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A NOTE TO BIOGRAPHERS REGARDING FAMOUS AUTHOR FLANNERY O'CONNOR

My mother went to school with her, and so did my Aunt Mimi. That much is bald-faced fact. I personally tape-recorded their recollections of the future famous author, starting two years ago, when my mother and I drove down to Macon to see Aunt Mimi. My relatives don't blink an eye when I come around with my notebook or my tape recorder. They chalk it up to my having made a career out of going to school. They used to be right about that. I used to be working on a PhD thesis about famous author Flannery O'Connor—until last Thursday, when I burned it like a heretic, page by marked-up page. Now all I'm trying to do is set the record straight.

They attended Peabody High School in Milledgeville—my mother, her sisters, and Flannery O'Connor—on the campus of what is now Georgia College & State University, home of the *Flannery O'Connor Bulletin* and repository of her manuscripts and memorabilia. In addition to their alma mater, O'Connor and my mother share their year of birth (1925), their first name (she was Mary Flannery then, of course; my mother, like me, is Mary Helen), and the loss of their fathers (both named Ed) at an early age. It was not my mother, but her older sister Mildred—my Aunt Mimi—who graduated with O'Connor in 1942, after which the future famous author moved on to the women's college. My mother and Aunt Mimi did not aspire to higher education. They lived outside Milledgeville on a farm their grandfather rented, and in their neck of the woods, finishing high school was a long shot. I'm glad to have a graduation picture of my mother seated on a straight-backed chair, wearing the pale chiffon formal that Mimi had worn the year before, a corsage of carnations on her shoulder. (It was supposed to be roses, but the florist ran out.) Somebody must have a similar photograph of Mary Flannery O'Connor. My mother is very beautiful in hers, slender and hopeful, layers of chiffon draped over her thighs.

Aunt Mimi was 73 and hospitalized for heart trouble two years ago when I made the first of what my thesis supervisor later called my “nearly unintelligible recordings of an elderly woman talking about someone who may or may not have been Flannery O'Connor.” Aunt Mimi sat up in her hospital bed like

a swami, in a pink satin turban and robe, happy to help me out any way she could. She said, "The Catholic girl? I remember that girl." Aunt Mimi knew the usual things about her: Mary Flannery was shy, she could draw pictures of people "like a son of a gun," and she was famous for bringing a live chicken into Home Ec class wearing "little bitty pants and a coat" she'd made for it. Having said that much, Aunt Mimi leaned toward me over her bed table, and added, "I always figured it was because she was Catholic that she was so peculiar, but then you all are Catholic and I bet you never made a suit for a chicken, did you?"

"No, ma'am, I haven't," I said, checking to make sure the tape was rolling in my recorder.

"That girl was smart," Aunt Mimi went on. "Teachers loved her. I reckon they liked getting invited over to the house, too. You all have seen the house they lived in. On the same block with the old Governor's mansion? Big white columns and all?"

My mother and I had driven past the house earlier that week. We'd seen big white columns but also peeling paint, rotting porches, shutters falling off. I told Aunt Mimi that the famous author's home had fallen into disrepair since her mother died.

"Don't take long for a house to rot in Georgia," Aunt Mimi said. That fact struck her as funny. She started to laugh, which turned into wheezing and then a bout of coughing that sent the volume needle on my tape recorder frantically to red. I handed her a plastic cup of water, and when she could talk again, she said hoarsely, "What d'you reckon they'd do with all the rooms in a house that big?"

My mother spoke up from her chair under the TV. Her voice is faint and echoey on the tape because she's too far away from the microphone, her Georgia accent faded by five decades of living in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. "They probably closed part of it off," my mother said, "like Mrs. Sawyer did her place in Hopewell."

Before I could ask about this Mrs. Sawyer, Aunt Mimi said, "They must have had a couple of rooms set aside for *him*."

"Him?" I said. I try to avoid leading questions.

"Her daddy," Aunt Mimi said confidentially. "He was real sick. It was something pretty ugly."

"Lupus," I said. They didn't have the drugs they have now.

Aunt Mimi continued. "That's why they come to Milledgeville in the first place from Atlanta. You can't hardly blame that girl for being glum."

"I believe it was Savannah, Mimi," said my mother. "They came from Savannah."

