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# The Woman Who Saved Jesse James



PHOTO: JERRY BOWER

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## TESS GALLAGHER

IT WAS MID-AFTERNOON by the time I'd settled into my room at the resort. My friends wouldn't arrive until the following day. Every three years several women I'd been with at cooking school twenty years ago would join me for a few days' vacation. We always had such a good time we wondered why we didn't do it every summer. But the other women had husbands and families or summer retreats of their own, so we settled for meeting every three years.

I'd decided to come a day early and answer a few letters. This was not as easy as it sounds because some of the letters were at least five years old. I work at home, compiling cookbooks with titles like *Frozen Bread*, *Coffee Cake Bonanzas*, or *Appetizers Galore*. Everything falls by the wayside, especially mail, when I'm collecting recipes and testing them. Macy, the woman who works with me testing the recipes, also does some of my filing. That's how these five-year-old letters came to the surface. Macy had come across them in a box where I keep photo albums—pictures of ex-husbands with my ex-selves and ex-parents-in-law, and the forgotten friends of ex-in-laws.

"Why don't you just chuck them out if you're not going to answer them," Macy had asked me one day. I'd caught her with the box tipped toward the trash barrel.

Macy's right, of course. Who are these neglected writers anyway? Are they worth bothering with if they don't even complain? Still, I'd carried the box back into the house and made myself open a few of the envelopes. I skimmed over questions about people who'd long since left my life, or otherwise ceased to be of concern. People who now lived happily or unhappily in far-away cities, in other countries even. Some of the letters carried bad news from which the writers had probably recovered long ago. Or hadn't. Others wanted to share a triumph—a new job, or a child, the purchase of a car.

There was a mixture of regret and pleasure in rereading these

letters. Mostly I felt regret. I sat with the letters and felt older, as though I'd fallen behind myself. Trying to answer the letters seemed a way of catching up, of saving what I'd had to let go. That's when I got the idea of coming to the lake a day early and trying to answer the people who'd assuredly given up on me.

I arranged my things in the cabin, then carried the typewriter to a picnic table near the edge of the lake. I held the folder of letters and my stationery under one arm. There was a breeze from the lake, so I looked for something to put on the stationery to hold it down. I found a rock about the size of my hand and walked back to the table. There were a few water-skiers buzzing back and forth on the lake. The shadows from the hills would close over the lake before long, the skiers would get cold and go in.

I rolled a piece of blue stationery into the typewriter and looked out along the lake again. Two boys with one fishing rod between them were trying for something. The one with the rod was casting from the dock, taking direction from the other boy. But in no time the boy had snagged the branch of a downed tree that jutted from the water several yards from shore. After a while I could see him sloshing up to his waist, tugging on the line.

I decided to make some rules for myself. I would take each letter only in the order it came to me as I reached into the folder. I would have to answer in that order. I could draw two at a time.

I put my hand into the folder and took out the first letter. The postmark told me it was over three years old. I didn't recognize the name on the return address, which was from Dallas. I hoped the letter would give a clue so I'd have something to say. I drew a second letter. It was from a woman I'd worked with at the Sheraton Hotel in Denver. I'd cooked there fifteen years ago. Dotty Mayfair was her name. The letter was only a year old and had been written from Sugar Grove, Wyoming. I seemed to remember that it concerned her having remarried and settled down in Wyoming to run her own cooking service which catered to ranches in the area. "Gone to biscuits," I'd said to myself when I'd read that. I'd remembered her for her baked Alaskas and cherry cheesecakes during our hotel days.

I wanted to break my rules right then and answer Dotty first. Then I saw that the first letter had never been opened. Somehow it had made its way into the unanswered folders without ever having been read. I looked up as I tore it open, in time to see the boy with the fishing rod dive into the water and swim out toward the limb. The other boy was holding the rod. The head of the swimmer bobbed toward the branch.

