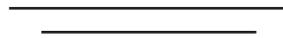




HARV AND MILDRED



1894-1934

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THE CUMBERLAND

LIKE THE *Valley Queen*, the old town of Burnside, where my father was born, is under water. The Cumberland River was dammed to create Lake Cumberland, and the hilltops now are islands. Water skiers and houseboats glide over the surface, while down below, my father's old house, the town jail, and the steamboat landing sink deeper beneath the water and the years.

When my father was in a talking mood, he'd recall some of his past. All his memories were hard: the men spitting tobacco juice on the boys' legs at the saw mill in Burnside; a flock of angry geese taller than he that came at him, clacking their beaks and beating their big wings; he and the other kids racing past the cemetery at dark; long hours in the poultry house candling eggs—holding them up to the light to find the ones with blood spots.

He and his seven brothers and sisters were expected to work. Though the family often took in people stranded in Burnside by low water, John and Charity Coomer, his parents, were not wealthy. My father remembered lunch as “greens and a bit of grease wrapped in bread” and joked that the family meals were “dried apples for breakfast, hot water for lunch, and swell up for supper.”

In Burnside, my father was always known as Harv, and that's the way I think of him as a boy and young man. I picture him with a mouth ready to demand his rights and his fists up to defend himself. He was small, the middle boy between his elder brother Stafford and his younger brother Joe. He always claimed “the bigger they are, the harder they fall,” a creed

he lived by, especially on the river where he became a legendary mate who would “fight a buzz saw.”

Harv had only a few years of school, always combined with work at the lumberyard or in the poultry house. He drove a stage coach from Monticello to Burnside in his teens. He never saw the Daniel Boone National Forest that is very near his home town: “You can’t eat scenery.”

Burnside was a busy little place. Formerly a settlement called Point Isabel, it had become a town just four years after Harv was born in 1894. Steamboats lined the landing where the Cumberland and South Fork Rivers met. They were filled with timber, eggs, and poultry going to Tennessee, and they brought in goods like shoes and furniture from Cincinnati, New Orleans, and St. Louis. Besides the lumber mill, there was a grocery store called Matty’s, Wagie Singleton’s General Store, several drug stores, churches and saloons, and two hotels, including a big frame Victorian called The Seven Gables, where visiting dignitaries and wealthy guests stayed. With all this growth, and a population reaching two thousand, pigs and cows still roamed the streets freely, merely ear-marked by the owner to be protected from theft. Everyone knew everyone else.

Harv’s father, the town marshal, supervised the upkeep of the town’s wooden sidewalks and dirt roads, pressing his own boys into service, as well as any others he saw loafing. John Coomer saw that no stranger remained in town after sundown. He detained petty offenders a day or two in the tiny wooden jailhouse and escorted more serious criminals to the penitentiary in Cincinnati.

A man respected by everyone, Marshal Coomer was tall and slim and utterly fearless. He dressed in a black frockcoat and wore his black hat at a rakish angle and a silver star on his breast. He walked with a cocky air, ignoring the danger of his job, though gunfights were common: three U.S. marshals were shot to death in one year.

Harv, who idolized his father, was just six years old when John Coomer was shot in the stomach.

The marshal had been called to Tom Smith’s barbershop, a little shingled establishment with the old-fashioned red-and-white pole. He found a man named John Satersfield standing over Smith with a gun and Smith on the floor bleeding onto the wisps of hair that he had just cut from a customer. Satersfield started to run, and when commanded to stop,

turned and shot Harv's father, who, in turn, shot and killed Satersfield. John Coomer survived his own wounds, but after this incident, he temporarily left the police and worked on the steamboats that navigated the Cumberland River from Burnside to Nashville.

Harv began hanging around the river. His first experiences on the Cumberland were on log booms, great pens of lumber that had been cut in the hills and left in the river by country people and paid for via mason jars left along the banks with the names of the cutters. Harv walked across the river on these logs, some floating as high as four feet above the water's surface. The work of getting the corraling staves upriver to the sawmill for shipping on the trains was dangerous. The hand-cranked windlasses employed to pull staves from the water could cut a person in two. The water was cold—legend had it that the river where the South Fork and the Cumberland met had no bottom.

With his father on the steamboats, Harv begged to go along and work. John Coomer forbade it, but Harv would cut school and sneak on board the boat his father was on. When it pulled away from the landing, he would pop out from wherever he was hiding. "There I would be," he recalled of those days. "My father just had to put up with me. So finally he just said to me to quit school and go to night watchman."

Harv worked on the packets running between Burnside and Nashville, the *Burkesville*, the *Rowena*, the *Celina*, the *City of Burnside*, the *Patrol*, and the *Crescent* among them. They were typical steamboats of the day, shallow-bottomed, wooden, and prone to fire and holes knocked in their hulls. They navigated packed tight with freight—groceries, hardware, plows, rope, corn—to be discharged at Nashville. There, they would load up with fertilizer, salt, sugar, clothing, dry goods, fencing, and oil.