"Maybe so," Aunt Mimi said. "Anyhow, I know he died not too long afterwards."

"It was a few years," said my mother.

"February '41," I said.

"That sounds about right," said Aunt Mimi.

"Did you go to the funeral?" I asked her.

"Whose?" she said.

"Mr. O'Connor's."

Aunt Mimi gave me a look. "Of course I didn't go to Mr. O'Connor's funeral. They were *Catholics*, honey. He would've got buried out of the Catholic church. St. Joseph's. Little bitty church about the size of this room."

My mother spoke up again. "St. Joseph's is in Macon, Mimi. The Catholic church in Milledgeville is Sacred Heart."

"I call them all St. Joseph's," Aunt Mimi said, and she leaned back against the bed and closed her eyes. Aunt Mimi has my mother's high cheekbones and the kind of fair skin that's flawless until about age 50 but crinkles all at once thereafter, like watered silk. Poor Aunt Mimi was not so much crinkled as puffed up like a pastry the day we visited her. The doctors were surprised she could wiggle her pinky without going into cardiac arrest. She opened her eyes and said, "I'll tell you one more thing I do remember. When she come back to school after her father died, I felt like I ought to say something to her, what with the way our daddy had passed on not long before."

"On Christmas Day, 1936," my mother put in.

"It was hard, though," Mimi said, "because I never could catch that girl's eye, until one day when the home economics teacher put us both fixing something at the same stove. Poor girl had to look at me then, so I quick told her how sorry I was about her daddy." Aunt Mimi coughed and cleared her throat. "I also said, 'At least you still got your mama,' which was more than we had, of course. I reckon now that it wasn't the best thing to say, but it was what I come up with at the time."

"What did she say to that?" I asked. On the tape you can hear my excitement at the prospect of a direct quotation from the famous author.

"Mary Helen, I don't think she said a word." Aunt Mimi paused. The silences between her sentences get longer and longer as the tape rolls on. "I think all she did was look at me." Aunt Mimi turned her head toward the window and added slowly, "She had gray eyes." From across the room my mother made a face at me to say that her sister was too tired to talk anymore. I raised my eyebrows to say I could see that and pushed STOP on the recorder. "Gray eyes," Aunt Mimi said again. "Like that." She was looking out the window. "Like the sky fixing to rain."

My mother didn't remember the gray eyes or the dressed chicken, but she did report having seen Mary Flannery O'Connor with the Catholic priest in a luncheonette downtown. My mother was not a Catholic herself, not yet. That came after she met my father—an Army Air Corps corporal from Milwaukee, who used to stand on the bus from the base into Macon to save the crease in his pants. She married him, and when he shipped out, she moved up north to live with his family, a houseful of Hungarian Catholic immigrants who couldn't understand a word she said. Back in high school, my mother was still a *de facto* Methodist in a family of Baptists—the one kid who refused to dunk her head under the water—but she knew the man she saw with Flannery O'Connor had to be the Catholic priest. What other kind of man could get away with wearing a long black dress in Milledgeville, Georgia, in 1941?

The way I picture it, my mother, Mimi, and their older sister Dottie are in Rosie's Ten-Cent Store after school one day. They're hanging around the cosmetics counter, examining pots of rouge and shaking little round boxes of Pond's Dusting Powder. They're touching blue heart-shaped bottles of *Evening in Paris* that they can't afford to buy, waving the bottles under one another's noses, hoping to catch a whiff through the glass stoppers. A clerk stationed beside the cash register is watching them like a field mouse watching three hawks. My mother and her sisters are tall, sturdy, nice-looking girls: two brunettes and Dottie, a redhead, who is past 20 and married already. At 5'6" my mother is the smallest of the three, the one whose cotton dress (made by Mimi from a pattern in Home Ec) is clean and ironed and smartly belted (another of Mimi's fashion ideas) but still too big for her. They're all three busy figuring prices and deciding what their pooled resources—Dottie's tips and some quarters they've earned picking cotton—might buy, when a girl's voice floats over to them from another part of the store, saying things like "I dunno, Father," and "Do you think so, Father?" It's the "Father" part that

catches my mother's ear, and she turns and looks across Rosie's Ten-Cent Store to the luncheonette, where the Catholic girl is sitting in a red booth with Father Whatsisname.

