

Freak Story
1967-1969

A NOVEL

BY

JIM MUSGRAVE

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DEDICATION

To all those who “survived” the turbulent Sixties. You know who you are.
Or, maybe not.

JIM MUSGRAVE

Freak Story: 1967-1969

By

Jim Musgrave

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of the main sources was David Farber's non-fiction book, *Chicago '68*, which details the events leading up to and including the riots at the Democratic National Convention. I've always wanted to write about this event, and Mr. Farber's excellent work gave me the details to weave into my story. Another excellent source I used was the online web site orangeburgmassacre.com, by Frank Beacham, an extraordinary journalist who has collected some amazing details about the truth of this horrendous affair as told by the people who lived it. Finally, the true inspiration for my novel was a book about the Hilton twins, *The Lives and Loves of Daisy and Violet Hilton: A True Story of Conjoined Twins*, by Dean Jensen. Mr. Jensen's excellent biography gave me the insight into the characters of Daisy and Violet so that I could render them realistically in my novel. I also used a variety of other online web sites and articles to create the reality of the late 1960s, and I thank the authors and researchers of this information.

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The non-fiction characters in my novel are portrayed fictitiously, but their authentic lives during the Civil Rights and Anti-War Movements gave me the courage to use them in this work. If we can learn from history, then their lives are beacons of truth to us all.

Part 1: My Mother, the Yippie

“You measure a democracy by the freedom it gives its dissidents, not the freedom it gives its assimilated conformists.”--Abbie Hoffman

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1 THE DAY I LEARNED I WAS A FREAK

Minneapolis, Minnesota, October 2, 1967.

“Mister Hartman? Could you pay attention, please?” The government lady was talking to me, but, as usual, I was busily creating a different reality. That’s the way it is with us writers. We like to consider all the possibilities out there, and this makes us rather drifty when we act in social situations. Humans are very complex beings, although they really don’t realize this when they put on their social faces. I had to be social in my job as a music group promoter, but it was my love of writing that made me a freak.

“Yes, I’m attentive. Sorry,” I said.

She waddled over to the printer and came back with a sheet of formal-looking paper. She immediately put it--disguised it, actually--between the leaves of a manila folder and slid it over to me on the desk as if it were a death certificate and not the certificate of my live birth. She was about seventy-five, with wisps of gray hair that sprouted out of her head in several places like whiskers of an old cat or a Salem witch. The almost purple bags under her dark-brown eyes held the years of government apparatchik employment and supported the bloodshot reality of her minority status in the public trenches of America, and, most likely, in the heralded occupation of her local church choir. Her fanny spread out on the ancient wooden seat like a massive dark pillow that could have easily swallowed my 150 pounds of homosexual body like Cthulhu’s squid head. Why couldn’t she be my mother? The tortuous experience I had with my adoptive black mother was almost like being sucked into a void. She was a heroin addict and whore who had me pimping for her before I was six years of age, but I digress.

I was 31 years of age, but I looked like I was 15, and I was about to find out who my mother was. It was one of the most horrific yet tantalizing moments of my life up to that point. Jesus of Nazareth supposedly lived to be 33, but at least he knew who his mother was--even though it was kind of irrelevant to his purpose in life. I wanted this knowledge to be relevant in a big way to my life, so I opened the folder and

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looked at what it said.

There was the Seal of the State of Minnesota, the signature of the governor, and the names of the hospital and the doctor who delivered me on December 15, 1936 at 0930. And, as my eyes moved over to the column where the parents were listed, I closed my eyes for a second and said a prayer, *Whatever happens, I promise to stay clean and sober and to continue my writing.* There was the name: Mother, Daisy Hilton. Father, N/A.

Funny thing; the only Daisy's I knew were Daisy Buchanan, in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* ("Her voice sounded like money") and Daisy Mae Scragg in the *Lil Abner* comic strip. I had never known a flesh and blood Daisy. In fact, the name sounded a lot like her mother was trying to paint a pretty picture inside an ugly frame. As in, "She's so damn homely. I need to call her Daisy."

"Do you know who she is?" The woman was speaking to me.

I was surprised to hear her again. "No. Am I supposed to?"