The Cumberland was a dangerous river. Smith's Shoals at Burnside was seven miles long, and so many coal barges sank there that coal shipping died out. There were Greasy Creek Shoals and Belnap Island where the water was so swift and the channel so narrow a boat coming upstream could not make it through; it would have to be pulled along with a rope.

At Wild Goose Shoals the current was so swift it would hit a boat bow and stern so hard it seemed as though the boat would go right over the wing dams built in the water. "Crazy thing. It would scare people to death to do it," Harv said.

Alma, Harv's older sister, was married to a steamboat man who died working on the Cumberland.

The river's shallow stretches made the work hard. Sometimes cargo would have to be pitched overboard to lighten the load. Wire fencing was thrown into the water and carried down by the swift current to a spot where the men could retrieve it with spike poles. Hogs and cattle were occasionally driven overboard to swim ashore, then picked up fifty or seventy-five feet farther along when the boat reached deep water again.

As night watchman, Harv had a lot of responsibility for a young man. He had to keep fires going in the pilothouse and engine room of the boat he was serving; each day he filled some forty lanterns with oil and assisted the mate in the loading and unloading of freight. While the mate stayed on the boat, Harv took over on the hill and supervised the roustabouts handling the big loads. There might be a thousand coops of chickens, eight hundred cases of eggs, three hundred hogs, five hundred head of cattle.

Harv was never content to stay in one place or one job (we found this out living with him). He convinced his father to give him the higher-ranking and more responsible job of second mate. No license was required, just some knowledge as night watchman, which Harv had. As second mate he stood watch by himself and oversaw the loading and unloading of cargo. The cargo had to be placed aboard correctly because the boats were of such light material that, as Harv said, "You can throw a leak in them very readily." He took his duties very seriously: "It is just the knack of a good mate knowing when there is any strain in the boat by just walking up the deck. He can feel it under his feet. It is just inner knowledge that when you walk up the deck if there is a little strain in the boat, you will feel it."

Harv was nineteen years old. His brother Stafford was also on the steamboats by now, and twelve-year-old Joe was agitating to go along. Harv's father had returned to his job as marshal.

Because of the shooting in Smith's barbershop, John Coomer decided not to carry a gun. The killing of another man, and his own wounds, made him very much against firearms—a hatred of guns that was passed down to his sons. Joe would have nothing to do with them, and Harv always said more people were killed by "unloaded" weapons than by loaded ones.

Every day Harv's father went to the Burnside depot and met the train from Cincinnati to see that there were no troublemakers on it. On August 13, 1913, a friend, Josh Tarter, staggered off the train, drunk. He had gone to Somerset, where there was an open saloon, to get whiskey. Marshal Coomer told Tarter he would have to go downtown for a while to sober up in the jail. Tarter was from a pugnacious clan, but Harv's father had no reason to think an order to "sleep it off" in the little wooden cell would cause Josh to turn vicious. He was taken completely off guard when, as he was led into the cell, Tarter pulled a pistol from his pocket and shot the Marshal in the neck.

Charity was at the jail, bringing lunch to the men, and John asked her to run home and bring him his pistol from his dresser drawer. Tarter was running toward the Cumberland River, and the marshal meant to catch him. When Charity came back with the gun, she found her husband could not stand. He was too injured.

At the river, Tarter asked Ben Brown, the ferry operator, to take him across to the Slab Town side and the road back to Somerset. Brown was unaware of what had happened and proceeded to take Tarter across the Cumberland. Meanwhile, Marshal Coomer, holding his own blood back with a towel, deputized a posse of Louis Ramsey, Lum Evans, Fred Perdue, Loge Hamm, and John Fitzgerald. The men ran to the river. Seeing Tarter on the other side, they called for Brown to return him to their side of the water, but Tarter pulled his weapon and held it on the ferry operator, saying, "I'm closer to you than they are." The posse opened fire, and Tarter was shot in the lower part of his right arm. Tarter shot and killed John Fitzgerald, who died there on the river bank.

John Coomer was brought home bleeding and weak but not dead. With the wound still festering, he even took a bank robber to the jail in Cincinnati. On returning home, he weakened further. He sat about the house, and would beat at his chest. For six weeks the family heard him coughing in his room.

Meanwhile, Tarter had gotten away. John asked that if found he not be prosecuted, for fear Harv and Stafford would get into a fight with the Tarters and get themselves killed. He worried that there would be no one to take care of his wife and young children. Edna, Ina, Sarah, and Jewel were still at home.

On October 1, 1913, at the age of fifty-two, Marshal John Coomer

died. To follow his request, the doctor described the cause of death as “unknown.”

Charity came to the children and told them their father was dead. She and the girls washed and dressed the body, and the three boys were sent down to Singleton’s general store to buy a coffin. The boys were told to get cleaned up, polish their shoes with blacking from the stove, put on their Buckeye hats. They did as they were told and helped the men from the town carry the coffin to the cemetery. No one cried. The family stood stoically as the father was lowered into the Kentucky earth where he was born.



COCK OF THE WALK

HARV USED TO say, “I believe in one thing and one thing only: the Almighty Dollar!” Of course, this was during the Depression, when one of the biggest problems in life was where our next meal was coming from. But money was always important.