Now my mother knows that, whatever he may be, the priest is not the Catholic girl's father, because the Catholic girl's father is dead. He died last winter of some unsightly disease, or so the girls said at school. My mother's own father has been gone much longer, having succumbed to a massive sinus infection at the Veterans Hospital in Macon when she was twelve. To make matters worse, he was preceded in death by her mother, who had died in childbirth the previous June. My mother's mother had only enough time to name the baby after her favorite sister, Gladys Mae, before the doctor left and the hemorrhaging began. All the while I was growing up, whenever I objected to what I considered my mother's nagging and meddling in my life, I had to hear about how *she* would be only *too glad* if she had *had* a mother to interfere with *her* life. One time I came back with, "You only *think* so because she *died!*" It's hard to have to remember that you're the same person who once said a thing like that to your mother.

My mother has always had less to say about her father—a carpenter who spent weeks and months away from home on construction jobs—but she does have one very clear memory of him sitting on a kitchen chair next to the stove with the new baby in his lap, a tiny head cradled on his knees and little feet kicking at the folds of his trousers. The baby's wearing only a diaper in the heat. Her barrel chest and belly are mottled pink, like marble. The rest of the children are gathered around—my eleven-year-old mother and Mimi and little Eddie, Jr., previously the youngest, and Dottie, the oldest, at sixteen. My mother remembers how the kerosene lamp on the table made all their faces look yellow, and how if you touched the baby's palm she'd grab your finger and hold on. Their father was saying that the best thing they could do for their new little sister was to give her to Uncle Rutherford in Tallahassee, because Uncle Rutherford and his wife didn't have any children and would raise her like their very own. My mother and her sisters tried to talk him out of it. They said three big girls could take care of one little baby, couldn't they? But their father had already made up his mind, knowing, perhaps, as his daughters did not, that no matter how bad things are, they can always take a turn for the worse. Sure enough, right before Christmas that same year, my mother's father went into the Veterans Hospital, where he died, leaving the

rest of the orphans to their grandparents, except for Dottie, who took herself off her grandparents' hands by dropping out of high school and quietly getting married.

Something about the way Mary Flannery O'Connor said, "Do you think so, Father?" to the priest in the luncheonette must have made my mother recall that scene in the kitchen. She was going on sixteen herself now, almost five years had passed since her father died, but suddenly she was seized with longing. Maybe all she wanted was to be able to say it herself: *Father. Do you think so, Father? Do we have to, Daddy? Do you reckon Mama'd want us to give her away? Do you? Daddy?* Whatever she was thinking, all of a sudden the bottle of *Evening in Paris* became a blue blur in her hand and she was crying in public, a big girl—almost a woman—crying like a baby right there at the cosmetics counter, in Rosie's Ten-Cent Store.

"What in the world is the matter?" her sister Dottie said when she saw, and then Mimi moved in, putting her arm around my mother, leaning so close that strands of her dark hair clung to my mother's tears, whispering in her ear, "Are you sick, sugar? You got cramps?"

My mother was famous in those days for hair-trigger sensitivity during her time of the month, a condition that her sisters blamed on the harsh way that the Curse had befallen her. Sometime between the summer evening when her mother bled to death and the Christmas day news about her father, my mother had a surprise in the outhouse. She was barely twelve years old and completely unprepared. Either of her sisters might have read the signs and clued her in, but recent events, understandably, had preoccupied them. No one thought to connect the fact that little Mary was shooting up tall as a weed, for example, with what must inevitably follow. When my mother ran to the outhouse one afternoon in November and saw the red stains in her pants, she could only think that her mother's bloody fate had caught up with her, which, of course, it had, but not in the sudden and deadly way my mother must have feared.

Mimi found her out there that evening. Nobody, including my mother, could say for sure how long she'd been sitting over the drafty hole in the wooden bench, with her ruined underpants wrapped around her ankles and her goose-bumpy arms drawn up under her dress for warmth (like somebody had tied her up and left her there, my Aunt Mimi told me, tears in her eyes 60 years later). With a history like that behind her, my mother could hardly be

blamed for getting weepy every month, cramps and hormones aside, but when Mimi took the bottle of cologne out of her hand and asked her if the Curse was upon her, she shook her head.

