

Voice Lessons for the Writer · Julie Checkoway

1.

THE MORNING THEY CAME to take my brother away, we gathered without him on the stoop in our best clothes. Hennie, whose freshly polished nails shone ruby-hued as she turned her wrists round and round in the sun, wore her hot-pink stretch pants and white ankle boots. My father, standing behind me silent against the door, left an impression of his backside on the once-taut screen. With one hand he fingered the loose change in his pocket and with the other, over and over again flipped up the lid on the rusted mailbox and then let it drop shut with a hollow *clack*. He wore his wide, sky-blue necktie with its spaghetti stain specks, his dull white dress shirt and his only jacket with decent elbows. That jacket, which he wore only when he attended church, was thick-lapelled and it was *dung-colored*, I had decided when I found that word in the *Roget's Thesaurus* during a foray there one day. Finding that word at thirteen had been a quiet and solitary miracle of naming; many years later I would use it again in writing to describe the elusive color of my father's eyes.

My own dress that day was a style already bygone and all constraint. It had been small even when new, and bound in at waist and collar with wide cords and ribbons, the kind of outfit that Hennie, my father's new wife, always brought me home from *Markdown's*, where she worked as a salesgirl and had the privilege of discount. It was a dress that I had already begun to outgrow the first time I tugged it down over my head and wide shoulders, but one which I had not yet contrived to free myself from. It was, of course, of two certain halves, two distinct hemispheres: fuchsia flowers spilling out enormous upon my thighs, busting out in bloom and singing, but across my ribs and bosom, under which my heart was hidden, ran thick black stripes, as on the issued attire of an inmate.

I sat myself down and covered my knees over with my skirt, pressing flat the rigid folds of the accordian pleats. That early the street was vacant except for the one soul who had come out to *maintain* her steps, as the act of upkeep was called in the language of our neighborhood. *Maintaining* again? neighbors called out to one another on Saturdays and Sundays whenever anyone climbed a stepladder and washed his windows, balanced a garden rake on his shoulder and made his way toward the leaves strewn

on the devil strip or hosed the grime off the hood of his Chevy. Maintaining their run-down houses and their beat-up cars so the neighborhood wouldn't sink down any lower than it already had, said my father, who was a man of aspirations. He worked as a mechanic at Murphy's Garage, a ten-block walk away, but he thrived on the idea of himself as a Big Band singer like Rudy Vallee or Mel Tormé, a hope he had had as a younger man.

Outside number 1459, the house that stood precisely across from ours and was covered with a perfect, undented surface of pink aluminum siding, and which displayed in the picture window a life-sized, black velvet paint-by-numbers portrait of a raven-haired, vacant-eyed Virgin, the neighbor lugged her brimming bucket with the mop in it, heavy in her arm, down the front steps. Mrs. Walley was a former Christian Scientist who had converted to Catholicism, a widow, and the only woman left on Summit Avenue in that decade who still baked things fresh for Halloween and dropped them steaming from a tray into a youngster's open pillowcase, though my brother and I were far too old by then to go knocking on doors. What was more, it was she who had once told a believing, younger incarnation of me, when I had skinned my shin on the pavement, that she had faith in the fact that torn or pierced, a knee or palm, or any wound or illness for that matter, could heal untreated and of its own accord.

Mrs. Walley stood on the sidewalk. She sagged in her huge housedress, across which a pattern of ice skaters twirled and raced.

"Hot one today, I can tell you that," she told no one in particular, though there was no one out besides her but our over-dressed gathering of three. She wiped her forehead with her forearm in that gesture that means *hot* and tucked a wayward strand of hair back into its knot. The ammonia smell from her washbucket seared the air and reached us.

"Just *look* at it," she said, motioning to the rooftops of the two-story rowhouses where even as early as half-past eight in the morning the haze lay heavy and unmoving, a warning about the heat of the later hours.

"Coming down upon us."

She turned to us for the first time.

"Why, Marilee," she said, addressing me, "you look *something* in that get-up."

"And you, Mr. Filson," she said to my father, her voice an obvious octave higher than usual and bearing the shrill knowledge of whom among

us she was neglecting, “you’re looking swell.”

