

Crazy Out Loud

written by Guest Contributor | November 6, 2019



“We may be the only sane family you have,” Uncle Olin yelled from the front seat of his red and white Chevy Impala. He laughed. “Hate to say that, but it’s true.” Olin’s car seemed to run in spite of itself. Even he couldn’t remember how many times the odometer had turned over. The trunk had rusted through and the muffler was totally shot. The air conditioner hadn’t worked in years, and the whoosh of muggy air swirling inside the car offered little relief from the prickly heat of a Louisiana summer’s day.

I’d flown back to see my mother. Her health had deteriorated and she had been transferred from a nursing facility to the hospital. While I appreciated being retrieved from the airport, Olin’s driving only added to my distress. He rarely looked at the road, forcing the car to jerk erratically in response to his corrective steering. His long bony fingers fluttered and played with the steering wheel as though it was a stringed instrument. Aunt Dookie sat beside him, chain-smoking. “Don’t be talking about my sister like that,” she said in her husky voice.

“Well, it’s not like losing Belle will be some big tragedy,” he replied. “It’ll be a blessing, really. The poor woman has no idea where she is. She doesn’t even recognize anybody anymore.”

Olin spoke as though I wasn’t there. Losing my mother hardly seemed a blessing. I hadn’t slept the previous night or a moment on the plane, but couldn’t be sure if the lethargy I fought was caused by sadness, fatigue, or the toxic gases arising from dead zones in Lake Pontchartrain.

The causeway spanning the lake runs for twenty-four miles, without a twist or turn. *Good thing*, I told myself. *Olin’s driving is bad enough on the straightaway.* When we finally reached the north shore of the lake, Olin pulled onto the shoulder, the cloud of blue exhaust that had trailed behind the car surrounding us. “Time to give the old gal a check-up,” he announced. Dookie, apparently familiar with the drill, picked up the quart can of oil she’d kept wedged between her feet, and removed the aluminum foil wrapped around its top. “Just be a second,” Olin said as he took the can from her.

Olin waved at us before raising the hood and obscuring our view. Dookie smiled at me sympathetically, gray wisps of smoke escaping her creased lips. To avoid conversation and being overtaken by my emotions, I called upon the male prerogative to help with things mechanical, ostensibly to lend Olin a hand, although I knew as much about repairing automobiles as I did about translating Egyptian hieroglyphics.

The sun-bleached oyster shells lining the road crunched under my feet. I approached, startled to see Olin sucking on a plastic straw stuck into the windshield washer reservoir. He rotated his eyes in my direction and, reacting to the stunned look on my face, contorted his face into a mockery of my own. He removed the straw from his mouth and placed a grimy finger over his lips to shush me.

"Vodka," he whispered before pulling down several more swallows. He offered the straw to me. *Hot oily-smelling vodka*, I thought, and shook my head. He took another sip, deftly tucked the bent straw in his breast pocket, and then poured a bit of oil from the can into the engine.

Dookie was stubbing out her cigarette with exaggerated consternation as we returned to our seats. The plastic slipcovers, sticky and hot, grabbed and pinched my legs. "What took you two so long?" She asked in irritation.

Olin patted the top of the dashboard. "Don't you worry. We'll get there by noon."

Dookie shot him a sideways glance. "With the help of God and three Marines!" Her devilish grin reminded me of my mother's. The sisters shared a delight in sarcastic quips and biting humor.

Olin's driving and the car's performance seemed to improve following our pit stop. Certainly, his spirits did. He talked about his days as a Mississippi riverboat pilot, describing the treacheries of navigating the river's muddy waters and its ever-shifting shallow shoals. He told stories about the characters he had to fight over the years. For a little guy, Olin was one tough bugger. His angular face and protruding forehead made him look like a Neanderthal, and his gruff manner did little to soften that impression. Inside the navy blue coveralls, he always wore was a lean, wiry man still strong for his seventy-six years. "Never had a single accident in my thirty years on the river," he boasted. "Some people have a feel for such things. Others," he said, shaking his head and chuckling with disdain, "just don't. Worst of all was your Great Aunt Fer. When your great-granddaddy tried to teach Fer to drive, she hit a streetcar right in front of their house. I'll never forget how red his face got whenever he told the story. 'That's it!' he'd said to her. 'If you can't miss something the size of a streetcar, you don't deserve to drive!' "

Dookie turned around to look at me. "You do know how Fer got that nickname, don't you? In French, f-e-r means iron ... and that woman had the lowest hairline and the hardest head of anybody in town. Don't you know she climbed right back into that car the next day and taught herself to drive. And she drove till she was ninety-two!"

