

WILL I, WON'T I?

Wallace and the children have been after me for several years to write down my memories, as he has done. Why have I so resisted? I think it is because there are so many things which are NOT pleasant memories, yet to leave them out seems dishonest. However, now, in January, 2005, I have decided to try—partly because everyone pretty well knows most of the unpleasant things already. So I will try to begin—though, my dears, do NOT assume that you are being told everything I remember, because you are not. OK, so long as we understand where we are, here goes.

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I'll add one other thing here—as I have written what follows, I have become aware in a whole new way of the way in which small incidents have formed me—my beliefs, my ethics, my fears, my hopes—all the things I care about. I knew part of this, of course—it's what I wrote about in *Core Images*—especially in that section where I talk about being lied to by my parents when I was to have my tonsils out. I didn't really know, however, how much something like Miss Cunningham making fun of that boy's drawing in the first grade would form me into who I am today. This writing is, really, a good thing to do for anyone.

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The stories of my parents' courtship have a certain charm, I've always thought. Mother had lied about her age in order to attend East Texas State Teachers College in a program for people from non-accredited rural schools. She entered "Sub-College," as they called it, for one year and then College for one year, at which point she could get a teacher's certificate in the rules of the time. Since she had told them she was 16 when she was actually 14, she got her teacher's certificate when she was 16! This perhaps isn't quite so shocking when you see that you could get a certificate to teach in public schools after one year of college at the age of 18. I find myself wondering if this mightn't still be a good idea.

By the way, she never really wanted to be a teacher and probably wasn't great at it (unlike my Father, who was a natural, and should have been one). She said she had always wanted to work in an office, but her mother said, "Nice girls didn't work in offices." So that was that. I don't know if her mother had given up by this time on her earlier plan—that Mother would be the child who never married, but stayed home and took care of her. If she hadn't already given that up, Mother took care of it in her own way a bit later.

My mother really never cared for school or learning, but this was evidently the only way she could see to get away. It is an anomalous thing that she married into the Dalby family, for whom education was a very high value.

The job Mother got was teaching at a two-teacher school in a hamlet known as Old Boston (to distinguish it from Boston, the county seat at the center of Bowie County, and New Boston, where the railroad went through). The other teacher at the school was my Father's sister Lucille. The young woman in the house where Mother roomed took her into New Boston one Saturday night so she could check out the available dates. As

they sat in the car and watched the passing parade of people, Mother said she spotted my Father—because he was so “tawl.” Her friend said, oh, no, you don’t want to go with him. Why? Mother asked— isn’t he nice or is he from a “bad family”?

“Oh, no, that’s Lucille Dalby’s brother, but he just goes with a girl for a while and then drops her, and she never even knows why.” I’ve always thought my Mother viewed that as a challenge—one for which she was eminently suited.

They began to date, though he went off to college during that time—frequently double dating with my Aunt Lucille and Clarence Poer, whom she ultimately married. I guess they weren’t always doubling, though, because somehow in the course of time, Mother realized she was pregnant. She immediately wrote to my Father and said she wouldn’t go with him any more—breaking off their dating. He was devastated and came to see her, begging her to tell him what he had done to make her break it off. After a lot of tears on his part, she finally told him, and he evidently immediately said they would go to Arkansas and get married.

I don’t know exactly the timing of all this, as this was always kept a secret from me as I was growing up. They lied about the sequence of events, telling me that the reason they had to elope to Arkansas was because teachers couldn’t get married and go on teaching. They used to say they eloped some time in December, but somehow, as soon as I got old enough to think about it, I knew it wasn’t true. I never said so to them—we didn’t talk to each other straight-forwardly like that, but I just knew. How?

Maybe because as sentimental as my Mother was, they never celebrated an anniversary. Maybe because of the way my Mother clearly did not care for my Aunt Frances, Dad’s oldest sister, who had her second baby, Paul Waters, just 6 weeks before I was born. I have later speculated, I am sure correctly, that Aunt Frances didn’t want “Brother” to get married to Mother. Everyone else thought Aunt Frances was the top of the line, but my Mother was clearly lukewarm about her.

