

Looking for Peyton Place

I am a writer. My third and most recent novel won critical acclaim and a lengthy stay on the bestseller lists, a fact that nearly a year later I'm still trying to grasp. Rarely does a day pass when I don't feel deep gratitude. I'm only thirty-three. Not many writers attain the success I have in a lifetime, much less at my age, much less with the inauspicious start I had.

By rights, given how my earliest work was ridiculed, I should have given up. That I didn't spoke either of an irrepressible creative drive or of stubbornness. I suspect it was a bit of both.

It was also Grace.

Let me explain.

I am from Middle River. Middle River is a small town in northern New Hampshire that, true to its name, sits on a river midway between two others, the Connecticut and the Androscoggin. I was born and raised there. That meant living not only in the shadow of the White Mountains, but in that of Grace Metalious.

Grace who? you ask.

Had I not been from Middle River, I probably wouldn't have known who she was, either. I'm too young. Her provocative bestseller, *Peyton Place*, was published in 1956, sixteen years before I was born. Likewise, I missed the movie and the television show, both of which followed the book in close succession. By the time I arrived in 1972, the movie had been mothballed and the evening tv show cancelled. An afternoon show was in the works, but by then Grace had been dead seven years, and her name was largely forgotten.

I am always amazed by how quickly her fame faded. To hear tell, when *Peyton Place* first came out, Grace Metalious made headlines all over the country. She was an unknown who penned an explosive novel, a New Hampshire schoolteacher's wife who wrote about sex, a young woman in sneakers and blue jeans who dared tell the truth about small town life and — even more unheard-of — about the yearnings of women. Though by today's standards *Peyton Place* is tame, in 1956 the book was a shocker. It was banned in a handful of American counties, in many more libraries than that, and in Canada, Italy, and Australia; Grace was shunned by neighbors and received threatening mail; her husband lost his job, her children were harrassed by classmates. And all the while millions of people, men and women alike, were reading *Peyton Place* on the sly. To this day, take any copy from a library shelf, and it falls open to the racy parts.

But memory is as fickle as the woman Grace claimed Indian summer to be in the opening lines of her book. Within a decade of its publication and her own consequent notoreity, people mentioning *Peyton Place* were more apt to think of Mia Farrow and Ryan O'Neal on tv, or of Betty Anderson teasing Rodney Harrington in the back seat of John Pillsbury's car, or of Constance MacKenzie and Tomas Makris petting on the lakeshore at night, than of Grace Metalious. *Peyton Place* had taken on a life of its own, synonymous with small-town secrets, scandals, and sex. Grace had become irrelevant.

Grace was never irrelevant in Middle River, though. Long after Peyton Place was eclipsed by more graphic novels, she was alternately adored and reviled — because Middle River knew what the rest of the world did not, and whether the town was right didn't matter. All that mattered was the depth of our conviction. We knew that Peyton Place wasn't modeled after Gilmanton or Belmont, as was popularly believed. It's us, Middle River said when the book first appeared, and that conviction never died.

This I knew first-hand. Even all those years after Peyton Place's publication, when I was old enough to read, old enough to spend hours in the library, old enough to lock myself in the bathroom to write in my journal and to have the sense that I was following in a famous someone's footsteps, the town talked. There were too many parallels between Peyton Place and Middle River to ignore, starting with the physical layout of the town, proceeding to characters like the wealthy owner of the newspaper, the feisty but good-hearted doctor, the adored spinster teacher and the town drunk, and ending, in a major way, with the paper mill. In Peyton Place, the mill was owned and, hence, the town controlled by Leslie Harrington; in Middle River, that family name was Troy. Benjamin Troy was the patriarch then, and he wielded the same arrogant power as Leslie Harrington. And like Leslie's son Rodney, Benjamin's son, Sandy, was cocksure and wild.

Nay-sayers called these parallels mere coincidence. After all, Middle River sat farther north than the towns in which Grace Metalious had lived. Moreover, we had no proof that Grace had ever actually driven down our Oak Street, seen the red brick of Benjamin Troy's Northwood Mill, or eavesdropped on town gossip from a booth at Omie's Diner.

Mere coincidence, those naysayers repeated.

But this much coincidence? Middle River asked.

There were other similarities between the fictitious Peyton Place and our very real Middle River — scandals, notably — some of which I'll recount later. The only one I need to mention now is a personal one. Two major characters in Peyton Place were Constance MacKenzie and her daughter, Allison. With frightening accuracy, they corresponded to Middle River's own Connie McCall and her daughter, Alyssa. Like their fictitious counterparts, Connie and Alyssa lived man-less in Connie's childhood home. Connie ran a dress shop, as did Constance MacKenzie. Likewise, Connie's Alyssa was born in New York, returned to Middle River with her mother and no father, and grew up an introverted child who always felt different from her peers.

