**EXCERPT: How Un-Lucky Are the Dead**

*by Margaret Osburn*

**T**he Pensacola drive-in-theater flea market that looked out over the Gulf of Mexico was one place. Books brought home from there were handpicked by my grandma Bish and uncle Jess. But most our books came from Tallahassee, Florida, in pokes from library book sales or in unexamined boxes bought at auction. Other books were dropped off, used, by “neighbors” who lived as far away as Valdosta, Georgia. There was some pride in that—folks giving us their books, even the ones decorated on their inside covers with curlicues of lingering affections and with notes scribbled in their margins. Word was that Naomi Bishop on Bread and Butter Road had more books than the State of Georgia, and folks seemed to like her for that.

True. Grandma Bish was book crazy. She used book backs to even out table legs, book jackets to insulate walls and shade windows, book pages to wrap up jelly glasses to stop their breaking. She piled books high to put up her feet. And, she liked reading. Her thrift and jelly store was the nearest thing to Pavo County, Georgia, having a library. Even though the books she’d gathered were up for sale, she was happy enough when customers sat and read for free.

The best stories though—those with the close-up troubles—came from my grandma’s deep knowledge of the folks of Pavo County. Bish could see into you and know what was lacking, what comforted and inspired. So when she sold you something, anything at all, even something seemed so simple as a used book or a glass of homemade jelly, she’d done you a good deed. She hardly ever held back with her goodness. The one thing, though, was that she didn’t let a book leave with its book jacket. And all of Pavo knew this. When a book left the HERE WE HAVE IT, it left stripped down, shrouded in brown paper.

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**T**he day the New York woman came looking for Grandma Bish, a dark wind pressed down the road, jumped the culvert and sidewindered toward us, lifting and reversing the garden rows until it caught up and tossed the woman against our door. As she stumbled into my grandma’s thrift and jelly store, she must have thought the store itself spun her around. Jammed full with old chairs and sofas, dry aquariums and empty cages, tables of glassware and knick knacks, with a display case of curiosities on the faraway wall, the HERE WE HAVE IT was labyrinth-style disorganized.

\* “What fresh hell is this?” the woman gasped, reminding me of my surprise when I’d first landed in that incomprehensible mélange—not a word I knew back then—of used goods and found objects—a term also needing explaining.

The New York woman, wearing a cotton print sundress with martini glasses and olives wheeling in circles, its skirt sticky from the Georgia heat, seemed otherwise ordinary and small. Except for her voice. She had a deep crackly voice kept modulated low. Words crackled on her tongue. So we leaned in to hear, as we might to a staticky old radio, suspecting her every word might later be debated.

At first she said she was just needing to find a book to read on vacation with her husband. And, Mr. Peck, the chicken farmer lived down the road, stepped up to help. “Books everywhere,” he said with a broad gesture that took into account the piles that held the former church in place. A chorus rose from the other store regulars: “Lots of good reading. ...Find anything you want...”

“What kind of book you after?” asked Mr. Peck. He was the most outgoing of the bunch. How strangers took to him could be a little funny. Maybe they didn’t like the look of his beard, the way it unraveled over the bib of his overalls. Or maybe, it was his laugh. His laugh pierced your thoughts like a thorn. “We’ve got a pile here,” he said, and heehawed the word, “fresh.”

The New York woman turned. Did her eyes stab Mr. “Chicken” Peck? I can’t swear it. But with her head held high, she walked wide the fresh pile of books to run a hand over the glassware without looking to see it. She’d fixed her gaze to the cathedral window, streaks of heat lightning penetrating the book jackets taped flat against its glass.

Outside, a hundred tiger lilies floated on four-foot stems. Raised high to heaven, their long, pale orange buds thrust back and forth like a congregation of wagging fingers. And then they commenced to rapping, rapping, rapping, *banging*against our window. Were the lady fingers waving us to come on out to the churchyard or to stay put within? Either way, admonition is the word that comes to mind.

\* “How lucky are the dead,” she said.

We were all knocked back by that. Mr. Peck, Ma Devereux, Augie Bone, and all us others held our breath as the New York woman nudged past. A word or two more sizzled on her tongue, but nothing we could make out. ...

Once she’d stopped talking about herself—Mrs. Morse being a charter member of the Algonquin Round Table Society, and all that—she circled down her finger. My thought was she’d tired out her arm, but as Bish could see, there was meaning in that finger’s spiral. Next, Mrs. Morse dropped into a deep cushioned chair the color of artificial grass and pinched off a high-heeled shoe. That book jacket was rightfully hers, she said. Alan had purchased the book and she had a right to its jacket. Then she quick rubbed out a fit of crackly New York tears.

*\*thanks to Dorothy Parker for her quips and insights on female melancholia*