

DODGING PRAYERS
AND BULLETS

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SAMPLE CHAPTER

DESPITE RUMORS to the contrary, President Kennedy is dead. At North Essex State, Thanksgiving break is upon us, and I remind myself I certainly have enough to be thankful for. The Economic Opportunity Act funds will enable me to continue my college studies; I have a boyfriend prospect, several new friends, and at least I have both parents to go home to. I can't help wondering how the Kennedy family will handle this holiday. At college, I miss my brothers and sister terribly, but I have to admit that the notion of returning home to my family in the projects for the long Thanksgiving weekend is more daunting than pleasing.

Like many misguided students in freshman literature class, my imagination has been captured by the title of Thomas Wolfe's book, *You Can't Go Home Again*. Upon my return to the family, the words prove sadly prophetic. William picks me up at school and, on the drive back home, catches me up on his plans for law school and his intent to marry Mary Lou Ross after graduation. Though I understand his need for a little personal dignity, I've never fully gotten used to thinking of my brother as "William" instead of "Billy Dee." Once William had left for college, he

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never moved back home. Now working as an aide in a law office, he's somehow managing to support himself and keep his grades up at Rutgers University. "Dad actually tried to hit me up for some bucks!" William reports, shaking his head and releasing a puff of air.

I nod and my stomach contracts as William goes on to warn that, since early September when I left for college, the flames of discord between our parents have ignited on numerous occasions. I understand, without his saying so that, like me, he feels guilty about abandoning the little kids to the volatility of our parents. William then comments that he's particularly worried about our youngest brother, who is going on 13 years old, "Luke is carrying this identification with the Indians thing way too far. Wait 'til you see how long his hair is, and he still wears that stupid headband."

Apparently, school is not going well for Luke, and he's taken to hanging out with a couple of older, like-minded buddies. Though none of them are old enough to drive, the boys sometimes hitchhike to places where they can fish, camp out in the woods, and commiserate over their disaffections.

Regarding little Dory, William remarks, "She seems quiet, and she really misses you." I smile to myself, savoring the mother-link to my little sister.

On the good news front, William is excited to report that Gary, who made the Varsity football team in his sophomore year of high school, now, as a junior, will be the starting quarterback at the big football rivalry on Thanksgiving Day. Even Dad is going to the game.

As we approach the housing projects, William announces, "I'll drop you off here and see you tomorrow." Then he cautions, "Expect the worst from Mother."

Entering the apartment on the eve of Thanksgiving, I can see my mother is agitated; I dread that the next day will be another "hollerday," the term we kids use to describe celebrations at home with our parents. Still, I'm happy to see Dory, Luke and Gary, so I choose to ignore Mother's background harangues about "not enough Jesus and too much rock'n'roll" and "the poor people who got nothing while the rest waste food," and how "money couldn't save that President Kennedy, more'n likely killed by them Republicans." She talks incessantly and compulsively, and so much so that we've all learned to shut her out in

order to survive in the cramped apartment. It's more of a challenge for me to do so now that I'm getting used to the more managed, if not always sedate, living environment of the college dormitory.

Although Mother wants nothing so much as to gather the family at home for a blessed Thanksgiving, her psychic quandaries always intensify on holidays. Despite her best intentions, she can neither manage the preparation and presentation of a major meal, nor measure up to her self-decreed role as spiritual guardian of the family. And whenever Dad's at home (briefly between long distance runs with the truck, or on holidays), he and Mother just can't seem to adjust to being in each other's company again.

This Thanksgiving, Mother is forced to make excuses about why she can't go to Gary's game or even stop by next door to say hello to the neighbors. Usually, she claims to be having a "dizzy spell" or a sick headache, or insists she's the only one who can handle the numerous things that need tending in the household. At the same time, she's furious at being left out of any family configurations, especially if Dad is home to drive us kids somewhere. During religious holidays, like Christmas and Easter, Mother's distress presents as more manic, because, in addition to explaining away inadequate meals, she has to make excuses about not going to church while dutifully prodding the rest of us to do so.

I know that my mother suffers, but there never seems to be a way to unburden her. At times she feels like a black hole of despondency, and the best I can do is navigate away from the abyss. Had I not been living away from home and gotten out of practice shutting down emotionally and verbally, I might have quietly, if resentfully, finessed Thanksgiving. It was not to be.

