

*Jill McCorkle*

{ IN HER WORDS }

## Writing *Life After Life*

**M**y writing process often involves a lot of note taking, every day jotting down thoughts and ideas and in the evening putting the scraps away for later perusal. Eventually, there are enough pieces that a whole begins to come into view. I think we all are like those old antenna contraptions that used to perch on rooftops, turning and turning to pick up signals in hopes of making a connection and finding clarity. The pieces that led me to *Life After Life* began accumulating long before I was ready to write it. The first being when my dad died twenty years ago; I wrote how strange it was that I was able to sit and pay bills and feed my children and do all sorts of everyday tasks in the midst of that sorrow. How odd that even as I was heartbroken, I was equally amazed and enthralled by the process of death and how the body does everything it can to protect the heart and keep it beating as long as possible, the color and life leaving the extremities like someone going through a house and turning out the lights. I was aware of how I had dreaded and had been waiting for this moment my whole life. My dad had suffered severe depression and was hospitalized several times during my childhood, and I think I had always been preparing myself to lose him again. And then it happened, and there I was, still there with my bills to pay and my children to care for and students I would see back in class the next week. In those last days, my dad said many things. He asked my sister and me to help him get to the corner where *they* (he wasn't sure who) were waiting for him. He said he wished he had a train and could go and pick up everyone he had ever loved in his whole life. He told me he was sorry that there were things he hadn't been able to do in life and hoped he hadn't let us down, and that he was sorry that he wouldn't be there to see his grandchildren grow. And then he said, *You — meaning my mom, my sister, and me — are my heart. That's all that there is.*

When I began writing this novel, it was with the desire to capture such moments of realization in a character's life, to reduce a whole life to the purest form, like a kind of distillation process. Who was this person and what is left? But I didn't see that so clearly then. It took many more scraps thrown into the mix: years of raising children and then realizing how much I missed bedtime stories and Little League games and snow days. My mother diagnosed with dementia and slowly losing touch with the present. One friend desperately fighting to stay alive and another choosing to leave.

I dreamed of my dad for a whole year after he died, and in the dream he would often say to me, *I'm not dead*. I had dreamed of my grandmother years earlier, and she had said the same thing. I have a photo of her I took with a little box camera when I was eight years old. Really, it's a photo of her screen door as she stepped in and hid from my camera. I have carried it around for years, loving that I knew that she was standing there behind the dark screen even though I couldn't see her — my picture of faith. I kept it with other photos slipped into the frame of my window over my desk and had done so for years. But when I moved to a new place, the light different, I looked up one morning and I could see her there, her image clear as a bell. I knew I would find a home for this in fiction, this image of faith revealed.

Not too long after, I was riding in the car with my then fourteen-year-old son, who asked me how often I thought we passed a car with someone in it who had committed murder. I looked at the long lines of traffic surrounding us and started reaching for a pen to make a note, knowing that the answer to his question was probably one we would really hate to know; it was a chilling thought, and of course it was an easy step from that to the consideration of all dark secrets. I was already attempting to work out a part of that equation for various characters populating my work. Where is the weak spot? What is it that no one else knows about this human?

The moment of death, faith, darkness. It began to come together, and in the bits and pieces, I began studying the ideas for various characters and where each might fit. I would resurrect my fictional town: here's the cemetery and here's the retirement home and here's the road to the beach. There is a man who is faking dementia to escape life with his son, a woman from Boston who has come to this place to retire because it's the hometown of a long-ago lover no one knew about; there is a hospice volunteer committed

to collecting the most important details about those she sits with while also making amends with her own life, a young woman trying to survive the legacy of her own sad upbringing, a kid witnessing her parents' volatile marriage, and a senile third-grade teacher who believes we are all eight years old in the heart and who takes photographs and makes things happen that never did, most importantly, memories of herself with her mother, who died young.

I have always loved composite pieces, each character introduced like an instrument, their voices blending until there is a communal symphony of a particular place. I greatly admire the novel *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* for this reason, and for the way McCullers managed to highlight every walk of society and longing. In the same way, I have long been inspired by Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, especially its use of time and the way it give voice to the dead. *That's all that there is.*

I am very interested in that fine line between fiction and reality and between comedy and tragedy — and pushing the line as much as possible. In this novel, I was also interested in pushing the line between life and death in hopes of finding that split moment when the reader is aware of both places — what those left on earth are recalling and what the one leaving is thinking, that brief spark of connection and recognition before the paths continue in different directions.

This novel is a love song to memory and life. It's a love song to the ocean and elementary school, Boston and the Lumber River and Meadowbrook Cemetery, where I went to bike all through childhood and still visit frequently, one of those places where you're surrounded by history and if you stare upward and no planes pass over, you could easily imagine yourself in another time. It's a love song to all those scraps of sensory memories that leave us feeling timesick: the way the light hits a wall, a piece of clothing or fabric you long forgot, the smell of a house you once visited, a strain of music — all those bits that come together to form your interior life and to mark one life as different from all others. It's an acknowledgment of the fragility of it all. It's nothing new, obviously, just my attempt at it.

Somewhere in the box of notes I had written thoughts about how life is often like a magic trick — years and years of sleight of hand and lots of smoke and mirrors and doves and scarves and wands and words when so often the

result is very simple, right before your eyes. I recently spoke to my mother, who at the end of the call asked, “Would you like to speak to your daddy?” and I said of course I would. After a few moments of fumbling she came back to tell me that he was in there on the bed taking a nap and she hated to wake him, that she would just tell him that I had called. And I could see him there. For several hours, I thought of him there. Sometimes she tells me they’re at the beach and sometimes she’s waiting for him to get home from work, and my mind leaps to the kitchen of the house where I grew up, and there’s the dog from forty years ago, and there’s that Chevrolet Caprice station wagon in the drive and the dogwood tree my mother named for her Aunt Lottie, and there’s that antenna on the roof that turns and turns as it attempts to find a clear channel. My hope is that *Life After Life* will entertain but also will leave the reader to connect to his or her own signals and memories. After all, *That’s all that there is.*