"When I was your age, I saw the Hilton Twins play in Minneapolis. Your mother, Daisy, was a vaudeville entertainer. She was quite famous, too," she reflected, her face becoming lost in reverie. "When they danced with normal young men, the audience started clapping like crazy. You see, your mother, Daisy Hilton, was a Siamese twin. She was joined to her sister, Violet, at the hip when they were born."

After I left the Health Department office, I knew I had to head over to the library to see if I could find out anything on my new mother.

I asked the reference librarian how I could find out the identity of somebody who was famous, and she told me I could look in the *Reference Book of Celebrities*.

Hilton, Daisy. I flipped through the pages until I found the Hiltons. Conrad, Constance, Daisy! There it was. An entire paragraph devoted to my mother! As I read the passage, however, I suddenly realized what they were discussing. My mouth became dry, and my bowels began to gurgle.

Born to a barmaid, Daisy and her conjoined twin sister Violet Hilton were raised by the midwife who delivered them. This woman, Mary Hilton, saw her meal ticket in the curly-haired babies and trained them to perform. The girls were ill-treated and kept in a state of poverty until they arranged a private meeting with a lawyer at the age of 23. They then became their own managers and remained popular vaudeville performers until live shows were replaced by motion pictures. After performing in "Freaks" (1932) and "Chained for Life" (1951), Daisy and Violet fell into poverty and obscurity. They now live in Charlotte, North Carolina and work in a Park 'n Shop grocery store.

I nearly fell over as I scrambled out of my seat and headed for the microform section. The Minnesota Public Libraries were one of the first to get these ghastly machines, but they made research much easier than lugging browned newspapers back to the table and clumsily turning page after page in your fingers. You were afraid they would come apart in your hands. The microfilmed version, however, allowed you to skim through years of issues at the turn of a crank. The film displayed on a small screen above, and you could turn a knob to focus the print so you could read it.

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I read the headlines and pieced them together as they flashed before my eyes:

Daisy and Violet Hilton became fair favorites when the twins first appeared at the 1917 State Fair of Texas. They would show up at several fairs through the years.

Daisy played the violin, and Violet played the piano.

And they were conjoined right above their waists.

'The Hilton sisters, who are known the world over as the Texas grown-together sisters, are ... 16 years old, well-educated and of pleasing appearance,' The Dallas Morning News reported in 1922. 'They are joined together just above the waist.'

'They have not been apart and do not want to be.'

The News went on to report:

'The girls move around with agility and grace. One may be sound asleep while the other is reading, sewing or conversing.'

The sisters were born in England in 1908 and eventually moved to San Antonio.

They appeared in stage musicals in New York, hit the road in a vaudeville show and appeared in a 1932 film.

In the summer of 1936, Violet Hilton, carrying a bouquet of white roses, married James Moore in the Cotton Bowl during the Texas Centennial Exposition. Daisy was her maid of honor.

'While 4,500 people looked on, Miss Violet Hilton became the first Siamese twin bride in Texas history when she was wed in a public ceremony at night,' the newspaper reported.

Police controlled the crowds as the well-wishers shook hands and asked for autographs.

But it was Violet who got married? What the hell? My mother was Daisy. How was I conceived? I suppose that's why I was put up for adoption. Daisy wasn't married.

Finally, as I read on, I found what I was looking for. It was in an entertainment gossip column in the *Minneapolis Star*:

Daisy delivered late in November or early December of 1936, most likely in Minneapolis or St. Paul. After the annulment of the marriage to Jim Moore, Daisy gave birth to a boy, according to Florenza Williams of Sacramento, California. Her husband, Clifford, was a circus performer who toured with the Hiltons during their early carnival years and became a life-long friend and confidante. Jim Moore said Daisy immediately turned the baby boy over for adoption. He was born healthy, according to Clifford and Moore. She really had no choice. She was a public figure, and she was unmarried, and she never talked about the baby while she was pregnant, or afterward, even to those who were closest to the sisters.

After reading this paragraph, I felt as if I had been punched in the stomach. I began collecting anything I could find about the twins, and there were quite a number of articles available. The first thing I noticed was that they were white. My father must have been black because that's what I am. There was even a small pamphlet the twins wrote about themselves. I was fascinated by how the twins were able to overcome childhood poverty and being used by their midwife caretaker, "Auntie Lou," who must have calculated every minute as to how she could make more money off these beautiful freaks.

