twice-removed from my Grandma Mary Kate which made me the only blood kin she had left. I looked into that Little Sister's face, cuz the human face is a limitless terrain that just pulls you right in, an I saw the kinda happiness that

comes from peace. An that Little Sister, who took Jessarose's hand in her own, just kinda blessin everythin she touched, handed me a delicate envelope like she was deliverin a letter from my long-dead daddy, Big Jim, who was the postman. Inside the envelope was her Golden Anniversary card, an she asked me to read it to all the retired folks, so I stood up, looked at Jessarose, who was still holdin that Little Sister's hand, and I read to all those old people, just sittin aroun the piano under the crepe paper streamers, happy to be alive, words a wisdom I think they wanted to hand on to me, cuz my turn followed theirs.

“Lord, you know better n I know myself that I am growin older, an will someday be old. Keep me from the fatal habit a thinkin I must say somethin on every subject an on every occasion.” Jessarose smiled her knowin smile. “Release me from cravin to straighten out everybody's affairs. Make me thoughtful but not moody, helpful but not bossy.” An my voice just sorta floated outa me, a tad adlib, an I could hear myself sayin, readin, an more n readin really, more like understandin what a person needs to come to grips with. “With my vast store a wisdom, it seems sometimes a pity not to use it all, but you know, Lordy do you know, that I want a few friends at the end. Keep my mind free from the recital a endless details by givin me wings to get to the point. And, oh yeah, seal my lips on my aches an pains which are increasin, so I don't end up rehearsin my woes over an over, an give me the grace to endure the tales a others' pains with patience.” I looked into all their faces, some of em that I'd known my whole life long like so many stories. “I dare not ask for improved memory, but for a growin humility, an a lessenin a cocksureness when my memory seems to

clash with the memories a others.” Jessarose took my hand in hers. “Teach me the glorious lesson that occasionally I may be mistaken. An keep me reasonably sweet. Hey, for hay, I always say, I do not want to be a saint. Some a them would be so hard to live with, an I grew up knowin a wiseacre young person an a sour old person are both one a the crownin glories a the devil. Give me the ability to see good things in unexpected places, an talents in unexpected people, an forgiveness for those who have passed on, an love for those aroun me. An give me, oh Lord, the grace to tell them so.”

That sweet little ol Sister kissed my cheek, an she kissed the cheek a Jessarose, an all those ol people smiled an nodded their heads, amen, an some a them clapped their fragile ol hands, an the piano player started playin a cha-cha version a “Tea for Two” an them that could danced.

Hey for hay! The only thing I can say about bein alive is, thank God, I’m not somebody else.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jack Fritscher was born in southern Illinois, in Jacksonville, raised in central Illinois in Peoria, graduated from Loyola University in Chicago, and served as a tenured associate professor at Western Michigan University where he taught American literature, creative writing, and film history. As faculty advisor in the 1960s, he helped pioneer and establish women's studies in literature and cinema disciplines. He also taught at Loyola University and at Kalamazoo College, and frequently traveled as guest-lecturer in several university series that included Bella Abzug and Adelle Davis. Recently, he has appeared with Camille Paglia on a Channel 4 London television documentary special on gender, and has been extensively quoted in her published essays. His stories, poems, and articles have appeared in more than 25 national and international magazines and journals. He has written public-service documents specifically exploring women's issues in association with ABC-Television affiliate-programming, Channel 7, San Francisco. He also wrote the first *Senior-Citizen and Physically-Challenged Guide* for the San Francisco Municipal Railway. He is the author of three collections of short stories, three books of nonfiction, two plays, one screenplay, and two novels—including the best-selling and critically acclaimed nov-

el, *Some Dance to Remember*. He has been awarded a National Endowment for the Humanities Grant (NEH), and a State of Michigan grant to the arts. He lives in the San Francisco Bay Area and is descended, through his mother, Virginia Day Fritscher, from women whose ethnic Irish birth names are Mary Pearl Lawler, Mary Lynch, Honora Anastasia McDonough, and through his father, George Fritscher, from women whose ethnic Austrian birth names are Amelia Haberman, Theresa Hruby, and Victoria Etzler.

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About *The Geography of Women*

Telling her story at the end of the 20th century, Laydia Spain O'Hara, untangles the past of fourteen characters' lives tied together in a small southern Illinois town from the mid-1950s of Elvis through the mid-1960s post-JFK. Her comic tale of faces unmasking—and conflicts resolving—is a human journey about coming of age and inventing one's self, despite all gossip, while keeping the torch of true love burning. In a triangle with her two best friends, Jessarose and Mizz Lulabelle, Laydia Spain outwits convention, opens her own boarding house, and discovers a solidarity in new ideas of family, home, and the human heart that mirror the vast social changes sweeping American culture during the mid-century.

In the tradition of spunky small-town girls whose vernacular descends from Huck Finn, Laydia Spain dares to take on her own father, Big Jim O'Hara, the postman and accordion champ who named her Laydia Spain; Mister Henry Apple, the prescription-eating pharmacist who marries the bleach-blond Mizz Lulabelle; and Mister Wilmer Fox, the red-headed traveling salesman whose revolving returns to the little town of Canterberry always upset everyone's plans to live happily ever after.

Ultimately, the dark-skinned cinnamon girl, Jessarose, who takes off on the road to fame and fortune as a roadhouse blues singer, defines the direction of love, because, while “the human face is a limitless terrain that just pulls you right in....the geography of women is where nature itself takes course homeward bound, the long route or the short, the high road or the low.”