After Harv’s father died, the Coomers had little. John left a widow with four daughters and an adolescent boy to raise. Charity and Sarah, the oldest daughter still at home, had to go to work at the Seven Gables hotel. They lit fires in the guest rooms and washed towels and sheets.

Harv was still working on the river and, along with his brother Stafford, was sending what money he could to the family. In order to

make a better wage, he applied for a license to be a first mate on steamboats. There was a three-day test held in Louisville at the new Custom House, presided over by steamboat inspectors. Applicants were supposed to be twenty-one. Harv was nineteen, but by fibbing about his age, he managed to take the test. As he told the story, "I had very little schooling and I didn't know how to read and write very readily, so I took the book of rules and regulations and everything governing steamboats and I memorized all these big words at heart that I was going to have to spell out." He took the train, the first one he'd ever ridden, to Louisville. He was intimidated by the elaborateness of the Custom House: "Not knowing much about reading and writing, I was kind of lost. But I wrote out and answered every question they put at me." He got a very good rating on the test and a first mate's license.

Soon after this step up, Harv became more and more restless in Burnside. He heard wonderful tales of giant steamboats carrying freight and passengers all the way to New Orleans. A boy who had been to St. Louis and Cincinnati told him all about them. Dreaming of big cities and bigger money, Harv "got together a dollar and a half" and bought a round-trip ticket on the train to Cincinnati. He sold his return ticket and spent the seventy-five cents for a hotel room. "I had spent all of my wealth. So I looked up at the tall buildings in Cincinnati and I was a little bit scared of them. I could not see where they were going to stand up."

Some had ten and fifteen stories. The Central Trust tower, just completed, was thirty-four stories high, the tallest building in the world outside New York. It was all fabulous. The towers of the Roebling suspension bridge rose high above the river. The Tyler-Davidson fountain, a bright brass female figure surrounded by boys and dolphins, was at the center of town on Fountain Square. Several streets away was the gigantic, fancy music hall, a two-block-long pile of red brick. The steeples of brick and stone churches reared above the rows of houses. Streetcars buzzed about the streets and even crawled up the hills on inclines. Factories rang with the sounds of hammers and saws. The great breweries gave off a sour smell of hops that blended with the stench from the stockyards and made people hold their noses. There were parks, theaters with plays and music, lighted-up expensive restaurants, none of which Harv had ever seen before.

Standing on the cobblestone landing at the riverfront, Harv counted

thirty steamboats, “great big, fine steamboats, tremendous large boats compared to what I had been seeing.” Herds of pigs and sheep straight from the stockyard were guided toward the gangplanks, led by a frisky billy goat—the “judas goat”—who wore a little bell on a ribbon around his neck. Pretty women waited beside their suitcases for the pursers to get them on board, and families stood about just to watch all the activity.

The mates were lining up the cargo and yelling for the roustabouts—seventy-five or more, carrying kegs of pork and boxes of dry goods—to get a move on. The men were bent with the weight of the loads they carried. The mates were big men, with voices that carried and swear words new to Harv. He was a hundred-and-thirty-pounder from the hills. But he had to go down and get a job on one of the boats, or go back home. Burnside had become dull, and he could make better money here.

As Harv told it, “I finally got up courage and went in and asked a fellow named Walter Quiggin about a job as mate, and he looked me over and said ‘You got to be tough around here. You are too small.’ But I was pretty tough because you had to be tough in the Cumberland River, or on any water you have to be tough. Of course, I was a little scared because it looked pretty rough. I said, ‘Well, just give me a job and I’ll show you how tough I am.’”

Harv was hired on a boat that ran between Cincinnati and Madison, Indiana. As second mate, he was paid eight dollars and seventy-five cents a week and his room and board. The boats ran seven days a week. He was efficient and capable, and after a few months he got the job of first mate.

Over the next decade, he worked on some thirty packet boats, running from Pittsburgh to Cairo and Cairo to New Orleans. Some were grand, with luxurious passenger suites, gilded salons, and dining rooms with crystal chandeliers and imported carpets. Every kind of person rode the steamboats, from gamblers and prostitutes to presidents. Many boats stopped at every little town to pick up cargo, and the whole town would turn out to see the lucky passengers on board, listen to the music from the salon, and watch the excitement of loading and unloading. People knew when the boats were coming and sometimes which boat by the various distinctive whistles. A steamboat was a great sight, puffing along, almost breathing, smoke pouring from the great smokestacks, fancy woodwork painted a bright white.

The mate did not go to bed as long as the boat was in the landing and loading was taking place; he stayed on watch. Accidents on the fragile wooden boats were frequent: tales of exploding boilers and fires and busted hulls were common. The mate had to know a boat's moods, its every creak and groan; he had to place the freight "where it could be discharged, and always keep the boat on an even keel. If you don't get it that way, why, you would spring leaks which causes a tremendous lot of trouble." The mate was in charge of the entire boat when the captain was sleeping: "He feels that he can lay down and get a good rest. He has got a good mate. You have got a lot of people's lives at stake there. The boat hazards of fire and wind and hitting logs or in case of emergency, he has got a good mate."

