

Excerpt from: *Moonlight on Linoleum: A Daughter's Memoir*
By Terry Helwig

Prologue

Riverside Cemetery
1990

I could not find my mother's grave.

The caretaker thumped a large brown ledger onto his desk.

"What's your mom's name?"

An easy enough question, except for those five or six marriages. *I should know her last name*, I chastised myself. My face reddened as I stood momentarily speechless in the caretaker's office at Riverside Cemetery in Fort Morgan, Colorado.

"She might be under Carola Jean Vacha," I said. I remembered letters spelling *The Vachas* running vertically down a post on the front porch of her marigold-colored house before she died.

The caretaker's finger ran the length of the page. "Nothin' under that name."

In the fifteen years since Mama's death, I had not been back. I was unsure what name had been etched onto her headstone. Come to think of it, I couldn't remember being consulted about a headstone at all.

"What about Carola Jean Simmonds?" I asked.

He shook his head.

"She married a lot," I offered. "How about Wilton or Redding?"

He raised an eyebrow and continued his search. "Here's Carola Jean Redding. Died April 29, 1974. Lot 398, Block 10," he said and flipped the ledger closed.

I followed him as he wound his way through a maze of weathered gravestones variously carved with lilies, roses and angels. The graves didn't all look alike to him; he knew about lots and blocks. He reminded me of the ferryman on the river Styx, overseeing the dead.

When he came to a stop in front of a flat cement marker, barely larger than a brick, I was confused. Then I saw it: Mama's name crudely etched into cement. She had no headstone—only the plain dull marker the county had provided, which had begun to flake and crumble, surrendering to the surrounding grass.

She has a pauper's grave, I thought as I knelt and laid down the pink rose I had bought. I wrestled a clump of grass, trying to reclaim a corner of the marker. The cement felt cool to my touch. Wiping the smell of grass and dirt onto my jeans, I turned to the caretaker.

"I know it's a little late, but what if I wanted to order a headstone?"

"People do it all the time," he said. He turned and walked away, leaving me to my thoughts.

* * *

I was forty years old, the same age my mother had been when she died. I stood at the juncture of the second half of my life, at precisely the place where Mama's footprints ran out. The years ahead of me would be virgin territory, unexplored by the woman who had ushered me into the world. The only thing I understood with any certainty was just how young Mama had been when she died.

During her graveside service, fifteen years earlier, I had gazed up into the branches of a nearby tree, startled to see the juxtaposition of sunlight so near death. The beauty of pink blossoms punctuating the blue sky had taken my breath away. The colors of the world had never looked more vivid, my senses had never been more alive. It was as if death's razor had cut away the veil separating me from holy mystery, *exquisite wonder blazing with sorrow*.

Mama's casket had not yet been covered with earth. I had no idea then, being only twenty-five, what burial entailed. Mama's funeral was my first. My knees had buckled when I first saw her lying in the casket; her wax-like hands holding a single rose. The ink-blue bruise of ruptured blood vessels on her left temple, resulting from the overdose, had been camouflaged under a layer of caked make-up. Long sleeves hid the thick purple scars on the undersides of her wrists—scars that had been fresh wounds, once, bleeding a river of red onto white sheets.

I had wanted to shield my younger sisters from the sight of Mama's blood that day, to spare them that memory above all others. That's how I summoned up enough strength to shove the dresser in front of the door, to rip the sheets into bandages, to shoulder the weight of Mama staggering down the hallway. I, alone, washed Mama's sticky blood from my hands. I had wanted it that way.

But now that I had a daughter of my own, I understood just how bereft I had been. Picturing myself as a young girl, flipping a crimson-splotched mattress, I wished I could have spared her, too.

* * *

For the headstone, I selected a pinkish slab of granite and instructed the stonecutter to cut a single word for her epitaph. *Selah*.