Beside me, Hennie stopped revolving her wrists. She and Mrs. Walley had not been on speaking terms since the Christmas before, just after the wedding. Mrs. Walley, a friend of my dead mother, had taken offense at Hennie’s announcement in the neighborhood that Hennie *gave it* to my father whenever he wanted. It was a statement Mrs. Walley had construed as a slight against my mother, whom, it was common knowledge, had been an invalid and unable to *give it* at all toward the end.

Hennie held her hands to her mouth and began to blow on her fingers. “Say thank you to the nice lady,” she said between exhalations.

“Say it,” my father said between his teeth, and when I still hesitated to speak, he nudged me once with his workboot, down low in the hip so Mrs. Walley couldn’t see.

“Thank you, ma’am,” I said quickly, and tugged my skirt down further over my knees.

Hennie blew hard at her fingers, her cheeks puffing out enormous. On nearly each thin finger, except her wedding one—but even on pinky and thumb—was a thin golden ring, like a wedding band, as though she had been married that many times, when in fact she had been married only once before she’d married my father. Ten years earlier, when she’d been twenty, she’d been married to a Mr. Barnes she never spoke of in my presence but whose wrinkled photograph she hid in her dog-eared *Complete Medical Encyclopaedia*, and whose ring she kept in the secret compartment of her jewelry box.

The ring my father had given her, the one which had caused so much trouble in the beginning because Hennie had discovered that the gem was flawed, circled her real ring finger. Held in place by the small gold claw, the diamond gleamed jagged and seemingly whole. But with a closer look, a stronger lens, its minute fissure, like a hairline fracture in an ice chip, could be found. Every time I looked at the ring I saw the way that the day of the wedding Hennie had scrutinized the gem through her very own jeweler’s glass, and how it had become a regular habit of hers since then to hold her left hand out at arm’s length and regard it with disgust.

“What are you now? Eleven? Twelve?” Mrs. Walley asked me.

Others always seemed to wish or guess me a different age: younger, capable of less than I might threaten, though I was certain I was ancient, withstanding the burdens of the dead or the prematurely grey.

“Thirteen,” I said hurriedly. “Buddie is eleven now.”

My father glared at me.

“Oh, how it goes,” Mrs. Walley said, meaning, I reasoned, time.

“Still want to be a writer?” she cried out louder across the avenue, loud enough to embarrass me with the only real confidence I had shared with her, some years before.

“No,” I called to her across the way. “Not anymore,” I said. “Going to find something else to do,” I concluded, shutting my teeth and lips down upon these words, desiring to close the subject. I had decided just the day before that I had been foolish to think I had the power to tell any story from start to finish in my own voice.

“You’ll find something,” Mrs. Walley said. “A nice girl like you.” Then, “You folks waiting for something?” she called out innocently, not looking at us directly any more, but lifting her dripping mop out of the bucket and giving it a squeeze.

“Just waiting,” said my father in a monotone. He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned farther into the screen.

Mrs. Walley turned from us and bent down, re-dipping her mop. With effort she lifted it out again. Starting at the bottom and working her way to the top, she swabbed the dusty stairs until they gleamed wet and finished. Done, she poured the filthy water out onto her browned shrubbery and her sparse, browned patch of lawn and padded back into the house. Her screen door, tight on its spring, swung shut behind her with a *whack*. The black velvet Virgin shook against the glass of the picture window.

Up the street and over the hill, where my eyes had searched again and again for the car I knew was coming, the paper boy appeared, ambling slowly from door to door, his satchel slung over his shoulder and the strap across his chest like the banner across the chest of a beauty queen. He was Buddie’s age, and though his coloring was different—pale skin and fair hair—his build was the same long, lanky legs and long arms. With crisp whips of his long right arm he flung the *Boston Globe* onto porches all along the street, stopping now and then to stuff one imprecisely into a mailbox or to lean over and tie the dirty laces of his Keds. When he had made his way as far as our house, he strode up the steps and thrust the paper at my father, who hesitated at first before reaching out for it, as if he’d been given a thing he’d not asked for, and then wrenched it suddenly from the boy’s hand.