On holidays in our household, the boys routinely stay outside, away from the house, while Daddy, whenever he is there, sits rigid as a stone sculpture in front of the TV until he drops off to sleep on the living room sofa. When we get back from an exciting football game this Thanksgiving, Dad quickly assumes his place on the sofa. As always, when dinner is ready, Mother assigns us the scary task of shaking Dad awake to join the family for dinner. Since I feel guilty about being away at college, I volunteer for the awakening, and Dory agrees to back me up. Anxiously approaching Dad, where he's laid out on the sofa with

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the TV blaring, I shake his shoulder, while Dory petitions, “Mommy said it’s time to eat.” Dad groans and turns away, so I announce firmly, “You gotta get up. It’s time for Thanksgiving dinner.”

He groans more and tosses about like a fish on some rocks, but soon gets up, lumbers toward the table and slowly drops into his designated chair. In rumpled clothing and looking removed and sullen, he assumes a pained expression, turning his mouth down like a method actor preparing for the tragic part of a script. Not daring to keep Dad waiting, the rest of us scurry to our places around the table.

Even though (or perhaps because) Gary’s football team has won handily that morning, with Gary garnering the MVP trophy and Dad and the rest of us (except for Mother) in attendance, Mother uses the Thanksgiving table to unleash a diatribe. Refusing to sit down to eat, she aimlessly circles the table, cataloging her fears and complaints:

Here it is Thanksgiving and there’s poor people ain’t got nothing. We ought to be thankful, rather than concentrating on them old sports all the time. Them Republican snakes is a-hoardin’ all the money; why, they’s the ones killed President Kennedy. And that old Pope, misleading the true believers. But I reckon I’m raisin’ heathens myself. It’s no wonder. Spawned from that low-down, foul-mouthed Jenkins family out of Harlan. The sins of the fathers, the sins of the fathers. (She begins to talk about our father as if he is not right there.) And yer daddy— my so-called husband—he’s the prime example. He only cares about sports. Sports and them old cars. The Bible don’t say nothin’ about cars or sports.

Flo-Anna pauses, but noting the dearth of gustatory, as well as spiritual, enthusiasm at the dinner table, she starts up again.

Y’all better be eatin’ now. This family cain’t afford to waste good food.

She throws up her hands in resignation.

Aehhh, it don’t seem like Thanksgiving no how. And here I am stuck around next-door neighbors from ... who knows where? Filthy in mind and body alike. Catholics, too. And my own family don’t appreciate nothin’.

Mother then begins singing about the crucifixion, “On a hill far away, stood the old rugged cross, the emblem of suffering and shame” and bemoaning that her suffering is akin to that of Jesus. Then she resorts to a familiar, sorrowful refrain, “I reckon I’ll jist have to wait for my rewards in Heaven. Amen. I won’t live long enough to see Luke and Dory grow up.”

The part about dying always makes Dory and I well up, but Gary and Luke sneak glances at each other and make faces of bemused contempt. They smother their over-cooked string beans, packaged stuffing, and dry turkey meat in gravy. William assumes a vacant expression and eats with rote motions. Dad, shaking his head, looks down with a grimace and rapidly consumes his portions. Feeling as if I can't swallow, I nibble at the stuffing on my plate, and cut up small bits of meat to offer Dory. I try to peer into the living room and focus my attention on the news about the Kennedy family in mourning: the compelling, blurred images are repeatedly scrolled on the black and white TV that perpetually sounds in our living room, even when it's vacated.

At Mother's insistence, I manage to ingest a couple of bites of mashed potatoes and turkey, while my parents' repetitive cycle of violence plays itself out like a phonograph needle clinging to the grooves of a familiar old record. After first ignoring Mother's harangue, and then shaking his head at several more of her accusatory verbal assaults, Dad grows red in the face and shouts, "You shut that mouth o' yours right now, before I'm the one that shuts it for you!"

Of course, that confirms Mother's contentions about her husband. She positions herself opposite him on the far side of the table and taunts him further with, "Now yer showing us what a real Jenkins is like. I shoulda known you was jist like the worst o' them—yer old man included."

Since his father had died in jail after recurrent episodes of debauchery, Dad is particularly vulnerable to that invective. "Goddam you, woman!" he shouts, heaving his plate of food against the wall nearest Mother. Taking stock of the hand he has cocked to slap her, he quickly looks around at us children, takes a deep breath, and lowers it. He stands up, glares at Mother, curls his fingers into a fist and punches his palm twice. Cursing under his breath and turning away, he goes to the closet to grab his hat and jacket. Slamming the apartment door hard on his way out, he heads for his car. We children are actually relieved that today's confrontation has gone no further. (Something to be thankful for on this holiday of gratitude.)