The personal part? Connie McCall was my grandmother, Alyssa my mother.

My name is Annie Barnes. Anne, actually. But Anne was too serious a name for a very serious child, which apparently I was from the start. My mother often said that within days of my birth, she would have named me Joy, Daisy, or Gaye, if she hadn't already registered Anne with the state. Calling me Annie was her attempt to soften that up. It worked particularly well, since my middle initial was E. I was Anne E. Annie. The E was for Ellen — another serious name — but my sisters considered me lucky. They were named Phoebe and Sabina, after Greek goddesses, something they felt was pretentious, albeit characteristic of our mother, whose whimsy often

gravitated toward myth. By the time I was born, though, our father was sick, finances were tight, and Mom was in a down-to-earth stage.

If that sounds critical, I don't mean it to be. I respected my mother tremendously. She was a woman caught between generations, torn between wanting to make a name for herself and wanting to make a family. She had to choose. Middle River wouldn't let her do both.

That's one of the things I resent about the town. Another is the way my mother and grandmother were treated when Peyton Place first appeared. Prior to that time, Middle River had bought into the story that my grandmother was duly married and living in New York with her husband when my mother was conceived, but that the man died shortly thereafter. When Peyton Place suggested another scenario, people began snooping into birth and death records, and the truth emerged.

If you're thinking that my grandmother might have sued Grace Metalious for libel, think again. Even if she could prove malicious intent on Grace's part — which she surely couldn't — people didn't jump to litigate in the 1950s the way they do now. Besides, the last thing my grandmother would have wanted was to draw attention to herself. Grace's fictional Constance MacKenzie had it easy; the only person to learn her secret was Tomas Makris, who loved her enough to accept what she had done. My real-life grandmother had no Tomas Makris. Outed to the entire town as an unmarried woman with a bastard child, she was the butt of sly whispers and scornful looks for years to come. This took its toll. No extrovert to begin with, she withdrew into herself all the more. If it hadn't been for the dress shop, which she relied on as her only source of support and ran with quiet dignity — and skill enough to attract even reluctant customers — she would have become a recluse.

So I did hold a grudge against the town. I found Middle River stifling, stagnant, and cruel. I looked at my sisters, and saw intelligent women in their thirties whose lives were wasted in a town that discouraged free expression and honest thought. I looked at my mother, and saw a woman who had died at sixty-five — too young — following Middle River rules. I looked at myself and saw someone so hurt by her childhood experiences that she'd had to leave town.

I faulted Middle River for much of that.

Grace Metalious was to blame for the rest. Her book changed all of our lives — mine, perhaps, more than some. Since Middle River considered my mother and grandmother an intricate part of Peyton Place, when I took to writing myself, comparisons to Grace were inevitable. Aside from those by a local bookseller — analogous in support to Allison MacKenzie's teacher in Peyton Place — the comparisons were always derogatory. I was a homely child with my nose in books, then a lonely teenager writing what I thought to be made-up stories about people in town, and I stepped on a number of toes. I had no idea that I was telling secrets, had no idea that what I said was true. I didn't know what instinctive insight was, much less that I had it.

Too smart for her own good, huffed one peeved subject. There's a bad seed in that child, declared another. If she isn't careful, warned a third, she'll end up in the same mess Grace did.

Intrigued, albeit perversely, I learned all I could about Grace. As I grew, I identified with her on many levels, from the isolation she felt as a child, to her appreciation of strong men, to her approach to being a novelist. She became part of my psyche, my alter-ego at times. In my loneliness I talked with her, carried on actual conversations with her right up into my college years. More than once I dreamed we were related — and it wasn't a bad thought at all, because I loved her spirit. She often said she wrote for the money, but my reading suggests it went deeper than that. She was driven to write. She wanted to do it well. And she wanted her work to be taken seriously.

So did I. In that sense alone, Grace was an inspiration to me, because Peyton Place was about far more than sex. Move past titillation, and you have the story of women coming into their own. This was what I wrote about, myself.

But I saw what had happened to Grace. Initial perceptions stick; once seen as a writer of backseat sex, always seen as a writer of backseat sex. So I avoided backseat sex. I chose my publisher with care. Rather than being manipulated by publicity as Grace had been, I manipulated the publicity myself. Image was crucial. My bio didn't mention Middle River, but struck a more sophisticated pose. It helped that I lived in Washington, a hub of urbanity even with its political hot air — helped that Greg Steele, my roommate, was a national correspondent for network television and that I was his date at numerous events of State — helped that I had grown into a passably stylish adult who could wear Armani with an ease that made my dark hair, pale skin, and overly wide-set eyes look exotic.