At any rate, I checked it out one year when we were driving back and forth to Chicago from Texas. I had, apparently idly, made my Mother tell me the town where they ran off to, and we went by there. Wallace took the children somewhere while I went into the Court House and looked, finding their wedding recorded sometime in July.

Then, after Dad died, I stayed over in Austin for a week to help Mother with the legal stuff, and as I was asking her for various documents, I asked for the Marriage Certificate. She brought it to the breakfast table where we were working, and I just laid it aside and went on. She said, “Don’t you want to look at it?”—in a nervous voice. I just looked at her and said, “Mother, I know. It’s o.k.”

She immediately said, “Who told you?” And I forget who she guessed, but she was mad about it. I said, “You did, really,” and told her about going by to check it out. This is when I heard all these stories about how she tried to make him go away and he cried and begged her to come back to him. She may also have mentioned Aunt Frances then; I don’t remember.

Anyway, they made the plan and did in fact run off to Arkansas with two friends as witnesses in July and get married. I don’t know when they told their families for sure or any of that, but I do know that Mother began teaching again in September and that sometime that year Daddy got what was evidently a great job in 1929—with the railroad.

He moved to Amarillo for the job, and when Mother's time to deliver came, she went home to the farm where her Mother lived and had the baby there.

They evidently hadn't agreed on a name beforehand. Mother said Daddy wanted to name me "Willie" after her, but she'd always hated it and refused—thank goodness! Billie Jean was bad enough, but very Texas. I know they took some time to decide, because when I started to take the Texas Bar Exam and ordered my birth certificate for the first time, I was registered as "Baby Girl Dalby." It was too late to get it formally changed before the exam, which I then took as "Baby Girl Dalby."

One of the surprising stories I remember hearing was that after I was born, the school people came and wanted Mother to go back to teaching till the end of year, which was quite amazing for the time. However, that doesn't fit very well in timing for my memory of our next move.

When I was about six weeks old, my Dalby grandparents drove Mother and me to Amarillo to join Daddy. I don't know if he had seen pictures of me or not. Mother and my Aunt Frances had taken Paul and me to a photographer to have pictures made (don't you know THAT was a fun trip!), so there are extant pictures of me, of Paul, of Paul and me, and one of Mother and me—evidently because I started fussing till she held me. You can see my cross look in that picture, and Mother is not very fixed up, because she hadn't meant to be in the picture, so these are probably pretty true to life. I've always loved the set because I am SO much cuter than Paul.

They tell the story that I captivated my father immediately because I kept staring at him and giggling. Don't you know, if you remember him, how much of a hit that was. (In a fascinating aside, the summer we brought 4 month old Anne to Texas for Wallace to work in the Attorney General's Office during the summer, my Dad went with us to San Antonio the very next day after our arrival. A friend of ours was being ordained, and he went with us to take care of Anne while we were in the service. She rode in a car seat in the back seat, and every time he began to talk, she giggled. He had to stop each time to play with her and almost never got his story told.)

My parents set up house in a small apartment and had several months there before the depression hit. Since my father was one of the newest employees, he was one of the first to be fired. So all they had was a ticket to anywhere the railroad went in Texas. We all rode from Amarillo all the way down to Waco and then back up to Texarkana, or maybe New Boston, I don't know. The mythology I always heard was that I never cried on that whole long journey. What a great baby!

We moved in with my Dalby grandparents on their farm, and my Dad began to look for a job. My Mother would get fiercely proud when she would tell that he went to work on a road gang repairing highways to take care of them. I don't know how long that lasted, but I know that he got a job at the New Boston post office after awhile—some political pull or other got it for him. This was absolutely magnificent—I think I recall they told me that he was paid \$100 a month, which was fabulous.