Mother isn't finished of course. "See," she hisses, lifting her head in the direction of the door. "See how a Jenkins behaves!" She turns and surveys the kitchen area. "Look here at this mess. It's a disgrace to

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decent people.” Mother resumes her pacing and gospel singing, urging us to keep eating and not waste the food she has slaved to prepare.

Fighting off a rush of tears, I pick up Dory, my distraught little Sweet Pea, and carry her into the back bedroom. A minute after Dad pulls away in the car, Luke, looking pale and shaken, dashes out the door with Gary in pursuit; William stands up and awkwardly announces that he will spend the remainder of Thanksgiving day with the family of his fiancée, Mary Lou.

Mother begins to cry and sing about Jesus, and, left alone, cleans up the Thanksgiving dinner and the odious mess left on the wall and floor from the smashed plate of food. Later in the day, at her behest, we go to the refrigerator and pick at some leftovers.

Dad comes home after dark, and no reference is made to the earlier events of the day. Mother serves him pumpkin pie and coffee, and we all gather in the living room to watch, in silence, the Ed Sullivan Thanksgiving Special and a continuous loop of news about the Kennedy assassination, including profiles of Lee Harvey Oswald and Jack Ruby.

Nobody, except for Mother during her harangues, expresses an opinion on the events. I can't help wondering once again what Thanksgiving is like for the Kennedy family. I lament silently, *Even without the President, likely better than mine*. I go to the bedroom to hide out and read a book in bed. Dory follows, resting her head on my lap, behind the book.

On Friday and Saturday, my family maintains our emotional distance, doing our best imitation, I imagine, of Jackie Kennedy “keeping a lid on it.” By Sunday afternoon, however, the accumulated heat of resentment and the suppressed steam of rage pop the lid. When Dad comes home from his buddy's garage to drive me back to college, Mother must be jealous that he can do something for me; perhaps she resents my leaving, even my ability to leave. Furthermore, William, who has called to say goodbye to me, does not ask to speak to Mother.

As I sit reading a book on the sofa, ignoring the background static of the TV and the bluish glare from the screen, Mother looks out from the kitchen and begins a discourse on the frivolity of girls attending college. “I ain't never understood why a girl's got to go to college. It's the boy's got to work and support a family. Poor people can't be getting uppity jist for

its own sake.” Nobody responds to the lob, so Mother winds up and directs a hard, fastball, “Miss Skylar Fay Jenkins don’t lift a finger around this here house—always got her nose stuck in a book. It ain’t right.”

“Isn’t,” I correct, barely looking up from the book. Luke sniggers behind a comic book.

“What?” says Mother, suspiciously perplexed.

“It *isn’t* right,” I look up and challenge. “Ain’t isn’t proper English.”

“Hush up,” warns Dad, shooting a dirty look at me from the kitchen table, where he’s sipping coffee. But it’s too late.

“My own chillern turnin’ against me,” Mother begins to wail. “I sacrifice, and I pray, and I work my fingers to the bone, and it ain’t never appreciated.”

“Don’t do it!” I retort, shoving the book into my handbag. “I don’t ask you to. I never ask you for a penny.”

“Who’s talking about money—the root of all evil?” Mother counters, charging out of the kitchen and wagging an accusatory finger at me.

Of course, I can’t resist the temptation to correct the Biblical misquote, so I mouth, “It’s FOR THE LOVE of money.”

Her face distorted in spite, Mother’s voice pitches high. “All the book learning in the world don’t get you no common sense, child. You ain’t never had no common sense—getting in that truck with them lowdown fellers like you did.”

This gratuitous reference to “the disgrace” that happened to me in Kentucky sets my face ablaze with shame and fury; my head begins throbbing.

“You crazy old bitch!” I scream at Mother.

It’s the first time I’ve ever used such a word in front of my parents, let alone directed it *at* my mother. Even the boys have learned not to use “blasphemy” at home—that’s Dad’s bailiwick. I shudder, in fact, recalling the time when Luke had let go with a few expletives. That’s the scene catapulting through my mind immediately after I scream the curse on the Sunday afternoon of Thanksgiving weekend.

Dad’s head snaps in my direction. He springs up from the table where he’s seated, spills his coffee, and knocks over the chair as he lunges forward. I throw my hands over my face and head for protection, then gasp in relief—and horror—as Dad begins slapping and pummeling Mother.

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“Oh, Lord, oh, Lordy,” Mother whimpers, bent over and cowering in a corner of the living room.

“Stop it right now!” yells Gary, as he and Luke jump up from the floor where they’re watching TV and run to pull Dad away from Mother. She manages to get up and run, and, once again, lock herself in the bathroom.