Harv ran cattle all night sometimes. Or maybe he would have to get a hundred hogs on board a boat: "Once in a while, one of the roustabouts would be bored to death, but then they always are. He would go to sleeping and the hogs would get quick and then every damn hog goes out. Then you got to corral them up again." For that job, Harv would supervise the making of a "seine," a heavy canvas corral which would be dragged as far as a mile away to bring in the animals. Horses were a problem, too: "There's occasions where we have handled stud horses and that is really one of the tragedies of hauling stock aboard a steamboat with the wooden hull—you take a stud horse and put him aboard a boat and let him pass a field where there might be some mares—he gets a whiff of colt or something in the field and he'll go to stomping. And he will stomp and stomp and then nothing you can do, except just put one of your roustabouts back there in the pen with him to chew on his ears. It seemed to pacify him and he will quit stomping, otherwise he would stomp holes right through the deck."

Harv didn't like boat pilots. They got all the glory, but, in Harv's view, didn't have to work too hard, just sitting in the pilothouse and turning the wheel. He claimed the mate, fireman, clerk, and roustabouts did the real work.

The roustabouts were mostly black, except for a few who would do loading part-time for ready cash. In packet boat days, all were considered pretty much cogs in the machinery of steamboating and sometimes were worked around the clock. The weather didn't matter: the boats had to

go. When rain or sleet would freeze on the bales of hay carried on the men's shoulders, the flesh would get very raw. The metal bindings on cotton bales would cut into the rousters' legs. Fertilizer would sometimes run onto the men's necks and make them bleed. To get men to carry fertilizer, the mate would have to promise "a dollar a day and a penny a sack"—give each roustabout one penny for each bag of fertilizer he got to the boat, along with his usual wage.

Naturally there were rebellions, which the mate was faced with. Tales went around the river of mates pushing roustabouts overboard. Harv himself had many fights (there were those scars on his shoulders). He told us, "I have been cut several times and shot once by rousters. I had to be pretty tough with them sometimes. Maybe they would just work until they were tired out, maybe go hide on you. They would go down in the hatches and lay back there and you just had to go down in there. The ones that would fight would kill you."

Much later in life Harv admitted the cruelties of the packet-boat system. At the time, he was trying to survive.

ON THE Ohio River Harv often felt that the veteran mates were trying to "dog it over" him, that they considered him inexperienced and small and the Cumberland River "a little pond." But he proved himself efficient, and thought the "old-timers that was born and raised on the Ohio River maybe were probably a little jealous."

Harv told of "Meet the Boat" trips, in which boats would come together and transfer passengers from one to the other: "The deckhands on the boats got to jiving with each other, and first thing you know the mate would take it up and if I caught him back in my deck room I would let him have it, and if he caught me over on his boat somewhere, why, he would let me have it, so first thing you know we had a little clash here and there."

In the midst of Harv's packet-boat career, more and more news reached the river about America being drawn into the war in Europe. In April of 1918, Harv joined the army and was sent overseas. Pictures show him looking handsome in his uniform. He was always proud of his good looks.

He was given the job of stoking mortar, that is, inserting the plunger

into cannon. His character rating was “excellent,” and he was honorably discharged in May 1919. “I was *patriotic*,” he claimed in answer to our questions about his service. “I heard the Kaiser was killin’ women and cuttin’ babies’ arms off, and I damn-fool went and enlisted!”

He was not impressed with Italy, France, or Germany—they were dirty and old, and Harv always bragged that America was the greatest and most beautiful country in the world. He became bitter about the army; we spent many hours during the Depression waiting around courthouses to collect a pension which never seemed to come.

When Harv returned from the army, he went back on the river. When he would recite the names of the packet boats he worked on to us children, we wanted to be on those old boats. We could see them in dim outline: the *Bowling Green*, the *Liberty*, and especially the *Jo Horton Fall*, a packet that carried hogs and cattle like the rest until she was tricked out as a pleasure boat and renamed the *Valley Queen*.

The *Idlewild*, on which Harv worked with his brother Joe, was one of the boats he loved best; she was built in 1914, a “Mark Twain” type of vessel with staterooms and a fancy steel hull. She would come back into his life, first as the *Avalon*, and then in his later years as the *Belle of Louisville*. In his travels Harv acquired a taste for elegance, for exotic food and certain luxuries: he liked silk sheets and good clothes.

Harv got the job of first mate on the new and sparkling second *Island Queen*, built by the Coney Island Company in 1925. The job was a plum. Harv headed the deck crew on her maiden voyage from Cincinnati to Fernbank, then on daily trips from Cincinnati to the Coney Island amusement park several miles upriver. On this glamorous new excursion boat, there were no messy hogs, cattle, or horses to contend with, just a deck crew of ten or so and a herd of passengers—many of them pretty girls out for a good time.