My Aunt Lizzie, Nothermama's older sister, owned some tiny rent houses in New Boston, and she gave them one free to live in. The snapshot of me with black curls all over my head, dressed only in panties is taken in that yard. A most touching story I remember Mother telling me was that when school started and she could hear the

excitement of everyone going back to school, she began to cry. Then she held me while she cried and kept telling me she didn't mean that she didn't want me.

I've been told several stories from that time in New Boston. One time my grandparents were coming for Sunday dinner. It was evidently poor planning, as it was toward the end of the salary period, and my folks only had \$1.25 left. Mother sent Daddy off to the store to see what he could get for that. After some time, he came back with big sacks full of groceries. Mother couldn't believe it, but for a while he wouldn't tell her what had happened. Then he finally admitted that he just looked at those five quarters, knowing he couldn't get anything for a meal with them. So he put them in the slot machines which were available at the time—and hit a jackpot! As he had known she would be, Mother was furious with him, but he said, look, I got us all these groceries. That's always seemed to me a story that really fit with the two of them.

Another story they tell is that they came in one day to find me with their two watches on the floor, with one of my feet on each of them. Maybe not such an ideal baby after all.

Another story my Dad told was how he was proudly carrying me around the annual May Fete when an old man he knew admired me. My father said, "Yes, she got her looks from her Dad." At which point the old man, after a pause, said, "Yep, and she got durned near all of them too."

Another May Fete year, when I was three, my friend Betty and I were to be the flower girls. That occasion I still have a scrap of a program from, and I also remember parts of it. I remember being at the back of an auditorium with the ladies fussing over us and giving us the baskets of flowers and instructing us just to drop a few at a time. What I don't remember, but have been told, is that I was so careful about dropping them that I got up on stage with a lot still in my basket, looked at them, and just turned the basket upside down, bringing a laugh from the audience. I do remember that there were "big girls" in pretty long dresses all around the back of the stage in a semi-circle, and they all tried to get Betty and me stand in front of them. I remember the trouble making up my mind who to go to.

Probably my earliest memory, though, is about the tonsils—and I've written that up in part in *Core Images*. They said that my parents were so used to hearing my heavy breathing all the time that the first night home from the hospital when they couldn't hear me, they ran to my crib in a panic, thinking I was dead.

One other story they delighted in telling about me concerned an old man in New Boston who used to come by to get me and take me in to buy me an ice cream cone in the afternoon—at a nickel each in those days. He began to tease me, as men like to do with little girls, saying that I had to buy HIM an ice cream cone one day. Well, my mother gave me two nickels on the big day. We went in and ordered our cones, and I carefully laid ONE nickel on the counter, saying "I pay for lis but one." I evidently took it quite literally—I bought HIM a cone and that was all. Hmmm.

About in 1933 the big oil boom hit east Texas. My Aunt Frances, evidently through political pull (my Uncle Dick was a lawyer and active in Democratic politics), was able to get my father a great job with the Texas State Comptroller's Office. He was to visit east Texas oil fields and check the oil company records, making sure they paid their taxes to the state. So for a time, we moved from one east Texas boom town to

another. In one of them (I don't know which) my parents rented out rooms to two young single men who worked in the oil fields.

These lads liked to tease me because I was such a big girl (three), yet I still drank my milk from a bottle. I was so big that I had to use special nipples, which cost 50 cents each—quite a lot of money then. The boys would tease me about the bottle and I would get so mad that I'd bite the top out. My Dad sat me down one day and explained how much the nipples cost. He gave me one and said it was the last one and that if I bit the top out once more, that was it. They tell me that I was able to hide from the boys for quite a while, but that finally they caught me, teased me, and I bit the top out. My Dad never bought me another one, and I, truly his daughter, never drank milk again. All I can say today is that it just doesn't taste good to me. So odd, isn't it, the workings of our minds and bodies.