“Y’owe ten dollars,” the boy said over his shoulder, casually but with a strand of cruelty, smart-assed the way Buddie could be, when pushed or given the occasion. “I come collecting on Fridays,” he said to the three of us, as he walked on to the next door down. “*Friday was yesterday*,” he said, chucking a paper onto the neighbor’s porch. “And I won’t be d’livering to you no more if you don’t pay up.”

“*Friday was yesterday*,” Hennie repeated mockingly once the boy had gone out of hearing range, her voice lilting. “Walking-talking goddamn calendar,” she said under her breath and laughed, and then returned to blowing on her fingers.

My father slipped the rubber band off the paper and thwacked the pages open. He stared at the front page for a moment and then dropped the paper at his feet, beside me. He breathed heavily and loosened his necktie.

July 15, 1963. WORST AIR QUALITY ON RECORD EXPECTED TODAY the blackest headline read, but I did not read on. I took a deep breath and let the denseness and the haze fill my lungs and remain, the way the denseness and haze filled the city and did the same. From inside the house I heard the sounds my brother made, drawers opening and shutting, wood barking as it rubbed against the tracks of the bureau, belongings being emptied into garbage bags. My father had said that if he went, he could not take a suitcase. And that once gone, he could never come back. The air was what sorrow felt like when it filled you, full and heavy in your chest so that breathing was a thing you had to rehearse and demand of yourself every time, so you wouldn’t forget how to do it.

When the paper boy disappeared down the street, Hennie, the previous coat on her nails having dried, sat down on the stoop beside me and took out a bottle of clear nail varnish from her pants pocket. She opened it, and the sweet smell of lacquer overpowered for a moment the ammonia odor of Mrs. Walley’s stairs and lawn and bushes. Hennie daintily smoothed the tip of the brush along the surface of her nails, putting on an outer coating, her brow wrinkling up as she concentrated on her slow and steady strokes.

“Take out the speech,” she said without looking at me, and I pulled the sheet of paper from the pocket of my dress.

“I am perfectly happy where I am,” she said in a clear voice, stroking her nails the way a painter might paint a canvas, consumed by tiny strokes and small attentions, but with an eye to the whole and finished scene. My

father had dictated the speech to her the night before and she had dictated it to me; she had memorized it herself, though I was not yet certain I had.

"I am perfectly happy where I am," I said, not looking at the sheet of paper, with its pencilled lines.

"And this is a *happy* home," she said.

"And this is a happy home," I repeated without conviction.

"Feel it," my father said from behind me.

"And this is a happy home," I said again.

"*Feel it*," he said and kicked my hip.

"And this is a *happy* home," I said, with feeling.

"And Buddie is just a troublemaker," Hennie said. "A troublemaker who has trouble fitting into such a happy home environment." And I repeated that, too, though Buddie wasn't trouble, just a sass back, a word out of turn, and on occasion, then some.

"Unlike myself," she said, pointing to herself with her wet hand.

"Unlike myself," I said, and pointed to myself.

But when Hennie said the thing she most wanted me to say when the social worker was to arrive, I wrinkled up the paper in my hands and began to cry.

Hennie said it once more, and when I didn't repeat it, she said it again, this time raising the brush from her thumbnail and turning to me, her mouth set hard and certain.

"Say it, for Christ's sake," she said.

"Say it like she told you," my father said, still standing, his foot poised in the air, near my face. "Like she had you write on that paper."

I looked across the street to see if anybody might be watching but the street was vacant. Across at Mrs. Walley's, only the blank-eyed Virgin gazed absently back.

Still weeping, I repeated what Hennie had said.

"And you make sure you behave when that woman comes, now," my father said, leaning down, taking the wrinkled sheet of paper from my hands and stuffing it into his jacket pocket. "You make sure you say all the things Hennie told you to remember."

Hennie's face softened a bit.

"Wipe your face," she said, picking out from her pocket a tissue that was dabbed with dried red nail polish. "Clean yourself up," she said. And when I wiped my face clean, she reached over to my head. With her palm

down and wet nails raised upwards so as not to mess them, she smoothed my hair back, the way a mother smooths the hair of a child far younger than I, trying to soothe her into being something she isn't or believing something she can't.

More kindly now, she leaned toward me, her teeth showing, and she said, "We know you're a good girl, Marilee."

