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Lex Williford

My Mother's Wedding Dress

For My Mother

The first time she could remember my father ever striking me, my mother told me forty-five years later, I was just learning to crawl on the hardwood floors of my father's cramped officer's barracks at Fort Bliss, and when – just bathed and powdered-pink and still naked on hands and knees – I reached out to touch a scorpion, carrying her young on her back, dozens of them, her hind end up, pincers out, flicking her tail at me from the shadows of my mother's closet, my father jumped from their bed, shouting, "No!" then slapped me across the back of my tender knuckles, picking me up like a football under his arm as I howled, then stepped the scorpions into a long blond smear with his boot.

That's what Maricella, my mother's best friend from Juarez, the bullfighter's daughter, called them: "Little blondies. Güeritos." Tiny scorpions the vanilla color of *calaveras*, candy skulls for *el Día de los Muertos*, the Day of the Dead. The day I was born, William Barret Travis Truitt, III. November second, 1954.

"¡Los alacranes son güeritos como tu!" Maricella said the next day, helping my mother hang two dozen Boraxed diapers on a clothesline in our backyard of blond sand and prickly pear and creosote bush. *The scorpions are little blondies like you!* Maricella pointed at my beautiful, fair-skinned mother and told her how much she looked like that *gringa* movie star Marilyn Monroe now that she'd bleached her dark auburn hair blond the first time.

"¡Como tu niño tambien! Like your baby, too!" Maricella laughed and made faces at me in my stroller, ruffling the thin blond curl at the tender pons still peaking my skull till I squirmed and sweated, squinting in the sun, drooling as I sucked at my fisted knuckle. "But your husband was right," Maricella said, shaking her head, a good Catholic woman. "This isn't Dallas!" Then she laughed and wagged a finger at my mother for not knowing better than to let

a naked baby crawl on the hardwood floors of a home in the middle of the desert.

My mother was twenty years old.

That afternoon, when she heard my diapers flapping outside like flags in the wind, she looked out the kitchen window to see a blue-black sky and a great wall of dust rolling south toward the officers' barracks down from the flats at Oro Grande – where my father spent weeks at a time blistering in the sun and taking stinging salt-water showers after he'd spent all day shooting off 120 mm artillery shells and anti-aircraft missiles at the Army's desert artillery firing range – and my mother rushed outside, the screen door slapping hard behind her as she choked and squinted her sand-stung eyes, then pulled down all my once-white diapers fast as she could, each one brown now as the suffocating sky, and she brought them back into the house, where I was crying in my crib, so she could wash them all over again as the thunderstorms rolled in.

The pregnancy with me had been hard, my mother said, her second, and with all that time alone to think in those cramped tarpaper barracks while my father was gone, she'd convinced herself that she'd lose me like her first.

"There was one before me?" I said – her first born – but she just looked down into her coffee on the kitchen table.

"Please be quiet about it," she said. "Not even your father knows."

For two years after they'd moved from Dallas, they'd tried everything – my father going AWOL in the middle of the night sometimes, ordering his jeep driver out of his bunk and swearing him to secrecy to drive him two hours south from Oro Grande so my father could get a real shower in El Paso and leave my mother standing naked on her head just before dawn, laughing, in my great grandmother's canopied feather bed – and after all that trying, then nothing, for months, my mother came to believe she'd never conceive again. So when she'd missed her cycle for the third month, she walked around for weeks with a smile frozen on her face like the one she'd worn in her white silk wedding dress on the steps of St. James in east Dallas, my father, William Barret Travis Truitt, Jr., standing there on the steps with her in his khaki jodhpurs, his commissioned second lieutenant's uniform and cap, a perfect spit shine on his Texas A & M senior boots.

Nothing like a man in uniform, my mother told me, smiling,

and he had such a handsome face, square-jawed, with that strawberry blond crew cut and such intense blue eyes you wouldn't believe it, like the wide New Mexico sky, like that actor Jeffrey Hunter's in *Seven Cities of Gold*. The man, she knew the moment she saw him, who'd make all her beautiful babies.

"Helen, why are you so happy?" my father asked her, taking her face into his rough palms, caking blisters on his knuckles and sunburned nose, his fatigues still dusted from a week-long stint of shooting off missiles in the desert.

"I just am," she said. And then she told him.

On Halloween two days before she went into labor, a diphtheria epidemic broke out in the Fort Bliss hospital – three newborns dead – and when my father rushed her there, her water breaking in the back seat of my father's 1950 Plymouth Coupe, the hospital, in quarantine, turned them away at the last minute, then sent them on with a Military Police escort to the Emergency Room at Biggs Air Force Base. Born there on a gurney, headfirst, ten pounds, seven ounces, I was a big baby boy, my mother told me, with a bright red nevus across my forehead, from where it had pressed against my mother's spine for months, a pink spot on my forehead that still glowed red at forty-five whenever I grew angry or hot from too much work in the sun, a birthmark shaped like the scorpion that never stung.

Six days after my mother returned home, she grew sick, a piercing pain in her side like Maricella's father's, gored once by a huffing bull. Then a terrible odor arose from under the sheets as she rolled moaning in their bed, and my father rushed her back to Biggs Air Force Base, where the doctors removed the sponge they'd left inside her for over a week.