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The photos of them showed how easily they adapted to whichever clothes, musical instruments, and hair styles were in fashion. Here they were as “The Pretty Grown-together Children” in England, or the “Brighton United Twins.” Ruffled dresses, eyes bright, one twin at the piano, one with a violin, they had smiles for all. At ten, they had huge, bunny-ear ribbons in their curly hair, white dresses with long white socks and patent leather shoes. At sixteen, they stood in front of a full moon backdrop, spit curled and grown-up, wearing fox furs and dark evening gowns.

However, something was growing inside me as I rode the bus back to our apartment on Fourth Avenue south. I pictured my mother in my imagination. Both twins were less than five feet tall, and I am short at five feet four. They learned to crawl in Brighton, England, but when they came to a table leg, they began to cry when each of them was on either side of the leg and they couldn’t go any further. When they got older, they made a vow to stay together, however, and they became adamant about this, as many doctors from around the world poked and prodded their bodies and made promises to Mary Hilton that they could successfully operate to divide them. The major medical and surgical associations said this was impossible for pygopagus twins who were conjoined at the hips and buttocks.

Then, I became immobilized. They were still alive, and I was still alive. They were in Charlotte, and I was in Minneapolis. They were freaks who were getting old, and I was a young freak who had yet to make his mark on society. I needed to see my mother, even though it meant leaving Barry and moving to North Carolina. I had to learn from her about what it was like growing up joined to someone else, not being able to do anything--not even go to the bathroom--without this other person coming along with you. This was the essence of their dilemma.

Democracies loved you when you were a beautiful freak because they could look at you perform in vaudeville, sing and play instruments on key, and dance with healthy young men like Bob Hope. Oh, but don’t grow old and droopy, young ladies, or make some human mistake like marrying under false pretenses. We will love you when you’re perfectly freakish; we can pity you and call you our darlings. The day we turn against you because you become a conniving artist afraid of losing our love, we will condemn you to drive-in theaters and to B movies, and to strip-tease shows that aren’t ashamed of showing beautiful freakish women who take it all off for men masturbating under popcorn boxes.

I wanted to see them and speak to them. I wanted to tell my mother how I had to live like an animal all those years without her. I needed to hear her voice and find out how she could forget me. Was it all worth the partying and fame? Didn’t she even once think about her only son? And, who was this mysterious father of mine? Was he a writer? Did he have creative talent? I wanted to answer all these questions, and I also wanted to punish her for abandoning me. I was filled with a mixture of exhilaration and fear of the unknown.

The man sitting next to me on the bus was humming in his sleep. It was a tune I

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remembered hearing on the radio. We were deep into a deadening war in Southeast Asia. Bobby Kennedy was planning to run as an anti-war candidate next year to bring down the war-loving President Johnson. The song was an old ballad by Phil Ochs, the poor man's Bob Dylan. "I Ain't Marchin' Anymore." I remembered the line that said, "It's always the old who lead us to the war, always the young to fall." This old, tattered man in Army fatigues, who probably didn't even hear the lyrics, hummed away as he dreamed.

He would never send me to war, I thought, looking out the window for my street. The dark clouds of earlier in the day had turned into rain clouds, and we were really getting it. The puddles splashed outside, and people along the sidewalk were running, most caught without umbrellas, afraid they'd all melt like Wicked Witches in Oz. I wasn't afraid anymore, however, and my mind was made up. The only obstacle now was to tell Barry and get his blessing. I know he has always thought about me as some limp-wristed Tinker Bell who doesn't really know how to wipe his own bottom. I was determined to show him and to show the whole world that I was a man who could establish his own destiny.

The old man woke-up as the bus pulled into my stop. He glanced up at me as I walked over to the opening double-doors that were whooshing, allowing the rain to enter momentarily and splatter on my Zories as I stepped down. I was afraid my tie-dye would run, and my afro looked like Frankenstein's Bride when it rained. I heard him plainly call out to me, "You *better* get off, you danged hippie! You freak! Get off our bus!"

☐