Harv was cock of the walk. The girls swarmed all over this handsome fellow with the quaint accent and the army record. One girl jumped overboard because he shifted his attention to another. Then one evening he noticed a small girl linking arms with an older woman. She was adorable, and seemed to be sneaking looks in his direction.



CINCINNATI DUTCH

MILDRED BEAMER WAS a tiny woman, only four feet eleven inches tall. She was pretty, with wiry brown hair, big green eyes, and a slim figure. She was romantic and dreamy and loved to read, draw, and write poetry. She was also a good athlete, fond of tennis and acrobatics; energy came off her in waves, from her size four-and-a-half feet to her springy electric hair.

Born in 1904 (or thereabouts—she habitually fibbed about her age), Mildred had been a severely underweight baby who was not expected to survive. At the age most children walk, she had to be helped to stand up. Mildred's five brothers and sisters died at birth, and her mother died giving birth to her. Her father, Roy Beamer, remarried, had five children with his new wife, and left Mildred with his parents like something forgotten. Mildred visited him and her stepmother Lulu Neiderheman and the children often—the little outsider looking in.

The grandparents' house on Windsor Street in Cincinnati was big and lively. A young uncle, Morris, called "Bud," was still at home. Sometimes another of Melissa and George's nine grown children moved in. Mildred's cousins Alice and Pearl, girls about her age, were also occasionally left with Melissa and George Beamer because of their father's marital difficulties.

The atmosphere at the Beamer household was fun, but strict: the family was German on both sides, "Cincinnati Dutch" who believed "Cleanliness is next to godliness" and "A penny saved is a penny earned." Mildred's classes at Windsor School, right across the street from her

grandparents' house, were taught in German as well as English, until World War I created prejudice against the Germans. Street names that had been German were renamed (Bismark became Montreal). The bilingual approach in the public schools was dropped. The non-German kids teased and threw rocks at children who spoke anything but English.

Mildred adored her grandmother, a pretty woman who was born with a club foot. Melissa wore an ugly five-inch riser on the shoe of the shorter leg. But she never stopped doing the work of her large household and raising the children who came to her. Mildred always kept her grandmother's photograph in a place of honor and often spoke of her sweetness and understanding, her lack of the judgmental streak that ran in the family. Melissa's face was soft and her eyes sad: she had borne thirteen children altogether. Four died young. Buena Vista was buried in the Deutsch-Protestantischen Kirchhof auf Walnut Hills for the sum of six dollars. A small grave and interment for Edith cost the same.

Mildred's grandfather ran a lumberyard and stables, a business he established in 1892. His word was law in the Beamer household. He gave Mildred and the other girls in the family the job of pulling off and cleaning his manure-covered boots when he returned home in the evening. He came from an Ohio clan of farmers, strict teetotaling Lutherans, but in spite of his own strictures against alcohol, he was a hard drinker. And a hard man. He was infamous for trying to remove his bunions with carbolic acid and for breaking his own fist by punching a disobedient horse in the face.

Roy Beamer, Mildred's father, was a genial, ruddy-faced, sandy-haired man who went into construction work and before the Depression owned several apartment buildings. He always wore a big smile on his round face; his cheeks were the color of pumpkin and his eyes black as seeds.

Watching the lively three boys and two girls at her father's house, but never really belonging, Mildred never stopped thinking of herself as an orphan, unwanted in spite of her grandmother's love. She was guilty of her mother's death, she thought, because her mother had died giving birth to her. As a child in the big house on Windsor Street, she once overheard her Aunt Ninnie crying and seeking comfort from Melissa when her son died of the measles Mildred had given him. "Why couldn't it

have been Mildred,” Ninnie asked, “the child nobody wanted?” Though she was cheerful and energetic most of the time, Mildred never got over her aunt’s words, never got over being the outsider looking in. In her last few years, she wrote about her early life, trying to come to terms with it.

Mildred’s many aunts and uncles formed a background chorus with a plethora of opinions on the raising of Mildred and the other cousins. Odessa, Lester, Ninnie Esther, and Ethel were religious zealots, becoming Jehovah’s Witnesses and God’s Bible Students. They disapproved of card-playing, dancing, alcohol, cigarettes, and sex. Ninnie was once arrested for selling *Watchtowers* on the street.

Mildred’s favorite aunt took no part in this religious fervor. Louise, whom Mildred called “Auntie,” was beautiful, vain, and strong-willed. She was fond of diamonds and her “bird of paradise” hat—an elaborate headgear with an entire snow-white bird perched on top. The oldest of George and Melissa’s children, “Auntie” was a good cook and ran a farm in Anchorage, Kentucky, while her husband Willis worked in Louisville as an engineer. He was the only professional among these construction workers, brick layers, and contractors.

Mildred spent many summers with Auntie on the farm. Auntie cooked for the fieldworkers; she raised cows, St. Bernard dogs, and parrots, as well as two children. She was her father’s daughter. She locked her children in the closet when they were disobedient and struck her cows on the head with a large board to get them to follow her orders.

Auntie made a pet of Mildred, who always tried to please. Early on, Mildred developed the charm and tact that helped her survive in her step-mother’s and grandmother’s houses. When she smiled, her green eyes were full of light and life. Her teachers called her “Little Mary Sunshine.”