"Then what the heck are you crying for?" Dottie said.

In a voice gummy with tears, my mother could only say, "He ain't her father."

"Who ain't whose father?" said Dottie.

My mother shot a look at the luncheonette.

"The Catholic girl?" Mimi said.

My mother nodded, and they all looked at the red booth where Mary Flannery O'Connor was sitting across from the priest. She was smiling at him now, covering the little gap between her front teeth by tapping her index finger against her lip, as if she were telling him to hush. She was not a particularly attractive girl, although Mimi believed she could have been better looking if she tried. Sitting across the aisle from her in class, my Aunt Mimi had thought more than once that if *she* could afford to live in a house like the one that Mary Flannery O'Connor lived in, she would also shell out a few dollars for a nice permanent wave and clothes that didn't look as if she'd made them herself. (In fact, O'Connor's mother made them for her.) She was wearing one of her most unfortunate dresses today, a blue velveteen with a gathered neckline and gold trim that made her look like a bottle in a draw-string bag. While Mimi and Dottie and my mother watched, Mary Flannery O'Connor tugged at first one and then the other of her long blue sleeves. They heard her say something like, "Well, Father, I'll tell her what you said."

Meanwhile (and to me this is the most amazing part since I can count on one hand the number of times I've seen my mother cry in my lifetime), she was still blubbing by the cosmetic counter, repeating tragically, "He ain't her father."

"Of course he's not," Dottie said. "That's what all Catholics say to their what-do-you-call-it, their priests. You know that."

"He ain't," my mother said again. She was unable to explain why this was suddenly a problem for her, but the anguish in her voice worked on her sister Mimi like a call to arms. Mimi straightened her shoulders and pressed her lips together, causing Dottie to exclaim, "Mildred! What are you thinking to do?"

My Aunt Mimi has mellowed with the years, but they tell me she was a warrior in her day—broad-shouldered, small-waisted, wide-hipped, slim-ankled,

and tall—almost 5'9" in her stockinged feet before she started to shrink with age, which happens sooner than you think. Mimi shook off the hand that Dottie had laid on her arm and strode away from the cosmetics counter. Before my mother and Dottie could decide if they should run out the door of Rosie's Ten-Cent Store and into the next county right now, Mimi was standing next to Mary Flannery O'Connor's table and looking down at the future famous author. It was to O'Connor's credit, my mother would say, that she didn't flinch or duck her head, but looked the formidable Mimi full in the face, while the priest looked up and down from one to the other like somebody measuring the distance between two points. Their Aunt Gladys had taught all the girls (as my mother taught me) that the rudest thing you could do in the world was to talk about a person while that person was sitting right there in front of you. ("Like they was invisible," Aunt Gladys would say, shaking her head.) So the first thing Mimi said was "Excuse me, sir," to the priest, a pale fellow with rounded shoulders. Then Mimi turned to O'Connor and, putting her hands on her hips, she said flat out, "Your daddy is dead and you know it. So how come you're calling this man 'father'? He ain't your father any more than I am."

Until recently, whenever I imagined this moment, I would try to make that priest keep quiet and let the future famous author say something that Aunt Mimi might remember, or my mother overhear, something they could report to me 50-some years later. I know it didn't happen that way. I know the priest said, "See here, young lady!" and proceeded to explain to my Aunt Mimi selected points of Catholic dogma regarding the sacrament of Holy Orders and priests as spiritual fathers and the like, to which Mimi responded, after waiting politely for him to finish, "Beg your pardon, sir, but us Baptists don't put much stock in *spiritual* fathers." She drew herself up straighter and added, "Except, of course, for God Almighty."

Mary Flannery O'Connor's gray eyes must have widened at the audacity of my Aunt Mimi, while the priest's face turned a shade of red significant enough to attract the attention of my mother's Aunt Gladys, who had just stopped on the sidewalk outside the big front windows of the store, having left her husband in Garrison's Grill with his Packard parked out front while she ran down to Rosie's to pick up some thread. My mother's Aunt Gladys was an energetic woman with the same fine skin and cheekbones as her nieces. From the sidewalk, standing in the shade of a faded awning, Gladys had looked inside

the store and immediately spotted Dottie and Mary at the cosmetics counter, turning their pockets out for a pair of scowling salesclerks. Then, as if that weren't bad enough, the scene in the luncheonette caught her eye. From Mimi's stance and the red face and Roman collar on the man in the booth, Gladys couldn't help but conclude that her niece was having an argument with the Catholic priest. Knowing Mimi, Gladys thought, they were arguing religion.