Though Fer had died when I was a child, I still remember her careening around New Orleans in an enormous black Buick, cursing in French at the other drivers. Anyone in his right mind who spotted that car swerving down the street, covered with dents and scratches, driven by a tiny woman peering *through* the steering wheel, would surely have yielded the way.

Olin's laugh rattled deep in his chest, "Like I said, we may be the only sane family you've got. And your Mama, truth be told, ain't never been in her right mind."

Mother was famous for her histrionics and wicked tongue. Her antics often had me in hysterics. Olin, on the other hand, held a particular grudge against her ever since she'd gotten him good, telling him that, as long as he was alive, she'd never have to worry that she was the ugliest person on Earth. Clearly, I come from people who are crazy out loud. I can still hear Daddy saying, "There's only one woman in the world like her." He didn't mean it as a compliment. Those two argued about everything. One night after a particularly heated assault that didn't move Daddy an inch, Mama threatened to throw her drink in his face. "Do that," he'd said, "and I'm leaving!" Never one to back down from a dare, she dipped two fingers into her drink and flicked several drops at him. With that, Daddy marched into their bedroom and started packing. When he opened the bottom drawer of his dresser, he found two new asbestos oven mitts he'd purchased for her months earlier and had forgotten to give her. "She's not getting these!" he yelled, as he threw them into his bag.

Daddy spent that night at his sister's house. "I want my husband back," Mama pleaded the next morning. She begged me to call and tell him she was sorry. When I finally did, Daddy said, "Tell her that she doesn't have to apologize to me. She just has to say, 'Come home.' "

"Okay," she agreed when I told her. She sighed, dried her eyes, blew her nose, and took the receiver from my hand. "Listen here, you!" she barked. That was it. Daddy hung up. But he came home later that evening. I think the two enjoyed making up even more than they liked quarrelling.

If there was one thing my parents never disagreed about, it was the value of a good education. Daddy died suddenly, two years before I graduated from high school, and Mama started her decline soon after. I was never sure whether she understood that I had gone to college and earned my diploma. Now, only weeks after starting my first job, she was in her last days.

. . .

I sat beside mother, stroking her head. "Home," she mumbled between labored breaths. Her tone more dejected when her doctor walked into the room. Dr. Breaux looked the part—thick dark hair graying at the temples, and a face full of compassion. We introduced ourselves before he turned his attention to Mama. "Rest," he told her while gently taking hold of her hand.

"Home." Her voice registered barely above a whisper.

He looked at me. "Your mother has great persistence."

She always did, I thought. "I love you," I told her as the doctor left the room.

"Love you," Mama parroted, immediately losing focus.

Dookie sat across the room, quietly flipping through old magazines, leaving now and then to have a cigarette. Olin found it impossible to remain still, walking in and out, pacing the hospital hallways. After an hour or so, he tapped me on the shoulder. "You could use a break. There's a bar around the corner with a dartboard."

I shook my head. Mother had become unresponsive. "I want to be with her as much as I can."

"Dookie will stay with her. A couple of drinks and a few minutes breathing space will do you a world of good."

Olin's determination lifted me from the chair. I felt my manhood being challenged. Though I wanted to appear strong, I wasn't strong enough to insist upon staying. Restraining tears, I kissed mother on the forehead and followed him out of the room. By the time we returned, she was gone.



Alan Gartenhaus had a thirty-year career publishing a professional journal for museum educators, and serving as a curator for the New Orleans Museum of Art and the Smithsonian Institution. His non-fiction has been published by *Running Press*, *Caddo Gap Press*, and the Smithsonian Institution. His fiction has appeared in the *Santa Fe Literary Review*, *Euphony*—the literary magazine of the University of Chicago, the *Broad River Review*, and *Evening Street Press*, among others.