Unfortunately, Middle River didn't see any of this — because yes, initial perceptions stuck. The town was fixated on my being its own Grace. It didn't matter that I had been gone for fifteen years, during which time I had built a national name for myself. When I showed up there last August, they were convinced I had returned to write about them.

The irony, of course, was that I didn't seriously consider it until they started asking. They put the bug in my ear. But I didn't deny it. I was angry enough to let them worry. My mother was dead. I wanted to know why. My sisters were content to say that she died after a fall down the stairs, in turn caused by a loss of balance. I agreed that the fall killed her, but the balance part bothered me. I wanted to know why her balance had been so bad.

Something was going on in Middle River. It wasn't documented — God help us if anything there was forthright — but the Middle River Times, which I received weekly, was always reporting about someone or other who was sick. Granted, I was a novelist; if I hadn't been born with a vivid imagination, I would have developed one in the course of my work, which meant that I could dream up scenarios with ease. But wouldn't you think something was fishy if people in a small town of five thousand, max, were increasingly, chronically ill?

As with any good plot, dreaming it up took a while. I was too numb to do much of anything at first. My sisters hadn't painted a picture anywhere near as bleak as they might have, so my mother's death came at me almost out of the blue. I'd like to say Phoebe and Sabina were sparing me worry — but we three knew better. There was an established protocol. What I didn't ask, they didn't tell. We weren't very close.

The funeral was in June. I was in Middle River for three days, and left with no plans ever to return.

Then the numbness wore off, and a niggling began. It had to do with my sister Phoebe, who was so grief-stricken calling me about Mom's death that she didn't know my voice on the phone, so distracted when I reached Middle River that carrying on a conversation with her was difficult. It was only natural that Mom's death would hit her the hardest, Sabina argued dismissively when I asked her about it. Not only had they lived and worked together, but Phoebe was the one who had found Mom at the foot of the stairs.

Still, I had seen things in her during those three days in Middle River that, in hindsight and with a clearer mind myself now, were eerily reminiscent of Mom's unsteadiness, and I was haunted. How to explain Mom being sick? How to explain Phoebe being sick? Naturally, my imagination kicked into high gear. I thought of recessive genes, of pharmacological complications, of medical incompetency. I thought of the TCE used to clean printing presses down the street from the store. I thought of poison, though had no idea why anyone would have cause to poison my mother and sister. Of all the scenarios I dreamed up, the one I liked best had to do with the release of toxicity into the air by Northwood Mill. I detested the Troys. They had been responsible for the greatest humiliation of my life. As villains went, they were ideal.

That said, I had been in enough discussions with Greg and his colleagues about the importance of impartiality to know not to point every finger at Northwood. During those warm July weeks, I divided my time between finishing the revisions of my new book and exploring those other possibilities.

Actually, I spent more time on the latter. It wasn't an obsession. But the more I read, the more into it I was.

I ruled out TCE, because it caused cancer, not the Parkinsonian symptoms Mom had had. I ruled out pharmacologic complications, because neither Mom nor Phoebe took much beyond vitamins. Mercury poisoning would have been perfect, and the mill did produce mercury. Or it had. Unfortunately for me, state records showed that Northwood had stopped using mercury years before.

I finally came across lead. Mom's store, Miss Lissy's Closet, had been rehabbed four years ago, largely for decorating purposes, but also for the sake of scraping down and removing old layers of paint that contained lead. My research told me that lead poisoning could cause neurological disorders as well as memory lapses and concentration problems. If Mom and Phoebe had been in the store while the work was being done, and ventilation had been poor, they might have inhaled significant amounts of lead-laden dust. Mom was older, hence weakened sooner.

Lead poisoning made sense. The clincher, for me, was that the Troys owned the building, had suggested doing the work, and had hired the man who carried it out. I would like nothing more than to have the Troys found liable for the result.

Facts were needed, of course. I tried to ask Phoebe whether she and Mom had been in the store while the work was being done, what precautions had been taken, whether the date of the work had preceded Mom's first symptoms. But my questions confused her.

Sabina wasn't confused. She said — unequivocally — that I was making things worse.

Worse was the operative word. Phoebe wasn't recovering from Mom's death, and my imagination wouldn't let go.