Aunt Gladys usually tried to make allowances for her dead sister's daughters, ignoring their oddities as much as possible, but this looked like a situation that required the intervention of her own special talents. Her husband used to say that if she hadn't been born female, Gladys would have made a first-rate salesman or a powerful preacher. "Six to one, half-a-dozen to the other," Gladys would say. In addition to her quick wit, she had a mesmerizing blue gaze and a way with words that could talk anybody into or out of anything. Within minutes of her entry into Rosie's Ten-Cent Store, Aunt Gladys had rescued Mary and Dot from the irate sales staff. Liberated, the girls fled to a corner in the rear of the store, by the hanging rolls of oilcloth, where they had a clear view of their aunt bearing down on her next objective: the red booth in the luncheonette.

Now we're getting to the part of the story that disturbed my thesis supervisor even more than my incendiary tendencies. Although no one could have known it at the time, I believe that my mother and her sisters were about to witness an important moment in the life of Flannery O'Connor. It was the kind of moment the famous author liked to inflict in her stories on the characters she loved best, which is to say, on the ones most likely to be shot, gored, drowned or abandoned. (Never let your mother read these stories to your aunt who has a heart condition, by the way. They'll find the one with the grandmother and hold you personally responsible when somebody shoots her dead.) But you know the kind of moment I mean. Remember the story with the black lady who gets on the bus and sits down right across from Julian and his mother, wearing the same damn purple hat that Julian's mother is wearing? And remember how Julian—unaware that he's the main character in a Flannery O'Connor story—thinks smug thoughts about the lesson his aging Southern belle of a mother must be learning from her hat-shaped slice of humble pie? Little does he know, as he watches his mother's face go gray, that he's looking in the wrong direction, attending to the wrong detail, that he—

not she—is the author’s target. Of course, in real life, your mother doesn’t have a brain-addling stroke just to prove that you’re a bigger bigot than she is. In real life, the moments of grace are never so clear cut, the gestures never so totally right as all that.

Still, I did burn my PhD thesis in a seldom-used women’s restroom on the third floor of the Graham P. McGranaham Humanities Building last Thursday. It took me seventeen minutes to reduce the first 166 pages to flakes and ashes in a foot-operated flip-top waste receptacle—the white heavy-duty kind intended for discreet disposals. I proceeded methodically, keeping the tip of my foot on the pedal and cradling the stack in the crook of my arm, dealing pages off the top like cards, dedicating them alternately to Aunt Mimi and to Mom. (“She loves me, she loves me not,” I said at first, until I realized I had an even number of pages.) Can you picture it? Toe down, top up, *whoosh*. Talk about discreet. I didn’t even set off the fire alarm. My little gesture might, in fact, have gone undetected, if a toilet hadn’t overflowed on the second floor, sending the Director of Composition one floor up to relieve herself. She opened the restroom door just as the top flipped up for page 167 with a little belch of smoke and a leaping tongue of flame.

They called me into the dean’s office on Monday morning and made me stand on the Persian carpet in front of his mahogany desk while my thesis supervisor told the dean that he had found my thesis—no small task, since it had been buried on his desk for most of a semester—to be two-thirds unbridled fantasy. He didn’t discuss the other third. Instead, he attacked my sources and said that if I wanted to write my family history, or a tribute to my mother, I should go ahead and write it, and not try to give it some kind of literary *significance* by dragging one of this century’s finest writers—“the Chekhov of the South,” he called her—into it. He said my psychologizing of O’Connor’s vision was unscholarly and banal, which is one of their favorite words. When my thesis supervisor’s mustache stopped twitching at the end of his nose like a whiskbroom and it was my turn to speak, I drew myself up the way I imagined my Aunt Mimi would do, and I told him and the dean, borrowing my figure of speech from the Chekhov of the South, that there’s every kind of blindness in the world, and each of us suffers from our own variety.

Things do happen that change people forever.