Unable to bear it any longer I said: "*We know you're a good girl, Marilee,*" just like Hennie had said it, and I wound myself out from under her hand.

Then Hennie looked up to my father, and my father leaned down and slapped me one good.

2.

Grown women, loving or full of hate, remember forever the moments in their childhood when all things stood poised for change, on a pivot, and they acted or didn't act accordingly, bringing change or leaving things to be as they were. Those moments pursue them, the moments and they combining to be things which turn in circles, revolving in memory like everything done or undone, said and silent.

It is that way for writers, too, and I have become one since that day, despite what I told Mrs. Walley. And if you are the kind of person who puts stock in words and reads things, you perhaps have seen the name *Marilee A. Filson* on a story or two, not unlike the story I am telling. When you write stories you are trying to heal with voicing, writing out, over and over again, a single moment, knowing that regardless of how you recast it on a page any given time, it is only its very self, as when you are unsure when you've left a place if you should have stayed there, the way my brother—who has since become a traveling salesman, unable to dig his heels into the soil of any given place for long—is unsure and full of guilt today; or having stayed, as I did, in a place long after it was no longer safe to stay, wondering if you should have made a swifter escape.

And perhaps it is that way for grown men, too, because when I think of my father, though he is dead now, I see him as a soul standing still but nonetheless forever chasing what he, too, had left undone.

There are theories about what makes people turn rotten, or what makes the wounded linger at the site of the wounding, but I can have none of those. With my father it is sufficient to say that he once had a voice to sing with and then the voice disappeared and when it went, most of him went,

too. And when my mother died, the very last of him was gone. It is sufficient to say about myself that I stayed beside him, as though beside a once-full but suddenly empty husk, hoarding the hope that it would be replenished in season.

I have memory of a time when I was much, much younger, of my father upon a stage in the VFW hall in our neighborhood, the microphone in his hands, the cord wound around his wrist, his weight shifting from foot to foot as he sang *Love Me or Leave Me* in a voice no longer potent, to a smoky room of men and women who were no longer listening. I was waiting for him that afternoon among the cigar smoke and the drunken crowds, and my brother beside me, and I recall cringing with shame at the fact that over the din I could not hear my father, though his lips were moving; and cringing again when he stopped and his face was puzzled, though the orchestra went on playing. And his shit-colored eyes were blank. He had forgotten the words to the song he was supposed to be singing.

3.

When the car finally pulled up to the curb, it was mid-morning and the heat had set in for certain. The street shone as though it had been recently re-surfaced, and pennies and bottle shards were pressed farther and farther by the heat into the soft, black tar. A woman of about forty stepped out onto the sidewalk, her heels on the curbstone. On her head was a well-worn, white mesh summer hat with a small green feather. The fronds of the feather were splayed and split as though the woman had held the hat in her lap and run her forefinger and thumb over the feather again and again, the way I had done with pigeon feathers I had found in the gutter. She was a heavy-set woman, dressed in a dull red jumper without sleeves. Her knees were dimpled, and the skin on her arms, like the skin of her face, was olive-colored, with a weightiness to it. She was smiling.

“Good afternoon,” she said, and introduced herself as Mrs. Givens from the State. She moved toward the steps where the three of us were and extended her right arm. Underneath the arm, down the side of her dress, there ran a long, dark stain of perspiration.

My father leaned down and, placing his two hands on my shoulders, pushed me forward.

“Welcome to our home,” I said automatically, remembering the words

on the page and moving forward towards the woman to shake her hand. It was warm and wet and slipped quickly from me.

“I’m Marilee Angela Filson, thirteen,” I said to her, “and this,” I continued, turning slowly and with the grace I had been instructed to use — as if balanced on my head were a piece of fragile china or a planet — my shoulders first, then my torso and lower body pivoting on my heels, “is my father, Mr. Bob Filson, age forty-one, and his wife — my stepmother — Mrs. Henrietta Filson, thirty years old this December.”

Hennie stood up quickly and smoothed her pants. My father, still on the top step, reached his arm down and shook the woman’s hand so firmly that he seemed to pull her up the steps. Mrs. Givens stood on the narrow top step beside Hennie and my father, the three of them crowded there and awkward between the left and right-hand wrought-iron railings. Hennie put her arm around my father’s waist and he put his arm around hers. The two of them looked to me.

