



## EVERYONE GOES TO HOLLYWOOD

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*Pamela T. Mitzelfeld*

*In McComb, Mississippi, everyone goes to Hollywood.*

*They always have.*

*They always will.*

*Some things never change. McComb is one of those things.*

*Frozen in time. Seemingly motionless.*

*Life marches past it like a parade.*

For McCombites, Hollywood is not the place where movies come to life, and the rich and famous strive to further their cinematic success. No. In McComb, Mississippi, Hollywood is a cemetery. A pie shaped park for the dead. The ultimate destination for the town's inhabitants. A wedge of well manicured green lawn and faded plastic funeral flowers. Hollywood Cemetery is the center of a southern town that is the canvas upon which my family's history has been painted for generations.

The gates of Hollywood Cemetery are large and heavy and black. They are attached to an arched entryway with "Hollywood" scrolled in dark iron across the top. There are narrow gravel pathways that cut through and across the expansive grounds, thickly dotted with headstones. I remember thinking once that the headstones popping up all across the lawn looked like candles on the birthday cake of someone who had lived a long time.

*It is very quiet in Hollywood.*

The kind of quiet that only tolerates the sounds of nature and hush of grief. Throughout Hollywood there are randomly placed signs urging visitors to “Please drive slowly,” as if the residents might be disturbed by any show of extreme vehicular acceleration. I have always thought it unnecessary for a cemetery to display signs indicating suggestions for appropriate behavior. Ultimately, most visitors seem to acquiesce to the implied rules of conduct.



*I have been to Hollywood many times.*

The first time I remember going to Hollywood, I was five-years-old. My grandmother and great-grandmother took me there to pay my respects to my grandfather. He had been dead for five years. I vaguely understood the sense of loss and grief that was mine by association, but there was something in Hollywood that day that took my thoughts beyond the dead grandfather I had never known. As my grandmothers arranged bouquets of fresh flowers near the monument that now represented their husband and son, I had the strange feeling that someone was watching me.

*I was right.*

*It was Cary Welsh.*

Smiling at me from the row of tombstones behind my family’s plot, was a young boy—young in age, but old in the sense that his life had come and gone quite some time before mine had even started. Some grieving parent, or creative headstone salesman, had come up with the brilliant idea of immortalizing Cary Welsh with a black and white photo that was the center and focus of his marble tombstone. The carved slab, which always seemed to me like some sort of grim picture frame, stood cold and silent, giving no real tribute or consolation to the little boy that lay dead beneath it. I wandered slowly over to Cary’s spot to get a closer look at him. He was dark

haired, brown eyed, and I felt certain that his mother thought him quite handsome. His large front teeth seemed too big for the little boy mouth that would never have the chance to grow up around them. He looked happy enough, and I guessed his age at approximately nine years old. In my way of thinking he was an older boy, a big kid. The suit he wore in the photograph was gray; but then again, in black and white every color is a subtle shade between the two extremes.

I thought that his picture looked very much like the annual photographs that are taken at school. I imagined that Cary's smile was probably inspired by a funny remark made by the photographer for precisely that purpose. Or maybe he was smiling at a classmate who was next in line for the photo session. At any rate, even though he was smiling, I thought that his photo was just like the photos of all people who died young; even when they are smiling, there is a strange look of melancholia that seems to indicate their own awareness that they are doomed.



Mississippi seems content in its consistency. The instant you arrive, you are struck by the gradual, ambling kind of feeling that the place has. McComb is a tiny town, about an hour south of Jackson, the state capital, and one hour north of New Orleans. In fact, McComb is only fifteen miles from the Louisiana state line. Although the two states are closely connected, they are more like cousins than sisters; Mississippi, the aging Belle cloaked in a sort of shabby gentility, Louisiana, as proud and flirtatious as a Rampart Street parade. For those who have a passing familiarity with *Gone With the Wind*, I would suggest that Mississippi plays the "Melanie Wilkes" to Louisiana's "Scarlett O'Hara." In any event, they are an intriguing juxtaposition of Southern flavors.