The word *Selah* is an enigma, which describes my mother perfectly. Some think *Selah* refers to a musical instruction, meaning "a pause" or "stopping to listen." It may also have been used similarly to the word *amen*. Now that I was the same age as Mama had been when she died, I wanted to stop and listen to what her life had meant; I wanted to say amen to her, as if she had been a prayer.

The next thing to determine was Mama's last name. *Dare I change it to one of her earlier names?* After the funeral, her fifth or sixth husband, Lenny, only two years my senior, took all of Mama's old

photographs, because *he loved her so*. Lenny thought his year and four months with Mama trumped all the years my sisters and I had spent with her. I was even more offended when I learned, years later, that Mama's marriage to Lenny may have been null and void. Mama may not have been legally divorced from Tom. But Mama would have considered this legality nothing more than a pesky technicality, a minor inconvenience that had to be *negotiated*.

I was my mother's daughter.

I concluded that the legality of the name on Mama's headstone was a minor inconvenience that could be *negotiated*, so I chose the married name that my sisters and I loved best, the once-legal name that had defined Mama the longest, the name that belonged to a man I call Daddy, still to this day.

In addition to *Selah!*, *Carola Jean Vacha* was etched into stone.

* * *

Chapter One



My dad holding Vicki; Mama holding me

Emerson, Iowa
1950

"I left your dad," Mama told me more than once, "because I didn't want to kill him."

She wasn't kidding.

Mama said she stood at the kitchen counter, her hand touching the smooth wooden handle of a butcher knife. In an argument that grew more heated, Mama felt her fist close around the handle. For a brief

moment, she deliberated between slashing our father with the knife or releasing it harmlessly back onto the counter and walking away.

My sister Vicki was ten months old; I was two. Mama was seventeen.

By all accounts, Mama and Dad loved each other, even though Mama lied about her age. Mama told my dad that she had celebrated her eighteenth birthday; Dad, twenty-two, believed her. But the State of Iowa insisted on seeing Mama's record of birth before granting them a marriage license. Only then did Mama confess her lie. He broke down and cried. Mama was fourteen, not eighteen. Still, despite the deceit and age difference, on Wednesday, May 26, 1948, Carola Jean Simmonds and Donald Lee Skinner said, "I do." Mama's mother signed her consent.

Mama definitely looked older than fourteen. She had thick black hair that fell around her face, accenting the widow's peak she inherited from her mother. Her hazel eyes reflected not a shy, timid girl, but a womanly gaze that belied her years. Physically, she was curved and full-bosomed. But she was not pregnant. According to my birth certificate, I came along a full eleven months after they married; proving their union sprang from something other than necessity.

Part of Mama's motivation may have come from her eagerness to leave home. Her older brother, my uncle Gaylen, witnessed the difficult relationship Mama had with their mother.

"God, this is hard to tell," he said. "When your mom was just a baby, I remember walking alongside her baby carriage with our mom. I must have been about eight. Carola was crying and crying and Mom got so mad. She stopped the carriage, walked to a nearby tree and yanked off a switch. She returned to the carriage and whipped your mom for crying. I couldn't believe she was whipping a baby."

Uncle Gaylen fumbled for words, attributing his mom's state of mind to my grandfather Gashum's infidelity. "I think Mom took out all her frustrations on Carola," he said.

I wish I could scrub that stain from our family's history. I wish I could reach back in time, snatch the switch from Grandma's raised fist and snap it across my knee. It might have made a difference. Mama's life might have taken a different turn.

She might not have been so desperate for tenderness.

By the time Mama turned fourteen, she had fallen for my dad. Instead of protesting when Mama asked to marry him, Grandma extolled my father's family, told Mama she was lucky to have him and readily signed permission for Mama to marry. With the words, "I do," uttered in the sleepy town of Glenwood, Iowa, Mama became a fourteen year-old, tenant-farmer's wife.

Around that time, Mama wrote a couple of jingles and sold them to Burma-Shave as part of its roadside advertising campaign. Mama liked to drive by a particular set of red-and-white signs posted successively along the highway near Glenwood. The words on the signs, which built toward a punch line farther down the road, were Mama's words, right there in plain daylight, for the whole world to see.