The letter was handwritten in a cramped script, but the words were legible. The gist of it was that the writer, a Jim Danzer, wanted to hear from me. What had become of me since I'd left Dallas and the Sutter's Mill Steak House? Had I found a man to suit me? Then came a long story about his mother's illness. He'd been attending to that or he would have written sooner. He was still going into Sutter's asking for pie as good as my cherry-apple pie. Good, I thought. Good for him. If I was ever passing through I was to let him know. In the meantime, it

was possible he might be coming my way—in about two weeks. He would not force his attentions on me, but would wait to hear whether it was okay to stop for a visit.

When I looked up, the boy had reached the snarled line and was shouting to his friend, “Give me some slack!” The boy on shore began to spool line from the tip of the rod and loop it into the water.

I tried to remember Jim Danzer. He used to sit alone in a booth on a Saturday night, a never-married-but-still-looking cattle rancher who came into the city on business every so often. I’d talked with him more than once, may even have met the mother he mentioned. I couldn’t remember. In any case, we’d missed our chance.

I looked at the page of stationery rolled into my typewriter, then glanced to the far side of the lake, the summer houses and boat docks. I thought about Dotty getting a letter from me out in Wyoming. Maybe she’d have to drive to a main road where the mailboxes for an entire area would be lined up with names scrawled on their sides. Or maybe one of those rural drivers in a pickup would turn in at the ranch house and honk for her to come out. She’d have on her apron. She’d be wearing a hair net which she’d pull off before she opened the door. I remember how she hated for a man to see her in that hair net.

She was a good woman, Dotty. She was always taking up collections for people’s birthdays at work or, if they were sick, getting together some little gift item and card for them. Our connection, at the time we’d worked together, centered on a woman named Miss Nix. This woman was a retired English teacher, though her life had gone downhill so badly no one would have guessed. She had multiple sclerosis. Dotty had been going over to make her lunch everyday—this on top of her regular cooking shift. Oh, she got paid, but not enough to make it worthwhile that way. I used to spell Dotty on her job at the hotel so she could make the run over to Miss Nix’s place and get back in time to cook the dinner specials. When Dotty quit her job at the hotel and decided to go west, I inherited Miss Nix. It was a depressing thing to have right there in the middle of the day. In the beginning I didn’t know if I’d last the week.

I adjusted the paper in my typewriter and wondered if Dotty ever gave a backward thought to Miss Nix. I remembered the time Dotty had come to work a Kiwanis Club luncheon with me. She started in complaining—the lettuce, she said, must have been lying in the sun for a week. Where *did* they get that lettuce! But I knew something more than lettuce was wrong. Finally it came out. Dotty had just come back from Miss Nix’s, where she’d opened a can of protein mix for her. Miss Nix lived on this sweet-smelling, cream-colored stuff. She used to go through a case of it every two weeks. But when Dotty got there that day, she’d found Miss Nix in tears. Miss Nix wouldn’t touch the junk after Dotty opened the can and poured it into a tall glass for her. She told Dotty twelve of her best friends had died that month. “Imagine that,” Dotty had said when she told me, “to lose a dozen friends in that short a time. The poor old dear.”

I heard about those twelve friends too—after I started to work in Dotty’s stead. At the time, it made me think that I didn’t have six

close friends to lose, let alone a dozen. It was plain to see that Miss Nix must have had another life before she'd ended up bedridden, watching TV serials and reading the *National Enquirer*.

I'd confessed to Dotty that I didn't see how she'd gotten herself into the business with Miss Nix in the first place. Miss Nix ought to be in a nursing home, I told Dotty. "Well now, Lorna, you're probably right," Dotty had said. "I know you're right. Anyone would agree with you. But I can see myself in her place, helpless, and everybody ready to ship me off. It's then I want her to be left alone, just left right where she is." I never said any more about it to her after that.