“Welcome to our home. Won’t you please go in?” I said.

The three of them went through the door, and I followed. The living room was dark and cluttered but cleaner than it had been in weeks. The floor had been swept and the furniture dusted. I knew because I had done both: I had cleaned the birdcage and watered the thirsty houseplants; I had picked up the newspapers and laid them in a pile at the foot of the sofa, and gathered together my father’s old sheet music, laying *Love is Always Lovelier the Second Time Around* casually upon the music stand at the piano, as though it had been recently played upon the dingy keys. In the birdcage, our speechless parakeet, Bisby, was sleeping. In the window, our tiny fan worked to spin a bit of coolness into the air, but the room was stifling.

From down the hallway came the sound of garbage bags crinkling, as though Buddie were in the process of closing them up at the mouths.

“Where is he?” Mrs. Givens said to my father, who still had his arm around Hennie’s waist. The two of them had moved like siamese twins over to the kitchen doorway.

Mrs. Givens was standing straight up now with her arms crossed over her chest and her black pocketbook dangling from both hands before her belly.

“Is he ready to go?” she asked, businesslike.

“Buddie is in his room,” my father said suddenly. “Just finishing his

packing. There is no need for him to go with you,” he went on. “Buddie seems to think we can’t get along here together. We want him to stay but *he* wants to go. He called you to take him,” my father said. “We didn’t call you to take him to the shelter and we don’t necessarily want him to go. But if he wants to go then we’ll let him.”

As he spoke, beside him Hennie stared up at my father in disbelief. When he finished, her hand was on her hip. It wasn’t planned that he should speak at all.

“That’s fine,” Mrs. Givens said, nodding her head as though she were satisfied with what my father had said, but tapping the black heel of her pump on the linoleum floor with quick, steady beats.

My father looked over to me searchingly.

“While we are waiting for Buddie to be finished packing, let me show you around our home,” I said. “I want you to see that this is a *happy* home.”

“Fine,” Mrs. Givens said shortly.

My father looked searchingly at Mrs. Givens.

“It’s fine,” she said, obviously a little annoyed. “If Marilee wants to show me the house, it’s fine. I’m still taking Buddie,” she said, “but if you people want me to see the house I’ll look at it with her.” She shook her head a little to herself.

I breathed deep.

4.

“We are currently standing in our living room,” I began, “where during the school year Buddie and I often do our homework, here on the floor.” I pointed to the floor. “Or watch television together.” I pointed to the television, and went over to it, running my hand over the console like those women I had seen on game shows when they displayed the prizes contestants might carry off with them if they triumphed.

I motioned for Mrs. Givens to follow me into the kitchen.

“We’ll come along,” my father said, tightening his arm around Hennie’s waist. And Hennie did likewise to him. I moved forward, and they all followed.

I did as I had been told, moving from room to room with Mrs. Givens directly behind me, and Hennie and my father, still linked and holding up the rear, moving sideways together around furniture, through narrow passageways and over thresholds. After the kitchen, where I remarked

upon the *exquisite*—I had chosen that word—shine on the surface of the dinette table, I proceeded to the pantry, opening the cabinets one by one to display our saucepans and dishes and our store of canned goods. At each thing to which I directed her attention, Mrs. Givens nodded and my father and Hennie looked on approvingly. I glided over to the back stairs.

“These are the back stairs,” I said, gesturing to the narrow, low-ceilinged stairwell off the pantry. “They are closed off because we rent to a family up there now. We live just in the downstairs since last year,” I said. “And this is the back door,” I said, gesturing to the door, with its iron anti-burglar grates. “Entranceway, portal, way-in, way-out, ingress, egress,” I said, smiling and with the dismissive gesture of a linguist: I shrugged. “Call it what you will.”

Of my own volition I had inserted that into the speech, and I looked to my father and Hennie, who stood behind Mrs. Givens. They disapproved of my improvising, each looking to the other as though to find the next thing to do about it.