His cheek

Was rough

His chick vamoosed

*And now she won't
Come home to roost
Burma-Shave*

It's impossible to know which jingles Mama wrote, but, all her life, she loved the word *vamoose*.

During the first year of their marriage, my parents moved into a house without running water, off County Road L-45 not far from the Waubonsie Church and Cemetery outside Glenwood. Dad, a farmer, loved the land and spent long hours plowing, planting and tending the livestock. His mother, my grandma Skinner, lived four miles down the gravel road. Grandma Skinner had raised six children while slopping the pigs, sewing, planting a garden, canning, baking and putting hearty meals on the table three times a day. I think Dad assumed all women inherited Grandma's Hestian gene.

But not his child bride Carola Jean. She could write a jingle, but she knew nothing about cooking, gardening, cleaning or running a household—not even how to iron.

"Your Mom couldn't keep up with the house or the laundry," Aunt Dixie, my dad's sister, said years later. "If she ran out of diapers, she'd pin curtains or dish towels on you, anything she could get her hands on."

I doubt Mama knew what to do with a screaming colicky baby either, one who smelled of sour milk and required little sleep. In a house without running water, I must have contributed to a legion of laundry and fatigue. The doctor finally determined that I suffered from a milk allergy and switched me to soy milk which cured my colic, but not my aversion to sleep.

"In desperation," Mama recounted many times, "I scooted your crib close enough to the bed to reach my hand through the slats to hold your hand. Finally, you'd settle down, but"--Mama would draw in a long breath, here--"If I let go, you'd wake up and start crying all over again. You always wanted to be near me. Sometimes, I cried, too."

Without fail, the next part of her story included a comparison between me and my sister Vicki, born fourteen months later.

"Now, Vicki was just the opposite," Mama marveled. "I'd have to keep thumping her heel just to keep her awake long enough to eat."

Mama's retelling of that story during our growing-up years made me feel like thumping Vicki, too, and it had nothing to do with her staying awake. I pictured Vicki sleeping peacefully and wished I had been an easier child. More than once I wanted to shout, *I can't help what I did as a baby!* But I held my tongue; I was good at that.

By the time Vicki joined our household, we lived in a former rural school-house near Emerson, Iowa. It was here that Mama broke.

She was sixteen.

No matter how you do the math, the equation always comes out the same; Mama was little more than a child herself. The rigors of marriage, farm life, and two girls under the age of two finally came crashing down on her.

Mama had adopted a kitten, much to my delight and my dad's dismay. Dad did not want animals in the house. But Mama stood her ground; the kitten stayed. Mama loved watching it pounce on a string and lap milk from a bowl. She loved hearing it purr and worked with me to be gentle with it.

One afternoon, in the driveway, Dad ran over the kitten. Mama could not stop crying.

"He said it was an accident and he was sorry," Mama told me years later. "But, I never believed him." She jutted out her jaw. "He didn't want that kitten in the house."

I find it unlikely that my Dad intentionally ran over a kitten. He had a reputation for being *soft* when it came to killing animals, even to put food on the table. But I do believe some part of their marriage died with that kitten.

When Mama found herself clutching the butcher knife, she said she thought about me and Vicki, what using the knife would mean, how it would carve a different course for each of us. I'll be forever grateful that Mama fast-forwarded to the consequences. She released her grip on the handle and chose divorce over murder.

I have only a single flash of memory of leaving Iowa.

I'm sitting on the plush seat of a train; the nappy brocade scratching my thighs. I'm not afraid because I'm pressed against Mama's arm; I can feel the warmth of her against my side as she rocks rhythmically. She holds Vicki (who no doubt was sleeping). I repeatedly click my black patent shoes together and apart, together and apart, noticing the folded lace tops of my anklets hanging just over the edge of the cushion. The world is a blur passing by the train window. Clickety-clack. Clickety-clack. Watch your back. We are headed west to Fort Morgan, Colorado.

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