All of my life, McComb has been in the background of my existence. I love the South, and I am not ashamed to say so. It is the place that my family comes from. It is the place where my parents met and fell in love. It is ever present in the way that

we speak, the things that we eat, the way that we view life, and work, and family, and God. I was born in Texas. That is where I am from. Like my mother and father, who hail from Alabama and Texas respectively, and their parents before them, who were all natives of Mississippi, the imprint of the South is a mark that cannot be erased from the story of my life.

McComb is a perfect representation of the impression that many people have of small southern towns. The people there speak with a Southern drawl. They do enjoy sitting on their front porches in the evening. They almost always drink ice tea. And yes, Main Street was renamed “Elvis Presley Boulevard” after Mr. Presley, a native of Tupelo, Mississippi, had the misfortune to prematurely exit this world. Ladies there still wear hats to church on Sunday. Dinner is the meal you eat at lunchtime. Supper is what you eat in the evening. Strangers greet you, not because they know you, but because there is always the chance that they may know “your people.” Magnolia trees are everywhere, and their saucer sized white blossoms are a beauty that is not to be missed. My great-grandmother always kept magnolia buds in her closets “just to make things smell good.” It is their super sweet, almost overpowering, fragrance that joins with the humidity and gives all of Mississippi the heady aroma of hot flowers.

As visitors drive along the expressway, they are always amazed by the leafy green growth that lays like a thick blanket over the trees and shrubs along the side of the road. It looks as if God himself had spread a quilt over the pine trees to keep them warm on a cool evening. This blanket is called Kudzu. My father once told me that the Kudzu was imported from Japan many years ago to help control and repel some native insects that cannot tolerate this heavy and rampant vegetation. The pest were driven out, but unfortunately no one has figured out how to control the vigorous Japanese immigrant that is quickly overcoming every tree in the state.

There are other commonly held impressions of the South that are not as harmless and quaint as iced tea and magnolia trees. I have met many people whose impression of the South

seems to have been drawn entirely from movies like “Mississippi Burning.” They envision mobs of white robed men burning crosses and churches. They are quick to mistake a Southern accent for a lack of intelligence and lack of racial sensitivity. It would be dishonest of me to say that the South is exempt from the ugliness of racism, but I can say absolutely that the extreme of that concept, as represented by filmmakers, is nothing that I have ever witnessed in the modern day South. It certainly is not the way that I was brought up. My Southern roots taught me about hard work and respect for my fellow man. McComb is a hard working community, and there is a sense of collective support and mutual respect exhibited by its inhabitants. Regardless of race.

Virtually every year of my childhood, my family spent the month of July in McComb. My brother and sister and I spent those thirty-one days languishing in the Southern heat, swimming in the South McComb High School swimming pool, and harvesting vegetables from our great-grandmother’s garden. By afternoon, the heat would invariably drive us to the comparative cool of the house. We used to take turns standing directly in front of the air conditioning unit in the living room window. Our damp hair blowing off of our faces, our great-grandmother reminding us, “Y’all are gonna catch pneumonia doin’ that.”

It was a time to be pampered and cared for by our great-grandmother and her sister. Two elderly widows content with their tiny house and garden and Bible study group, and the annual bonding with their various grandchildren. The days were long and slow, and filled with sunshine and the wonderful southern cooking that we were raised on. Supper was a feast every evening: fried chicken, sweet corn, fried okra, mashed potatoes and gravy, cornbread, black-eyed peas.

When we came in hot and hungry in the middle of the day, Aunt Annie would sit at the kitchen table and make sandwiches of mayonnaise and tomatoes on white bread. They were, at that time, the greatest sandwiches on earth. The three of us would sit at the table, tomato juice and seeds running down our chins,

chattering and laughing, as our great-aunt continued making tomato sandwiches until we had had our fill. Then we were back out into the heat, anxious for a new adventure.

