

The Wind is Changing

By Annette Nevins

Like lines on an old woman's face, long deep crevices split the splotched wood that frames the tiny tan and white house, its two front windows watching over West Cherry Street as it has for more than half a century. Lace curtains that once fluttered in the Texas breeze are gone, the house now squinting through tattered aluminum blinds. A chicken coop no longer chatters with hens but lay in rubble of grey corrugated metal and twisted wire where a lonely hen now scratches and pecks through tangles of dried grass hunting for something to eat. As dark clouds gather, dried limbs of an old weathered hackberry scrape against the house like fingernails on a chalkboard. Creeeak. Scraaaape. Two young peach saplings, struggling to take root in the dried split earth, bend and toss in gusts of wind. Locusts sing in the Texas heat as 102-year-old Lona Lewis steps carefully through a maze of cracks and holes, punching her cane in the hard ground to steady herself. Creeeeeeaaaak. Scraaaape. The wind picks up and clouds begin to spit, moistening the concrete step as the frail and slightly bent woman brushes silver wisps of hair from her brow, wraps her bony fingers securely around one of two iron pillars standing guard at the door and pulls herself up on the front porch.

The scraping hackberry summons the centurion to this house that her husband built when she was a bride of 17 who left her family behind 30 miles away in nearby Mabelle. It was the first time she had left home. Now she stands at the house in Archer City where she spent half a lifetime reading poetry to her two sons and sewing rodeo shirts from flour sacks. The savory aroma of beef stew bubbling on the stove often invited friends from the neighborhood school down the road. Lona didn't often sit in the rodeo stands where her boys rode bulls and roped

calves, their bodies writhing with each kick and stomp, their arms flailing in swirls of red dust in the circular arena where livestock line up in corrals, the air heavy with the smell of manure. She preferred to listen to the crowds and the announcer from her kitchen window for fear of seeing her sons thrown from one of the beasts.

Archer City was a place where everyone grew up together and newcomers like Lona struggled to find her place among the picnic tables at town barbecues. Her husband, Newt, didn't dance, so she danced alone in stocking feet in her living room. She often walked to town alone to catch a Saturday afternoon movie matinee. She couldn't seem to shake the sadness that followed her from when she was just six years old and she watched her mother die of cancer. It was a sadness that echoed again through middle age as her sons grew taller and she stayed home alone while Newt dug water wells during the day and wired houses for electricity at night. In her loneliness, Lona turned to prayer and visiting the sick in the nearby hospital and nursing home. Bible verses became her weapon in battling depression. She became a widow just weeks after her 50th wedding anniversary. Loneliness and dependency on others that comes with aging gradually forced her to give away her dog and pack her memories in a few cardboard boxes to seek companionship and help in a senior living apartment complex across town, in the shadow of Archer City Hall. For more than 30 years now, Lona has driven by her old house on Cherry Street at least once a week, watching new families move in and out, painting the walls different colors, planting new flowers. Now that her ability to drive has been relinquished by failing eyesight, her friend is driving her by the house. This time, Lona walks in. A man and woman are inside painting and remodeling the home as their two young boys play in the next room. They are painting the walls yellow. Lona smiles. "Newt and I always wanted to paint our house yellow."

Like Lona, I opened a door in Archer City and walked in on parts of my life that I had passed by everyday. The difference was that I chose to ignore them. I came to this dusty West Texas town to participate in a weeklong workshop to improve my writing, and what better inspiration was there to draw upon than Larry McMurtry's birthplace, the backdrop for his great novels and the inspiration for aspiring writers. With the pending sale of his bookstores there would be plenty of news stories to tell this year. So like the good journalist that I am, I spent my first hour in Archer City walking around town square talking to people and getting ideas for writing assignments. This couldn't be too bad, I thought.

What I couldn't understand just hours later was why we were out on a dusty country road in the middle of the night taking turns on the flatbed of a truck telling stories about ourselves. I was used to writing about others, not talking about myself much. My heart pounded harder each time another writer took to the "stage" on the open truck bed. I wanted to stay in the kitchen with Lona to listen to the rodeo announcer for fear of what might happen in the arena. It was my turn and I needed help lifting my old body up on that truck. "I am broken." The words came out faster than I could ever imagine. The stars in the night sky seemed to shine brighter. There. I said it, and that's exactly where I was -- broken. After working as a reporter for three daily newspapers for almost two decades and freelancing as I reared three children, I had chosen to return to school to rekindle the passion I once had for writing. It was a passion that had become worn and dried up like Lona's peeling house. My writing had become mundane, a slave to the formulas of inverted pyramids, deadlines and nut graphs and stilted by a wall of professionalism that I had learned to put up between my notebook and the story. I was in love with people and their stories but afraid to tell mine. I took pride in not getting involved for the sake of objectivity. I thought that's what needed to be done to be a good writer.

There was more to my story but was I ready to tell it? As my writing life was dying, so was my personal life. But I didn't think that was important to understand now. I was here to learn how to become an awesome writer and I didn't want my life to get in the way. Then I met Lona, who had found her way through life. It was the day after my confession atop the flatbed and I had been walking near the courthouse during a break from class. I noticed cars collecting around a red-bricked building. A couple of ladies were rolling across the street with their walkers. Something was about to happen, so I walked inside the Archer Community Center where Lona was eating ham and sweet potatoes with other grey-haired men and women. I was attracted to Lona's sharp blue eyes and the animated discussion she was having with her friends. With lots of repeated words for the hearing aid to catch, her friends were trying to convince her to get a walker. She didn't even want to use a cane. She couldn't understand why her friends took her driver's license away. And why were they trying to cut her ham? So I sat down to listen. She had lived through the Depression and two world wars. She had outlived her husband and two sons. She was wearing a pearl necklace and angel earrings and telling her friend she had lived for more than a century, old enough to cut her own meat and get her own second helping of banana pudding, thank you. There was something in that stubbornness in Lona that I wanted to learn more about.