Thirty-five years later, when her gynecologist had removed everything in a radical hysterectomy, she said, he found one of her ovaries collapsed in on itself, as if it had been crushed, from a terrible infection decades before, shrunken like the sun-pruned husk of a desert pomegranate, and the nurses all marveled at how she'd managed to have six healthy children.

When my father struck my knuckles that first time, my mother said, it was as if he'd struck *hers* – she could *feel* it, a sympathetic pain as real as the stabbing labor she'd felt when she'd begged for a spinal block in the emergency room, when the doctor held me upside down by my ankles and slapped me across the backside

screaming into the world – but when she raised her hand to slap my father's face, she couldn't.

She took me from his arms and held me, squalling, at her shoulder and screamed, "Don't you *ever!* *Ever* do that again!" But, of course, he did and would many times over the years, as if it was his god-given right and duty, as if there was nothing she could do or say to stop him.

"I'm his father," my father told her, "and I have to teach him."

"Teach him *what?*" my mother said.

"Fort Bliss," my father always joked. "So where's the bliss in it?" But those *were* blissful days, my mother told me, the most blissful days of her life. Before they had me to keep them up all night, blissfully free of their own parents and of being parents themselves, long before they had to worry about mortgages and bills and sick children and bankruptcy and war, they drove weekends to the mountains in Cloudcroft and Ruidoso and threw snowballs at each other when they'd fallen skiing, then cut down their own Christmas trees from the Lincoln National Forest. Weekends in summer and spring, they crossed the bridge over into Juarez with Maricella and her husband Juan and they got so smashed at Martino's on the best martinis in the world they could barely walk back over the bridge, and when she watched the bullfights, all that blood bothered my mother so much she almost got sick, and so they left *la Plaza de Toros Alberto Balderas* before the bullfight was over and spent hours at the *mercados* haggling for cut-tin mirrors and *calaveras* and tequila with the worm floating at the bottom and bullshit cigarettes the Mexican clerks sold only to tourists and stupid *gringo* soldiers out for a night in Boy's Town.

But after I was born, they were blissful, too, my mother said, my father and mother both staring down at me for hours in my crib, their faces unable to unsmile themselves, till I was awake and crying to be fed and my mother would breastfeed me, and then my father would lift me up, smiling, and toss me so high into the air that I almost hit my head on the ceiling, squealing with laughter, and though it terrified her to think my father might not catch me as I fell, my skull cracking on the hardwood floor, she swore to me she could never remember a time in her life so full of pure and simple bliss.

For months after my father struck me, my mother said, I held my hand in a tiny fist she could never unclench. "Like now," she said

and reached across to touch my knuckles fisted on the kitchen table.

"All those years," my mother said, "I should've protected you."

I palmed the back of my mother's hand. "No, Mom. Don't. You don't have to –"

"Yes, I do. *He* won't apologize to you – can't admit he was wrong, too goddamn stubborn and proud – but *I* can. It's the least I can do for my son."

My father was upstairs asleep now in one of the houses I'd grown up in, just a white-haired old man – a little pitiful, if you want to know the truth – mellowed in his own way, I suppose, completely harmless to me now.

"How could you protect me?" I asked my mother. "How?"

The night she cut open their boxes of clothes after they'd moved back to Dallas, into a new house with hardwood floors my father'd just bought on the GI Bill, his stint in the Army over, my mother pulled her wedding dress out of its moth-protected plastic and held it up in front of her in her new vanity mirror.

My mother was seven months pregnant with my sister Hannah then, and I was just walking, tottering, as I reached up to the bathroom counter for my father's box-cutting knife.

"No, no, honey," my mother said, "you don't want to touch that." Then she pulled my hand away and put the knife up higher, out of my reach.

"I wonder if this thing would still fit me now?" my mother said. Then, smiling as she had on her wedding day, she slipped her wedding dress on over her head, hoping to surprise my father.

When she began to scream from the bathroom, my father ran to her down the hall from the kitchen.

"Get it off!" she screamed. "For god's sake, get it off me!" And she screamed and screamed and screamed, till I was screaming with her, and she slapped at her shoulders and neck and thighs, her back and breasts and stomach, still bulging under her dress, stuck there so tight in the middle she couldn't get it off, till finally my father took the box-cutting knife and ripped her white silk wedding dress down the back, till it fell torn and shredded to the floor.

Inside the dress my father found a nest of baby scorpions, dozens of them, all of them little blondies, like the mother carrying her young that had almost stung me, and my father swiped what was left of them off my mother's naked back and shoulders and stamped them into the hardwood floor.

"You don't remember, do you?" my mother asked me.

"No," I said, "I don't."

Well, it was the strangest thing, she said. When she and my father had first moved to El Paso, she'd threatened to leave him, if only for just a moment, just one of the many times she'd threatened to leave him in all the years I was growing up, and never did.

"Who'd ever want to live in such a godforsaken place?" she'd told him. "Nothing but cactus and rattlesnakes and scorpions!"

But for months after they'd moved back to Dallas and the scorpions' stinging welts had all disappeared, she still found herself missing the dry air that made her nose bleed sometimes and the intense blue sky, like my father's eyes before he was my father, and the clean, sweet smell of creosote bush in the arroyos after rain. But the thing that surprised her most, my mother told me, the thing she would always love and miss the most about the desert, was that all the young and tender things grew thorns.

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