“Goddam, woman!” shouts Dad. Seizing his jacket, he turns to me and snaps, “I’ll be back to drive ya to that there college in one hour. You just be ready.” He stomps out of the apartment, slamming the door. I hear the tires screech as he pulls away, and I run sobbing to the bedroom with Dory at my heels—this time the child is attempting to comfort me. Luke and Gary bang on the bathroom door, assuring Mother that Dad is gone.

After about fifteen minutes, Mother comes out of the bathroom with a huge bruise on her left cheek. She busies herself in the kitchen, while the boys hover behind comic books with the TV on extra loud in the living room. They’re afraid to leave Mother alone, but neither do they want to see her bruised face nor hear her whimpers.

As he has promised, Dad returns an hour later, shamefully looking downward, cap in hand, to take me back to college. The family lulls about, outwardly presenting with blank stares and restrained voices, while beneath those demeanors are the roiling pits of rage, shame and despair. Mother busies herself in the kitchen, keeping her back to Dad.

Midst the muzzled silence and despite the throbbing in my head, I have somehow managed to gather my books and personal items and stuff them into a shopping bag. As Dad and I move toward the door for the return trip to North Essex State College, Mother emerges from the kitchen to foist upon me some dried out, unappealing Thanksgiving leftovers that she has packed up in greasy, recycled tin foil.

“There mighn’t be no food when you get back to that there dormitory,” Mother observes, in a wavering voice.

I accept the packet because it’s easier to do so than not, and, holding back tears, mumble, “Thanks,” as I hurry out of the apartment toward the car.

Mother steps outside the door and calls after me, “Skyla Fay, you come on back when you can, now; this here’s your home.” I nod,

trying to smile and swallow despite the thickened lump closing off my throat. I wave toward my sister Dory, who blinks back tears.

In the car, I lodge the shopping bag and food between my father and me, and shift my body as far as possible toward the car door. Feigning sleep most of the way back to the college, I avoid looking directly at Dad, whose rigid face and sad eyes are locked in the reverie of a very private pain.

After an aching long and silent car trip, as we pull up in front of the dormitory, Dad shrugs and tries, as a goodbye, “I don’t know what to tell you.”

“It’s OK,” I respond, quickly opening the car door and grabbing for my shopping bag suitcase. I inadvertently knock the foil-wrapped leftovers to the ground beside the car, where I ignore them. “Thanks for bringing me back,” is all I can muster.

“Hold on just a minute,” he calls out, before I can shut the car door and turn away. Taking out his wallet, he reaches toward me with a five-dollar bill. “I want you take this here.”

The money feels like an embarrassing bribe—a gesture inhabiting a murky area somewhere between acknowledged guilt and deficient restitution. I don’t really want to take it, first because I do not intend to forgive either of my parents, ever, and second because I know that Dad can’t afford the money. But, doubting my ability to continue to dam my tears there in front of the dorm, and determining that Dad’s departure, and my discomfort, will be prolonged if I try to refuse or explain, I accept the bill, and mumble, “Thanks, I can use it.” As my father turns the key in the ignition, I add, “Be careful driving home.”

“Bye,” Dad calls after me, slightly lifting his right hand as I turn away.

His gesture seems so pitiful that, when I’m sure he won’t notice, I look back to watch the car disappear. I try to imagine the sadness and confusion in his mind, but soon have to run around the side of the dormitory building to avoid meeting up with other returning students, especially since I fear I may throw up. Braced against the cold wall, the stones fashioned to look like bricks, I manage to get my sobbing and nausea under control, so I can return to complete the first semester of my freshman year of college.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

One of seven surviving children, Karen Beatty anchored her early childhood in a shack near the Licking River in Eastern Kentucky. Her academic education began when her father uprooted the family from Appalachia to Bound Brook, New Jersey, just off an outlet of the Raritan River. In the late 1960s, Karen served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Thailand.

She then settled in New York City, where she got schooled in life, attained a Ph.D. in Counseling Psychology and raised an amazing daughter. Her life has been defined by travel and activism on behalf of women's rights and international peace and justice. At John Jay College of the City University of New York, Karen trained human service professionals and served as a trauma-informed counselor for police officers, fire fighters, veterans, and immigrants.

Karen likes her music gritty and soulful (think Melissa Etheridge or Tom Waits), and there is always a song in her head and a pen in her hand, whether she is delivering medical supplies to Cuba or trekking the mountain jungles of Laos to converse with Buddhist monks in training. She loves exploring New York neighborhoods and, during summers, enjoys body surfing down the Jersey shore.