If I wrote to Dotty I could start by asking after her health. In those days she'd had bursitis in her shoulders, and when the weather changed she used to complain about the soreness. My own health has always been excellent. I never thought much about getting old and infirm until I started working for Miss Nix. Once Dotty and I gave her a bath—Dotty holding her by her shoulders in the tub so she wouldn't slip down. I still remember what Miss Nix's skin felt like. It was loose on her bones when I rubbed her—loose the way chicken skin is when you rub butter on it. When I got home that night and took my own bath, I had this sensation as if I was melting away right inside my skin. I got out of the tub and stood in front of a full-length mirror to look at myself. I took hold of the skin on my abdomen and pulled on it. Then I checked my breasts. I thought of getting old—old like Miss Nix. I put my clothes on right away, and some lipstick. Then I fixed myself a drink.

It wasn't long afterwards that Miss Nix pointed her finger at me and, for no reason I could fathom, said there'd come a time when I'd look back and know what it was to need people. "Even people who don't love you. People who don't give a damn," she'd said. "You're strong now, you've got the world by the tail. But the years will come down on you. Mark my words." Then she'd had me light her cigarette and change the TV channel for her.

There were good times with Miss Nix, too. Times when you wondered how she'd washed up there alone. She was spunky in the mornings, before she ran out of steam. She'd tell stories about growing up in Missouri. One story I remember had to do with Jesse James. It seems Jesse had been on the run from the law and had knocked on the door of the farmhouse where Miss Nix was a baby. She had colic and her mother was rocking her. Her father was off somewhere with the cattle. "Give me the baby," Jesse James had told the mother. So Miss Nix was handed over to the outlaw. The mother was terrified, of course, and she didn't even know it *was* Jesse James. She was a woman alone and there was nothing she could do.

"Jesse James began to pace up and down with me," Miss Nix said. "My mother said he held me right up close to his face."

When the sheriff arrived, he pushed his way into the house—looking for Jesse James, he said. That's when the mother knew who was holding her child. But all the sheriff saw was a father and a mother looking after their colicky baby.

"The sheriff just stood there. I was the only disguise Jesse needed,"

Miss Nix said. “My mother said I did my part. I cried and cried. Finally the sheriff couldn’t stand the noise and left.” Then Miss Nix told how Jesse James helped himself to a cup of beans from the pot on the stove. Then he’d borrowed a cow to lead down the road to the neighbors. If the sheriff happened to double back, Jesse would be disguised by the cow. He would look like a farmer.

“He walked the cow to our neighbor,” Miss Nix said. “Then he bought a horse from that man. Paid good money. Then I guess he rode on to join up with his gang, and to continue robbing banks and trains. But I’m the woman that saved Jesse James that day.”

After Miss Nix told this story I’d sometimes catch myself thinking, “That’s the woman that saved Jesse James.”

The wind was getting up on the lake. I’d only gotten as far with my letter as “Dear Dotty.” There was no sign of the water-skiers now—only a thin rim of sunlight on the far side of the lake.

If I was going to write Dotty at all, it had to be about something that mattered, I decided. I didn’t know exactly why Miss Nix mattered, but I felt she did. You can’t know how you’re going to end up in this life. Miss Nix was the living proof of that. One day when I was over there I’d come across a photograph of her in her college graduation gown, and I realized that the smiling young woman on the front lawn was the same woman who could now barely lift a spoon to her mouth.

The story I wanted to tell Dotty had to do with an alcoholic named John who used to come around to Miss Nix’s to run a few errands for her. She would give him money and sometimes they’d watch TV together. He was a good twenty years younger than Miss Nix. In his fifties maybe.

I hadn’t been working more than a month for Miss Nix when I went over there one day and found the bedroom thick with cigarette smoke. Miss Nix was in bed staring out the window. She wouldn’t even look at me. I took off my coat. “What’s wrong?” I asked her.

“He got in here with me,” she said finally, and then she put her head on her arms and started to cry.