Melissa encouraged Mildred, who no doubt soon proved herself the bright one among the cousins, to express herself through writing and drawing. After Mildred graduated from Windsor Elementary with honors, Melissa sent her to a performing arts academy. The school was run by its “directress,” Helen Merci Schuster Martin, who was no doubt a strong model of feminine accomplishment for Mildred. (With the air of a grand actress, mother frequently reminded us children that she was a bona fide graduate of the “Schuster Martin School of Dramatics and Elocution!”)

Mildred loved acting and excelled at it. Her diction was clear, emphatic; her vocabulary came straight from the plays, movies, and poetry she adored. Playing parts increased her natural tendency to observe and analyze others. She was sharp at detecting human foibles and “idiosyncrasies”—one of her favorite words.

As a young woman, Mildred was a flapper. She and Pearl and Alice, along with Bud’s wife Marie, cut their hair in the twenties style, wore short skirts, danced, and smoked. They sneaked into the bathroom to have a cigarette, always worried that the smoke would waft out into the parlor and into the nostrils of the grandparents.

Mildred’s first crush was on her oldest step-brother, an earnest, intelligent young man who put himself through school and became a public accountant and high-ranking member of a large accounting firm. Elmer remained Mildred’s ideal man: educated, mild-mannered, successful. The two shared books and played tennis together.

At seventeen, Mildred married a prizefighter, a man she didn’t love who convinced her that he loved “enough for two.” She was ecstatic at having her own apartment and soon a baby. She doted on the infant boy, made all his clothes, and decorated his bassinet with satin and ribbons until it was “a work of art.” Within four months, the “King of Babies” was dead. Again, Mildred was guilty: she had started the car in the garage and left the baby for just a few minutes to run back into the apartment and turn off the lights. She knew nothing about carbon monoxide. Her life, she thought, was over. Eventually, she divorced her husband and moved back to her grandmother’s house, where Bud was now in charge because of George’s drinking.

That was when Marie, Bud’s wife, took on the task of cheering up Mildred. Marie was unlike the other aunts and was never accepted as their equal or quite up to the mark. While Odessa, Ethel, Ninnie Esther, and the others were hard-working high-principled wives and mothers, always putting family first and living by the solid Germanic ways of the Beamers, Marie was fun-loving and lazy. She would go shopping every day with her girl friend while Bud was at work, then rush to the kitchen and be standing over a hot stove perspiring when Bud walked in. Melissa, the peacemaker, did Marie’s share of the housework and protected her daughter-in-law. As Mildred told the story, “At least once a week Marie

and her friend inveigled their husbands to let them out at night. Their favorite amusement was to go up the river on the big steamboat to dance. They knew the captain, pilot, mate, and all the orchestra men. They asked me to go with them one night, telling me how good looking the mate was. Mom insisted that I go. It would do me good. He was a bachelor, I knew, a man-about-town who never passed up anything, not even the colored maids. I know he didn't pass up Marie's girl friend. All the women were crazy about him. I couldn't have cared less."

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KONJOLA MAN

THE *ISLAND QUEEN* was lit by seven thousand lights at night: they doubled as they were reflected in the water, making the Cincinnati wharf a fairyland. She had been proclaimed the finest steamer in the world, unsinkable because of her metal decks. Four thousand people could ride the *Queen* on her trips to Coney Island, which ran from late morning until midnight. When the mate lowered the gate across her gangplank, the passengers raced off the wharf boat and up the grand staircase to claim the best seats by the rails. There were five bright white tiers to spread out on, from the ballroom to the porch, where rows of rocking chairs waited, to the open decks, where families ate their picnic dinners. Some people were on the boat just for the fun of it: to watch

the dark shores slide by, drink a beer, dance, or watch the canoers who followed in the boat's wake, riding the deep waves she made. Young people rode on the open top deck, which after dark was a favorite spot for necking.

There were other excursion boats at the wharf: the *Princess* also went to Coney. But the *Island Queen* was the biggest and grandest. There was a crew of eighty: watchmen, deck hands, and porters. There were cabin boys to serve the crew quarters needed for "tramping"—one-night cruises to other cities after Coney closed for the year. She cost twenty-five thousand dollars to build.

This was the boat Marie had finally talked Mildred into riding. The two women, dressed in short skirts, cloche hats, and high heels, took the streetcar to the cobblestone wharf just under the suspension bridge. It was crowded with Model Ts parked on the slanting stones lapped by the water. They bought their tickets on the wharf boat where the *Queen* was tied off, and then walked across the short gangplank and onto the boat. They might have caught a glimpse of Harv supervising the untying of the *Queen*—or maybe they met him later when he had time to hobnob with the girls. Whenever it was she first saw him, Mildred fell completely, madly, in love: "He was good-looking. Immaculate. And besides, he had a black eye."

Mildred became a dedicated steamboat buff and took more and more trips to Coney Island: "I fell in love! No one could change my mind. I tried all the tricks I knew and had learned in books, even to making myself faint to attract his attention."

