2003 Third Place Personal Narrative

Remembering Charlotte

There rests a book on my shelf at home that is unmatched in its effect on my perception of the world. It is situated among *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* by Harriett Beecher Stowe, Dicken’s *Great Expectations*, and a collection of poetry from William Shakespeare. Its pages are worn thin with creases and tears around the edges. The once blue-green paperback binding is faded, and the glue is disintegrating, allowing sheets to be pulled out like a well-used legal pad. This paperback has seen many reads. But what’s more, it represents my transition from the happy ignorance of infancy to the immediate and very real awareness that there is sorrow in the world. At the impressionable age of four, not only death, but also confusion and injustice entered into my life the day I read E.B. White’s story of *Charlotte’s Web*.

My afternoons as a child were timeless. It was an era before my younger sister was born, and the cosmos revolved around my world. I relished being alone and savored the outdoors, so I would wear out my hours collecting rocks and pinecones in the backyard and making grass soup from the lawn. By the time I was old enough to have a Fisherprice play set, a beloved pastime became wheeling through the air on the swings while singing children’s gospel songs. The Wise Man and the Foolish Man was a personal favorite. My mother later told me, “Jamie, you would have smiled at the sight of yourself. You were a tiny little thing with blonde pigtails, pumping your legs just as hard as they would go and singing to the heavens as if only the angels could hear you.” Then came a revolution. At about four years old, I stumbled upon the universe of reading, and from that point forward, I immersed myself in the melody of written word. And it was shortly thereafter that the music of my life resonated with its first minor chord.

The day was no different than most summer afternoons in Tahoe: sunshiny, warm, and tranquil. The breeze was light and it carried the scent of dandelions and pine trees. My mother and I had pulled out two aquamarine plastic beach chairs from the garage and we were sitting on the redwood deck as she read to me out
of a chapter book. Her harmonious voice lilted the words as she painted the story’s scene: it was springtime in the countryside…

"Where's Papa going with that ax?" said Fern to her mother as they were setting the table for breakfast.

"Out to the hoghouse," replied Mrs. Arable. "Some pigs were born last night."

"I don't see why he needs an ax," continued Fern, who was only eight. "Well," said her mother, "one of the pigs is a runt. It's very small and weak, and it will never amount to anything. So your father has decided to do away with it."

"Do away with it?" shrieked Fern. "You mean kill it? Just because it's smaller than the others?"

My heart welled up in my chest at the thought of someone being so cruel as to kill a baby pig. But I slowly relaxed, letting my breath escape from my lungs as the story unfolded. Fern rescued the pig through an earnest supplication to her father, and Wilbur, as she named him, became the object of her adulation. It did not take long before I too fell in love Wilbur. I knew from the start that he and I were kindred spirits: bumbling, shy, and anxious to please others. But when Wilbur moved to another farm, I meet a lady spider that became my true inspiration. I adored Charlotte. She was benevolent and selfless, witty and confident. In a very real sense, she was my exemplar. Time and time again, she helped others, and it was her effort in the end that saved Wilbur from his fate as Christmas dinner.


I listened in agony as my mother read how Wilbur carefully took Charlotte’s egg sac in his mouth, becoming the protector of her life’s work. And I could barely inhale as Charlotte’s children hatched and sailed into the wind, born up by their silk parachutes. They never knew their mother. They never knew that Charlotte saved Wilbur.

“Stop! Stop,” I pleaded with my mother. Choking, gasping, painful sobs jerked my throat. “I hate that book. Charlotte can’t die. She just can’t.” I couldn’t hear it again. I couldn’t think that could actually happen. “She has to see her children. Wilbur needs her. Please. She was too good to die!”
I lunged into the house and threw myself on the floor. I was inconsolable. As my father rushed from the living room to try and pacify my wailing, I felt like Fern on that fateful morning when she was exposed to such blatant inequality:

"Fern," her father said gently, "you will have to learn to control yourself."

"Control myself?" yelled Fern. "This is a matter of life and death, and you talk about controlling myself!"

I decided right then and there that that book was full of lies. I never wanted to see it again. So I shoved the paperback volume into the farthest recess of my closest as I shoved its memory into the farthest recess of my mind. That is, until six months later when Christmas time arrived, and I was forced to remember.