“He who?” I asked, but somehow I knew she meant John. “John?”

But she wouldn’t say his name. She just nodded into her arms and kept moaning.

I felt terrible. I wanted to do something. Kick something or yell. But I just got up and took a cigarette from her pack and sat down again. The face of the young girl in her graduation gown crossed my mind, and I thought of Miss Nix with that tassel hanging over one eye.

“I’m seventy-two years old,” Miss Nix said. “You’d think it would be too late for that. You’d think I could have got off this earth without that.”

I just sat there like a stump, watching some hydroplanes churn and spout across the TV screen. “I think you ought to tell the police,” I said.

She clammed up. She didn’t want to talk about police. “Close the

screen, but leave the door open,” she told me, when she saw I was getting ready to leave. I knew better than to argue with her. After all, it was her house. “You sure you don’t want the door locked?” I asked. She was sitting up in bed, smoking a cigarette. “The damage is done,” she said, without turning her head. The smoke curled up from the hard tips of her fingers. It didn’t seem right to leave her like that, but I did. I closed the screen and left.

Later that night I got to thinking about Miss Nix all alone there in the house. I was worried that John would show up again. I was no relation to her, but I was up to my neck in her situation. I decided to call Clara Zimmer, the woman who’d worked for Miss Nix before Dotty had. I wanted to see what she knew about John.

I told Clara over the phone what had happened, and Clara started to laugh. I told her I didn’t think it was a laughing matter.

“I’m sorry,” Clara said. “But Lorna, that woman is crazy as a loon. I’m surprised Dotty didn’t warn you.”

“Warn me about what?” I said.

“About John the rapist. Miss Nix is making that up,” Clara said. “It’s happening all right, but it’s happening in her head.”

I was dumbfounded. Like when people claim women want it when these things happen. Then it made me mad. But at the same time I’d seen old people, some of them running on half a battery, confused, stuck in some moment that had happened long ago or never happened at all. Cooking is easy compared to figuring out things like that. You add ingredients in the required amounts. You do it in the given order at the right temperature for the right amount of time. You follow directions and you get results. Motives and truth have nothing to do with a good dish. If something goes wrong you can usually find the reason. You can even throw it out and start over.

A week went by. I drove over to Miss Nix’s every chance I had, sometimes twice a day. I was living with this French Canadian man at the time, and he was getting fed up.

One night he said, “Why the hell don’t you just pack up and move in with her if she’s so damned important.”

“Maybe I will,” I said. “You’d better hope somebody cares about you when you’re sick and can’t do for yourself.” The words were hardly out of my mouth when I realized he’d be done with me in a minute if I ever got disabled. We had a big blowout that night. He said he wanted me to go back to Quebec City with him, meet his friends, have a vacation. How’d he think we were going to get there? I wanted to know. I was working two jobs to pay the bills and whose money, I asked him, were we going on? I was tired of taking orders from him. Then he got rough with me, and I had to hightail it to my sister’s place in Glendale. I cut my losses, and the long and short of it is that Miss Nix fell by the wayside. That was the last I saw of her. I don’t know what happened to her after that. I’d cut the anchor rope and left her to get through her days as best she could.

I was sitting there in front of the typewriter. But I wasn’t writing anything. I looked up and saw the resort manager. He was calling and motioning to me from his office door.

“Long dis-tance, Miss Parker,” he shouted. I got up and hurried toward the office. When I got to the desk, the manager went over to a file cabinet and started to shuffle some paper like he was too busy to leave the room. He wanted to listen.

It was Macy. She had a message from Jane Peterson, one of my friends. Jane needed a lift from the airport. She’d decided to fly to a nearby town rather than drive up. She’d be in tomorrow afternoon. The manager smiled when I hung up. He was Middle Eastern and his smile was broad.

“No trouble,” he said. “Always glad any time good news.”