Mildred's family did not approve of her new love. His reputation was lurid. He was thirty-two—ten years older than Mildred. He had never settled down. "A rolling stone gathers no moss," was one of the stolid Beamers' favorite shibboleths. Why didn't he have a home by now, live in one place for life as they did? All the Beamers clustered around the Windsor Street house, in the same neighborhood, and saw mostly each other for holidays and occasional parties.

But Mildred refused to give in. She was going to marry "Jim" (he was never Harv to her). Though my father always claimed he was "not the marryin' kind," the wedding took place January 3, 1927, at Wesley Chapel, a small Methodist church on Cincinnati's Fifth Street that stood

until the fifties. In spite of the family's doubts, they gave Mildred a nice send-off. Ninnie Esther and Lester attended, and Marie and Bud were witnesses. Mildred wore a blue brocade and velvet gown and carried an armful of orchids, a Harv Coomer touch.

Mildred stayed deeply in love. When her new husband went to work, she buried her face in the shirts he left scattered about their apartment. But she could not forget all the stories she had heard about Harv even before she met him. She suffered terrible jealousy when she saw him talk to another woman on the boat: "Women were always asking him questions to get acquainted."

In the *Queen's* off-season, Mildred and Harv lived in Chicago where he sold "ladies' lingerie" to department stores. He needed winter employment, and the job as salesman came along at the right time. The money was good, and the firm he worked for wanted someone nice-looking to promote their line of garments. In this new career, as on the boat, he was often in the company of women—the buyers for stores, whom he took to lunch or dinner. These "business duties" added to Mildred's jealousy: "I could hardly wait for him to come home."

KONJOLA, "THE NEW medicine of the West that restores health," was being talked about in the hotel lobbies and barber shops where Harv hung about. It was making big money. It was supposed to be good for the stomach, liver, kidney, and bowels; it cured rheumatism. Harv got a job selling Konjola, and he and Mildred began traveling from one town to another throughout the Midwest, living in hotels and rooming houses. Harv would pick out a drug store and give his spiel to the customers. In exchange for running their picture in the Konjola newspaper ads, he'd talk them into giving testimonials about how Konjola cured their ailments: the drug stores got a percentage of all the bottles sold. Harv became the star salesman and was featured in the newspapers as "The Konjola Man."

He enjoyed the theatrics of the job and the constant change. He often bragged about being able to sell ice to Eskimos. Mildred was miserable. She missed her family, especially her grandmother and Auntie. She missed the lunches in town with Marie, the giggling and gossiping with Pearl and Alice. Now she was alone, dumped in some strange room

in Kansas City or Indianapolis. The couple stayed about three months in each town, until Harv got Konjola going, and then the company sent a second man to take over.

Mildred was happy when she learned she was pregnant. A baby would be a companion for her. He would replace the child she lost. James Harvey Coomer, Jr., my brother, was born in Wabash, Indiana, in March of 1928. His crib was a dresser drawer. Mildred was happy, but there was no one to croon over him and share the excitement. Wabash was soon left behind, and the family moved on: I was born in Clinton, Illinois, on October 29, 1929, nineteen months after Jim and the day the stock market hit bottom. It was five days after “Black Thursday,” the collapse officially marking the worst economic depression in American history. Mildred was depressed, too. Harv claimed he had to push my baby carriage and take care of two bawling and crying females. Jim gave me my name, after a baby in an upstairs apartment. He translated for me when I began to talk: ““Oopagah,” he said, “means she wants water.”

Konjola was still doing well. A Clinton newspaper wrote: “The introduction of Konjola in Clinton has been a tremendous success and is now strongly endorsed by many. It is restoring health to thousands of people.” Harv continued enthusiastically touting the stuff. When Mildred would wheel me into a drugstore in my perambulator, clutching my tiny bottle of prune juice, Harv would point me out and say, “See, even the babies love it!”

Konjola remained popular, but the owner began to neglect the business. He went to Hollywood, chased after movie actresses, and began buying racing cars and yachts. The company was soon in financial trouble, and Harv and Mildred saw fewer paychecks.

Harv was out hustling, and Mildred was cooped up with two young children in one rented room after another. At one point, life became unbearable for her: “I was left in Milwaukee and Jim started back home to straighten things out and I didn’t hear for a long time. A few dollars and scanty letters was all. He was in Chicago working for a while. Knowing my husband’s poor management of money, I was not surprised. If he had money, he spent it. There was no tomorrow.”

Mildred occasionally made fifteen cents apiece ironing men’s shirts in her room, but the money didn’t go far enough to support herself and

two babies. A neighbor, a girl who worked at night, offered to let Mildred move in with her. During the day Mildred took the children to the park so the girl could sleep. "I never told her how hard up I really was or, no doubt, this kind person would have fed us also."

Mildred was ashamed to admit she might have been wrong about her husband, but she wired her father, asking for a loan. He wired back, "You made your bed, now lie in it."