Lola-Mae Case, lived down the road, “in the holler,” as my great-grandmother used to say—I always assumed that she intended to say “hollow,” and that she referred to it this way because the road dipped significantly into the shade overgrown place where Lola-Mae lived. When we couldn’t think of anything else to do, the three of us would walk down into “the holler” and pay a visit to Miss Case, who was always glad to see us. On most visits she would let my brother and sister and I feed the chickens, and play with the rabbits. Our reward for these little encounters was always a tall perspiring glass of heavily sweetened iced tea. We would sit together on her porch swing, drinking our reward from the old jelly jars that were the approved expendable drinking glasses for children all across the South.

Lola-Mae has long since gone to Hollywood. So have my great-grandmother and Aunt Annie. I miss them. The interesting thing is, those simple days still exist. Only the names have changed. My grandmother now lives in my great-grandmother’s house. Lola-Mae’s daughter lives in hers. When I visit with my own children in the summer, they go down into “the holler” and visit Miss Betty—every woman in the South is Miss something or another. They feed the chickens and play with the rabbits and drink iced tea from old jelly jars. They come home in time for a supper of fried chicken and okra and corn bread and black-eyed peas. They play around the magnolia tree in the yard, and bring buds into the house for their great-grandmother’s closets. Strangers who pass by say hello, not because they recognize them yet, but because they know “their people.” My children help Grandmother bring in tomatoes and snap beans from the garden, and they eat tomato sandwiches and cool themselves in front of the air conditioning unit in the living room window. As life moves past them, they

exist for a time in the Southern world that is the other half of who they are.



Several years ago I was visiting my sister who lives in Ohio. We were driving to Dayton and along the way we passed a small cemetery. I cannot remember why, but Cary popped into my head. I turned to my sister and asked, "Do you remember Cary Welsh?"

*"You mean that boy on the tombstone?" she asked, after a moment's contemplation.*

*"The little boy in Hollywood," I said.*

*"Yes, I remember him. I always wondered what happened to him, I mean how he died and all," she said.*

I have asked several relatives over the years if they knew what had happened to the boy on the tombstone. Was it some terrible childhood illness that had claimed him? Did a careless driver's car strike him? None of them seem to agree on the details. One thing is for sure. He went to Hollywood sooner than most. I can't say why, but it made me feel good that my sister remembered him too.

Last summer I saw Cary Welsh again. He has not changed. He is still on duty. The silent sentinel, keeping watch over the residents of Hollywood. I was struck by the changes that have taken place in my life since I was the five-year-old girl standing before his monument, naïvely contemplating his life and death.

*I grew past him.*

*I have had children and experiences. I have been in love. I have aged.*

*I have my life.*

*Cary Welsh is a little boy trapped in his elementary school picture.*

He has witnessed the changes in me over the course of my summer visits. He has watched me grow into a woman, a

mother, and a wife. He has watched me arrange flowers over my family. He will someday watch my children arrange flowers over me.

He has witnessed the evolution of our family history. As he greeted my grandparents, and great-grandparents, he will be there to welcome me someday. His nine-year-old face smiling as I am admitted to the Hollywood community. The whole pattern of my life having risen and faded while he remained young and immortalized, framed in his monument of gray marble. Living forever in the world of might-have-been.

There is so much in life that cannot be counted on. So much that is out of our control. So much to regret when things that once were, are no more. I know that life must move on, and I suppose that is always will, but I cherish those things that stay the same. I do love to bask in the fragrance of magnolia flowers on my grandmother's front porch, iced tea in hand. I love listening to the sounds of my own children at play. I love the Southern accents that bid me good evening as they pass. They know me. They know my people. They know that I belong here.

In McComb, Mississippi, everyone goes to Hollywood. That is the way it has always been, and will continue to be. Many of us have moved north to the fast-paced land of progress, venturing only the summer pilgrimage into the slow pace that is our true heritage. The important thing to note is that we always come home.

*We will keep coming home.*

*Some things never change.*

Like a slow growing pine tree hidden beneath a rampant blanket of Kudzu, McComb, Mississippi, stands happily in the shade of growth. Let the parade pass by this town and leave it unchanged and unique, comfortable and consistent.

*I like it just the way it is.*