The fragments I recollect most clearly about my Grandpa’s death are the sirens and the sense of frenzy and rushing. Looking back, it was mostly a blur of running and bright colors and feeling small and confused. I remember that I was downstairs in the family room with him on the old fold-out day bed. It was always the darkest room in the house because all the furniture and carpets and pillows were shades of deep brown. The floor was scratchy and the couch was too soft so Grandpa and I would pull out the sofa bed and lay on the cool sheets and giggle and squirm while we watched TV.

Then all of a sudden he started to shake and make strange noises in his throat. My mom hurtled downstairs and bawled that I had to get the phone and call 911. I remember feeling very strongly that it was important I run quickly even though I was scared and felt slow. My mom probably could have gone faster, but she couldn’t seem to move, and my grandma was crying, and my grandpa was moving less but he was still making those awful noises. “911, what is your emergency?” Silence on my end. “…ma’am?” My mother grabbed the phone. There were flashing lights and lots of shouting when the paramedics rushed in the door. I was scared, and I felt like hiding. I just hugged my knees close to my chest, rocking myself on the steps.

My cat Louie came running down the stairs, frightening by the noise, and would have bolted out the door but for my dad intercepting him. He shoved him at me and told me to hold him tight. I was glad to have Louie there with me. We were good friends. We would take baths together every night because Louie liked water, and he would sleep on my feet when I went to bed. He had fiery orange hair and tiger stripes. But I could
tell that Louie was scared now too, he struggled against me as I tried to hold him close to my stomach, but the more I squeezed, the stronger he resisted. His back claws penetrated through my nightgown, scraping my skin, and my arms were stretched out like I was hugging a beach ball as I tried to keep Louie near me. But I failed. I failed. I failed.

If I had just held him a little tighter or a moment longer maybe he wouldn’t have gotten away. But he lunged out of my arms and bounded out the door into the night. I remember howling. I remember screaming, “Daddy!! Louie got out, I’m sorry, I’m sorry but I couldn’t hold him. He scratched me and he was scared and he’s outside now and we have to get him back.”

“Jamie, you have to stay back. We’ll find Louie, I promise, but not yet. Stay back Jamie.”

My Grandpa didn’t die that night. He got out of the hospital and went back home with Grandma to Utah where he died two weeks later from emphysema. But I don’t remember things happening like that. I remember Grandpa dying after the sirens came and after Louie ran away. Then we got in the car and drove for a long time to the funeral. It was almost Christmas and I had to open my presents in the car. I knew that it wasn’t really Christmas because I had been very careful with our paper chain on the refrigerator, and there were still three rings left. One red and two green. I protested at first, but my parents seemed tired. We all knew it wasn’t Christmas.

We never did find Louie. My mom tried to make me feel better by telling me that he ran away to San Diego and was having a great vacation. I pictured him lounging by a pool under an umbrella with his favorite kitty snacks - the little brown square ones – and being surrounded by lots of people who loved and petted him. Louie always liked water, and he especially liked to be rubbed. That made me feel better. I liked believing in a happy ending.

It was two days after we returned from Utah that I heard my parents talking about Louie. There were whispering in the living room while I lay awake in bed. They didn’t know I was listening.

“Do you think we’ll find him?”

“Are you kidding? He probably didn’t even last an hour with all the coyotes in this neighborhood.”

Sickening silence.
That recognition was the final push. In a desperate need to understand death and loss I went to my closet and retrieved the book I so wanted to forget. It was time to remember *Charlotte’s Web*. The same feelings of despair and sorrow swept over me like a torrent as I revisited the spring morning that Charlotte passed out of the world, but this time I understood the truth about life: that it ends. And I found great comfort in knowing,

“*Wilbur never forgot Charlotte. Although he loved her children and grandchildren dearly, none of the new spiders ever quite took her place in his heart. She was in a class by herself...”* 

Wilbur, an ever-faithful and loving friend had said the perfect words to ease my troubled soul, “I will never forget.” So the music of life continued as it had before, full of the outdoors, and play, and learning. But it was different too, because a new refrain had been added to the verse: I will never forget Grandpa, I will never forget Louie, and I will never, no never, forget Charlotte.