From the rear of Rosie’s Ten-Cent Store, my mother and her sister Dottie watched the little drama in the luncheonette up front unfold like a silent

movie. They saw Mimi stepping back from the red booth to make room for Aunt Gladys. They saw Aunt Gladys fast-talking Father Whatsisname, who was on his feet by now, trying to look taller than the women. Gladys strung him along for a few minutes, the fingers of her left hand splayed on her breastbone to indicate how deeply mortified she was by her niece's behavior. Then she offered her hand for a shake. From the back of the store, the girls saw the priest reach for Gladys's hand. They saw him stop for an awkward moment with his right arm stuck out in front of him like a pump handle, and then he recovered, taking their aunt's left hand—the one she'd offered in the first place—in both of his and giving it a priestly squeeze. Most important, from the biographer's point of view, they saw Mary Flannery O'Connor, still seated in the red booth, her glass of Green River untouched in front of her, and her gray eyes on a level with the end of Gladys's right arm.

Now the fact is that Aunt Gladys's right arm ends about an inch below the elbow in a little knob of flesh that peeks out of her three-quarter-length sleeve from time to time, when she forgets to keep her apron tossed over it. She was born that way, with a regular left arm and a short right one, a deprivation that didn't keep her from finding herself a Packard-owning husband (long before the county got overrun with horny enlisted boys, she liked to point out) or from giving birth to a two-armed son. My Great-Aunt Gladys will be 89 this year.

If I have so far neglected to mention her arm, my intention was *not* to manipulate my dear reader—as I was accused in the margins of the thesis that went up in smoke. It was only to make you see my Great-Aunt Gladys as other people saw her, as you would have seen her yourself if you had met her back then. The first thing people noticed about Aunt Gladys was her eyes, sky-blue, wide open, welcoming as a pair of outstretched arms. Even now, with cataracts clouding them, her eyes take you right in, they make an insider out of you before she opens her mouth to speak, which is the second thing people noticed about Aunt Gladys—her voice. It's high-pitched and wavery now, but it used to be rich and relentless. (Aunt Mimi tells me, by the way, that if I could have taped *that* voice, my thesis supervisor would be singing a different tune.) The story goes that Great-Uncle Elmo fell in love with Gladys at first sight and sound, helpless to resist the double whammy of her voice and eyes across the counter of the baked goods booth at a church bazaar. He didn't even *see* the short arm until he called on her days later. ("My goodness,

Gladys!" he exclaimed at the door. "Whatever did you do to your arm?") The point is, *nobody* sees Aunt Gladys's arm; not even the priest noticed it until he reached for a hand to shake.

O'Connor was looking in the wrong place, that's all—she was attending to the wrong detail. Maybe, having watched her father scab up and die, she was already on the lookout for proof that the flesh was weak, wrong, fatally flawed, and finally useless. Maybe that's what kept her gaze fixed like a dissecting pin on that stub of an arm. I wish I could have been there. I wish I could have put my finger under Mary Flannery's pouting, pointy chin and tilted it up, up to Aunt Gladys's face, which was kindness itself, up to her eyes, which were steady like O'Connor's but without the clouds, without the storm approaching, not gray but blue—I have to say it—blue as the vault of heaven.

But I wasn't there, and as Aunt Gladys stood talking beside the red booth, her short right arm kept peeking out at Mary Flannery O'Connor, who had forgotten by now about the priest across the table from her and the strange confrontation with a girl she hardly knew from school. Mary Flannery was paying no attention to Mimi now, nor did she see my mother and Dottie leaning forward, shoulder to shoulder, in the back of the store. In fact, if you had told her that Gladys was speaking to the priest in Latin, Mary Flannery O'Connor couldn't have said that you were wrong. Her whole attention was pinned to the little knob of flesh at the tip of Gladys's arm, which poked in and out of sight like the pink snout of a little animal playing a grotesque game of hide-n-seek in her sleeve. The rest of Great-Aunt Gladys, like my mother and her sisters, shrank in the future famous author's mind to distant points of local color. For Flannery O'Connor, with lupus lurking in her cells and Jesus in her heart, only the tip of Gladys's right arm was a revelation. It was an early encounter with the enemy, it was a blind prophet, it was like one of her own babies, it was like the same damn hat.