Another blessing walked into my life that night when our class met with Jackie Lane, a rough-looking cowgirl and horse trainer with a huge heart and wisdom that can only be learned through brokenness. She trains writers like she breaks horses, with a loving but stern kick. "You write well. You have a kind soul," she told me after I read her my piece about my night on the flatbed truck. "But you've got to cowgirl up. Get a gut." What was she talking about? I thought I had a lot of guts to come to this workshop in the scorching West Texas July heat, twice as old as

several of the six writers who came with me. Perhaps Jackie was talking about the kind of guts that got her back on the horse no matter how many times she broke a bone falling off of one. She once even tied herself to the horse's back until it bucked no more.

I knew about falling and breaking. I came to Archer City with a broken family. A passion I once knew for the man I married 25 years ago began withering away during all those nights I was left alone with a growing family as he courted clients to grow his law practice. I knew Lona felt that same pain of loneliness as she danced alone in her living room while her husband worked. She watched her friends and family members die. I wondered how she reconciled with her pain as I watched her one day meticulously fixing a bouquet of red roses on her husband's grave, her wedding ring slipping loosely around her thin finger, still sparkling like new. My ring sits in a wine glass on the top shelf in my kitchen. Drained of emotion, I removed my ring several months before coming to Archer City when my husband and I decided to separate, moving to opposite ends of the house.

How did Jackie know? How did this woman with weathered skin and scraggly hair who lived in a house that doesn't always have electricity see the resentment and bitterness that I had so expertly hidden for so long from my the well-coifed, meticulously manicured acquaintances living in the gated communities of Plano? I have my own story, and I began to realize that I wasn't going to be able to write about others the way I needed to until I embraced mine. The brokenness had seeped into every corner of my family. My husband was at the office preparing for a trial for work the night I took a phone call at 2 a.m. from our 20-year-old son as he stood on the sixth floor of a parking garage in Austin contemplating jumping. My son and I talked and cried on the phone together for almost two hours before he decided to come down. I was exhausted and angry, but the anger I turned on myself. This was the story I couldn't control or

understand. I felt inadequate as a wife and a mother, and I blamed myself for the bitterness I harbored. I would often dodge my own reflection in the mirror or windows. I couldn't bear to see the lines that stress had etched on my face and the dark circles that tears and lack of sleep had dug under my eyes. I was unable to conjure up enough energy to comb my hair. Feeling unworthy to even eat, my throat would close up when I tried to swallow. I had lost 30 pounds before I called my doctor to admit myself into the hospital for depression.

Part of my mending is learning that I cannot change anyone but myself. That change has started in Archer City. It started with meeting Lona in the community center where I learned to set my reporter's pad aside a bit and make time to talk about the weather and potholes and bake cookies with aging neighbors. I gained strength in an old woman's determination as she watches her independence slip away, shushing away any offers of help and insisting on placing her own straw in her drink on our trip to the Dairy Queen. People all around me in Archer City made their mark on my transforming life. Suffocating in cynicism and bitterness, I had quit dancing and listening to music long ago, books gathered dust with pages unturned for fear their words would either drown me or shake me from my confounding foundation of comfort in sadness. Two young cowgirls that I met in Archer City, Cristal and Vonda, brought laughter and music back in my life as we sang and swayed to country tunes playing on the radio on the back roads of Archer City. I want to dance again with a free spirit, like Jackie so gracefully moved to the music of the jukebox across the floor of the American Legion Hall. She didn't spill a drop of the drink in the glass she balanced on her head. George, a patient counselor and teacher, opened my world to stories through his love of books. He often plucked a book for me to read from the boxes of books he brought with him. His enthusiasm wasn't much different than that of the town's patriarch, author Larry McMurtry, who exhibits the same fondness and familiarity with stories as

he quickly makes a selection from his voluminous collection of books in his stores. Bill Marvel enthralled me with his stories and his young spirit of inquisitiveness and observation. He and all of my classmates inspired me with their craft of words. Each one of them gave me gifts for which I will forever be indebted. I am thankful to Carli, Jane and Madiha for their moving stories of rediscovery and to Christian for rekindling my love of nature and adventure, not to mention hopping fences to get closer to the story. Kinsey entertained us with her delightful take on small town life from the view of a beauty salon. Mariela from Mexico and Julie from South Carolina each brought their own sense of wonderment, unique insight and excitement about the cowboy way of life.

I was falling in love with writing again. Jackie taught me how facing brokenness, not hiding from it, makes me a better writer. It helps me recognize that same brokenness in others, like Keith, a young man and town misfit who befriended us on our week's journey and who began writing, too. The night Keith shared his first journal entry was the night I, too, began journaling for the first time.

A verse sung Sunday in Lona's church resounds in my head as we leave Archer City, its one stoplight still blinking steadily.

“Words of life, words of hope, give us strength, help us cope.

In this world where we roam, ancient words will guide us home.

Ancient words ever true, changing me, changing you.”

The stoplight beats with the pulse of consistency and tradition yet it keeps pace with change as diesel trucks scream along Highway 79 past broken oil pumps and abandoned railroad beds. The city that changed me is changing, too, as men in hardhats herd cranes along dusty

gravel roads hoisting majestic metal wind turbines to harvest the wind for electricity. A new coat of paint is almost dry on Lona's old house now. And the winds that tossed about the old hackberry and peach saplings have changed direction.