When I got back to my typewriter I saw that the wind had swept the letters over the grass. Some had gusted into the lake and were floating away like small white birds. The letter from Dotty was nowhere in sight.

I gathered up the envelopes I could catch and stuffed them back into the folder. I was mad at myself for not fastening the letters down. Yet in a way I was glad too, as I watched them being pulled further and further from shore. I took the page with “Dear Dotty” typed on it out of the typewriter. Then I found a pen in my letter box and thought a minute of Dotty. It was as if she’d been sitting there all afternoon listening to me. I was ashamed I hadn’t done more for Miss Nix. I felt Dotty would have stuck by her. But maybe not. Dotty was out in Wyoming with a new husband. She wasn’t thinking about Miss Nix. She was doing what she had to do to look out for herself. I reached into my pocket file of new recipes and selected a few to put into the envelope. “Try these and think of me,” I wrote across the page to Dotty. Then I considered how I should sign it. I wrote “Love,” then signed my name. I folded it in with the recipes and wrote Dotty’s maiden name on the envelope, along with Sugar Grove, Wyoming. I had to hope it would get to her.

I thought of my friends who would arrive the next day. We’d sit by the lake and exchange recipes. We would all be a little fatter and a little older. One of the women was an expert on sauces. Another was a gourmet health-food cook, and a third had recently been to India and Pakistan to study the dishes there. We would have dinners out in the nearby villages and we’d probably get a little drunk and sing by the lake after dark. Yet I know that not one of these women would nurse one of the others if she were to fall ill and had no one to look after her. It made me sad to know this—though I couldn’t claim to be any different myself, if it got right down to it. That was the hard part. Knowing that.

Miss Nix was the only person I’d ever taken care of. At the time, everybody at work had said what a good thing I was doing. What a blessing I must be to that poor old woman. But all along I’d felt they weren’t talking about me, only finding a way to show how glad they were it wasn’t them having to wait on Miss Nix hand and foot. “The poor old dear,” they would say. “She ought to thank her lucky stars for you. Someone to look after her in her last days.” But I knew I was just another Jesse James in her life. Ready to walk in and out the same door. I’d left her at the mercy of John and whoever else would come



along before her money ran out. I'd been no better than a common bandit, though everybody thought I was a good Samaritan.

I felt mean and pinched to admit all this to myself. But what could I have done, under the circumstances? Jesse James couldn't have stayed on there at the farmhouse pretending to be a father. He had a getaway to make. I couldn't imagine he ever gave that day a backward glance, that woman alone with a colicky baby. He'd gotten away and what he did after that was his business. Miss Nix would have been the first to say so. Jesse would be shot in the back by Bob Ford and Ford would get remembered as "a dirty little coward."

One time Miss Nix had tried to sing "The Ballad of Jesse James" but she forgot how it went. Her memory had played out right where the song says, "and the children they were brave." I took it as far as I could for her, through the verse about Mister Ford. I knew there was a verse about the Glendale train, but before I could sing it I'd lost the words too. But I remember how good it made us feel that morning to sing that song, Miss Nix crooning after me in her rickety high voice, "and laid poor Jesse in his grave." We'd been glad to be alive and singing that morning, no matter what was happening to people anywhere else in the world. This was before the thing came up about John, and before my troubles with the French Canadian caused me to leave town on the run.

I picked up the folder with the rest of the unanswered letters and carried it over to the lake. At first the pages didn't want to go into the water. They kept flapping up in the breeze and flying back against my legs. I kicked them away until they floated out.

For a while I could see some of the pages being pulled along just under the surface of the water. Then there was nothing but ripples. I felt the way people do who like taking out the garbage—glad to make a sign to the past that some of it can be disposed of forever. I understood there were things I wasn't ever going to solve, like the right and wrong of what happened to Miss Nix. And if my own ending fell to her kind of luck I would just have to hope somebody, even a stranger, would give me help and comfort. But for now, I was ready to take up my life and do the next thing I could.