By the end of July, I made the decision. August promised to be brutal in the nation's capital — hot, humid, and highly deserted. Most of my friends would be gone through Labor Day. Greg had been given a month's leave by the network and was bound for Alaska to climb Mount McKinley, which was a three-week trek even without travel to and from. There was little reason for me to hang around in the District and good reason for me to leave. I had done all I could from afar. I had to be with Phoebe again to see if what I imagined seeing in her were really symptoms. I had to talk with people to learn how much of the paint removed had contained lead and how it had been removed. A phone call wouldn't do it. A dozen phone calls wouldn't do it.

I hadn't spent more than a weekend in Middle River in fifteen years. That I was willing to do so now vouched for my concern.

By the way, if you're thinking I never saw my mother and sisters during those years of exile, you're wrong. I saw them. Every winter, we met somewhere warm. The destination varied, but not the deal. I paid for us all, including Phoebe's husband while they were married and Sabina's longer-lasting husband and kids. Same with the summers we met in Bar Harbor. I had the money and was glad to spend it on our annual reunion. Unspoken but understood, was my aversion to the tongue-wagging that would take place if I showed up in town.

I was right to expect it. Sure enough, this August, though I pulled up at the house on Willow Street at night, by noon the next day, word of my arrival had spread. During a quick stop at the Post Office, I was approached by six — six — people asking if I had come home to write about them.

I didn't answer, simply smiled, but the question kept coming. It came with such frequency over the next few days that my imagination went into overdrive. Middle River was nervous. I wondered what dirty little secrets the locals had to hide.

But dirty little secrets of the very personal variety didn't interest me. I had no intention of being cast in the Grace Metalious role. She and I hadn't talked in years — as 'talking' with a dead person went. I had earned my own name. I had my own life, my own friends, my own career. The only reason I was in Middle River was to find an explanation for my family's illness. Could be it was lead. Could be it wasn't. Either way, I had to know.

Then came the photo. Several days before I left Washington, I was at the kitchen table with my laptop, finishing the revisions of my next book. Morning sun burned across the wood floor with promise of another scorcher. The central air was off, the windows open. I knew that I had barely

an hour before that would have to change, but I loved the sound of birds in our lone backyard tree.

I wore denim shorts, a skimpy tee-shirt, and my barest Mephisto slides. My hair was in a ponytail, my face without makeup. I hadn't been working fifteen minutes when I kicked off the slides. Even my iced latte was sweating.

Studying the laptop screen, I sat back, put the heels of my feet on the edge of the seat, braced my elbows on my knees and rested my mouth on my fists.

Click.

'The writer at work,' Greg declared with a grin as he approached from the door.

Greg was usually the handsome face of the news, not a filmer of it. But he was a digital junkie. He had researched for days before deciding which camera to buy for his trip. 'That the new one?' I asked.

'Sure is,' he replied, fiddling with buttons. 'Eight megapixels, ten times optical zoom, five-area autofocus. It's a beauty.' He held out the camera so that I could see the monitor, and the picture he had taken.

My first thought was that I looked very un-Washington-like, very naive, very much the country girl I didn't want to be. My second thought was that I looked a lot like Grace Metalious had in her famed photograph.

Oh, there were differences. I was slim, she was heavier-set. My hair was straight and in a high ponytail, while hers was caught at the nape of her neck and had waves. In the photograph, she wore a plaid flannel shirt, jeans rolled to mid-calf, and sneakers; I wore shorts and no shoes. But she sat at her typewriter with her feet up as I did, with her elbows on her knees and her mouth propped on her hands. Eyes dark as mine, she was focused on the words she had written.

Pandora in Blue Jeans, the shot was called. It was Grace's official author photo, the one that had appeared on the original edition of Peyton Place and been reproduced thousands of times since. That Greg had inadvertently taken a similar shot of me so soon before my return home struck me as eerie.

I pushed it out of my mind at the time. Weeks later, though, I would remember. By then, Grace would be driving me nuts.

Her story had no happy ending. As successful as Peyton Place was, Grace saw only a small part of the money it made, and that she spent largely on hangers-on who were only too eager to take. Distraught over reviews that reduced Peyton Place to trash, she set the bar so high for her subsequent work that she was destined to fail. She turned to booze. She married three times — twice to the same man — and had numerous affairs. Feeling unattractive, untalented, and unloved, she drank herself to death at the age of thirty-nine.

I had no intention of doing that. I had a home; I had friends. I had a successful career, with a new book coming out the next spring and a contract for more. I didn't need money or adulation, as Grace had. I wasn't desperate for a father figure as she was, and I didn't have a husband to lose his job or children to be taunted by classmates.

All I wanted was the truth about why my sister was sick and my mother was dead. *Looking for Peyton Place*.

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