“I am perfectly happy where I am,” I said loudly, my voice bounding in the tiny pantry. Then, more subdued, “Our bedrooms are this way,” I said, motioning Mrs. Givens out of the alcove, back through the kitchen and the living room and past the dank, powder-blue bathroom, which I also pointed out, flicking on the light and allowing Mrs. Givens to step in onto the powder-blue bath mat for a moment, to feel it under her heels.

The entourage followed me down the short hallway, where I pointed out my father and Hennie’s bedroom. I explained that because of the heavy metal awnings on the window casings outside, it was the only room in the house that received no light at all during the days. With a wave of my hand I motioned to the things that sat in heavy shadow: the bureau and armchair and king-sized mattress and box spring with the chessboard spread upon them, and the vanity in the corner, its mirror bordered with bulbs as on the marquee of a movie house. On the small table before the mirror sat a tin tray on which stood bottles and bottles of cheap perfume, some bottles in the shape of an egg or a woman or an infant’s face, some full and others half-empty. Though all along the tour Mrs. Givens had nodded at Hennie and my father and me, now she peered knowingly only at me, and I saw this, though I refused to look back at her for very long.

When we came to my room, I was briefest, saying only “my room,” and pointing to my desk and jelly jar of sharpened pencils and my twin bed

and the worn pink shag throw rug that covered the spotty linoleum floor. I pointed to the three plaques on my wall for Outstanding Scholarship, and my only trophy, tall as a hand—an honorable mention in the fifty yard dash—the tiny silver figure frozen in the attitude of running, forward knee bent, back foot off the ground. And then the frame that held my ten dollar First-Prize check, the money I had won for a story I had written for a school contest. I pointed to the picture of Richie Valens on the wall, for he was my idol then. And at all these things Mrs. Givens nodded politely, though more slowly than before, her eyes at times lowered beneath the smudged brim of her mesh hat.

The only room left after that was Buddie's, and without hesitation I led them all down the hallway to it.

5.

When I think of that afternoon, I tend to remember first the image of the blue Buick as it pulled away from the curb and chugged up over the hill that marked the end of Summit Avenue and went out of sight. I see next the waves of heat that rose from the street in late day as I stood watching while my brother disappeared from me. Then I see myself, as through a window, as through the blank eyes of the raven-haired picture-woman who watched me, as I *didn't* run after the Buick to save myself, the way I might have if I had been a different child, and fearless. I see myself simply waving my five-fingered hand. And one hand, I have learned, can do many things. It can wave farewell. Slam a door shut and bolt a lock. Give a body pleasure. It can twist a child's hope behind her back and make her cry out in surrender. It can raise the white flag. And one palm down upon a person's mouth makes silence, all things secret.

I think, too, of the short, dark hallway leading to my brother's room, the way that I, with the three adults behind me, opened the door to see Buddie, standing there dark-haired and strong-faced, his jaw set determined, a trash bag clutched in his left hand and another slung over his right shoulder. How the room had been stripped bare of anything his, posters off the walls, the closet door swung open, the hangers hung inside with nothing on them, the drawers gaping empty. How Buddie said nothing and how Hennie came up beside me and nudged my arm.

"Don't you have something more to tell Mrs. Givens?" she asked, too sweetly.

Mrs. Givens came forward then, stood before me and took me by both arms. Her eyes watched mine unwaveringly. She was sweating profusely now, the dark stains on both sides of her dress running down to her waist.

“What is it, Marilee?” she said urgently and shook me a bit. “What is it?”

I looked at Buddie, who had dropped the trash bags where he stood, because their heft was too much. He glared at me, the one unleaving and unscathed. For the second time that day I was speechless.

“Yes, what is it?” Hennie asked, coming closer and gripping my shoulder.

“Go on,” my father said, putting his hand on my other shoulder. “We all know you have something to say,” he said.

I turned my gaze from my brother. The vacant room bore down upon me, the gaping closet and the bare, white walls.

I looked into Mrs. Givens’s open, waiting eyes, and what followed I remember this long after only as a feeling, the taking in of air, a surfacing for an instant from under the wonted laying on of hands.

“Isn’t,” I said quietly. Then louder and in my clearest voice, “*Isn’t this a nice place for a child to live in?*”