His response was typical of the Beamer outlook: "Sink or swim," "God helps those who help themselves." The rules were strict, and fathers did not believe in bending them. Roy Beamer's brother Clint refused to speak to his daughter Edna for twenty years because she married a divorced man. Roy was the most easy-going of George and Melissa's children, but he shared the rigorous code taught by the Lutheran preachers of the family's Germanic background and the Ohio farm country where the Beamers began life in America.

Furthermore, the Depression had hit the construction business, and Roy had had to sell the buildings he owned. He was down to one truck, hauling brick and lumber.

Mildred took Jim-Boy by the hand, put me in my buggy, and walked down to the river. She stood at the water's edge. She would jump and it would all be over. She held her breath, summoning the nerve to push the buggy over the wall and follow it with Jim. She glanced all around. There was a group of men loitering nearby on a picnic bench. They were looking her way. Watching her.

She turned away from the river, embarrassed, and leaned down to Jim, pretending to point out something on the water's surface. She glanced at the men again. They were still watching. Ashamed, Mildred went back to the apartment. She thought about turning on the gas, but when she opened the apartment door, she stepped on an envelope: it was a telegram from her father with money in it.

The telegram urged Mildred to leave Harv and come back to Cincinnati. Instead, with her father's loan, Mildred went to the Chicago hotel where Harv supposedly was living, but found that he only picked up his mail there. She waited in the lobby for hours for him to come in. When he finally arrived, he begged Mildred not to go back home.

Mildred stayed with him. She did not want to face her father and all

the relatives with their “I told you so’s.” She later claimed she wanted her children to have two parents.

Until Konjola completely folded, the family kept moving from town to town, via the Greyhound bus. As he always did when in trouble, Harv turned once again to the river. He got a job as master (captain) of the *America*, a packet that had been turned into an excursion steamer. His younger brother Joe was mate. The family moved to Jeffersonville, Indiana. Harv worked all day and late at night, taking the boat out for afternoon and moonlight trips.

Sometimes Mildred and we children went along. Auntie lived nearby, and Mildred could visit her. At the farm, Mildred could enjoy her beloved trees and the family life she had missed so.

In September of 1930, with Harv, his brother Joe Coomer, and Jim Jr. on board, the *America* was on the way from Louisville to Fulton to tie up for the winter. The crew was putting out wire lines and setting spars when a fire broke out in the texas deck (officers’ quarters). Harv called up all hands to try and put it out; the pumps were started and the men squirted the flames with fire extinguishers, but the blaze was too intense. Even the firemen who came to the scene could not get the fire under control, and the crew had to scramble off the boat. No one was injured, but the boat burned to the water’s edge and the hull sank; it was a total loss.

Earlier, Harv could have gotten another berth, another job. He had never worried. Even while Konjola was going out of business, Harv kept his optimism, his jaunty air of being above it all. He always jingled change in his pocket and whistled as he walked.

Now, because of the Depression, steamboat work was way down. In 1936 the last packet on the river would make its final trip.

Auntie insisted that Mildred and we children stay with her in the country. She disapproved of Harv, the “rolling stone”; in return he gave “Mrs. Kennedy,” as he called her, a kind of grudging respect along with a good deal of teasing. These two strong-willed characters never got along, although at times Auntie had to laugh at Harv’s jokes.

Auntie’s own husband was a thoroughly tame man. He was educated and polite, no match for Louise’s imperious ways and lumberyard upbringing. He was tall and bald, with deep-set eyes and a perpetual frown.

He looked forbidding and often appeared to be out of sorts. He seemed fond only of his wife and the cute and charming Mildred, who as a child had spent so many summers with him and Auntie. She had long ago named him “More-Pop”: her father and grandfather were both “Pop,” so Willis Kennedy must be “More-Pop.”

More-Pop detested Harv. In fact, he liked few people, including many of his wife’s relatives, her son and daughter by a previous marriage, and the son’s wife. But he was thoroughly cowed by Louise and forced to tolerate them all. Auntie gave him the man’s place of honor at the table, the most comfortable chair in the house, and very little respect. The truth was something she doled out sparingly, her philosophy being “What he don’t know won’t hurt him.” She usually called him “Mr. Kennedy,” unless he looked as if he might be about to explode, then he became “Petty.” “Now Petty,” she would say, and More-Pop would stifle his anger.

Auntie was queen of her domain. Though she was fonder of Mildred than of her own daughter—she had not had the responsibility of bringing Mildred up, and Mildred’s usually sunny nature appealed to her—Auntie imposed her will on everyone. When she didn’t approve of something Mildred did, she called her “Lady Jane.” If Auntie wanted Mildred to remain at home instead of indulging in an evening or afternoon in town, she would fake a heart attack. She constantly reminded Mildred that if she stayed with Harv she would always be broke and never have a permanent home.

In 1933, Mildred sued for divorce. She took a job, and Harv lived in town.

Jim and I were taken to see him in his hotel room. He looked very white and somehow injured with the scars that marked his shoulders. We did not want to go near him. He was a stranger.

And then we were all living together on the *Valley Queen*, snug in the cozy cabin of the great empty steamboat encased in ice.