

September 2002

IF I'VE LEARNED anything at all in the last seventy years, it's that family usually isn't quick to forgive. It's a fact that most people are far more accommodating to strangers than relatives. Maybe that's why I postponed our trip to the Manila American Cemetery until the desert sun had bleached my hair as white as the crosses over these graves. World War II heroes lie buried here, more than seventeen thousand of them, their markers rising up in rows like a squadron of tiny, ossified ghosts.

I hope to find forgiveness from one particular ghost—but that remains to be seen.

My husband and I brought our two adult grandchildren to this place to help them understand what happened in that war and to grieve for what was lost. I want them to know how much we owe the bones under those crosses. And also, I want them to know some things about me that I've never told them before.

It takes us nearly an hour to find the marker I want. Our grandson stands so tall and straight in the sunlight, a slim boy with an engineering master's degree and so many years ahead. He's to marry next June, and she's a delightful girl. And our granddaughter. Nearly a year ago she left college to enlist in the army. Her unit ships out to Iraq in three months. Another desert. Another mission. Another war. Does she know how fragile life is? Really know in a permanent sort of way?

Both of them hover on the brink of maturity, and so perhaps they are ready to listen. But still I hesitate.

The story I have to tell, the reason I pay homage to this white marker and not some other, begins back in 1942. My twin sister Zella and I were sixteen then and in our penultimate year of high school. We lived in a dusty

little cow town called Phoenix, smack on the northernmost tip of the Sonoran Desert. So much happened in those war years, and some of it still shames me.

My granddaughter stoops to examine the name on the headstone. “Who exactly is he?”

I don’t answer.

She persists. “A relative?”

But it’s not a relative, nor even a friend from long ago. I shake my head. “I’ve never met this boy.”

“Never even met him, Grandma? Ever?”

“Not even once.”

My grandchildren exchange glances, and I can almost see their thoughts. She’s lost it. A doddering old woman who has taken them on a fool’s mission.

My grandson reaches out his hand, takes me by the elbow. “We’ve come all this way for . . . someone you’ve never met? But why, Grandma? It doesn’t make sense.”

My husband turns and speaks in his gentle way. “Tell them, Pheemie. That’s why we’re here.”

He’s right. Goethe wrote, “Where there is much light, the shadows are the deepest.”

It’s time my grandchildren learned about my shadows.

Chapter 1

SISTER MARY MATTHEW clicked her frog-shaped clicker once, and our class rose as a single unit to recite the Pledge of Allegiance. We hated that clicker, all of us, to a person. She must have bought it in some Phoenix novelty store—they sold for a nickel at Woolworth’s—but to us that novelty was an instrument of repression. She clicked once, and we all stood. She clicked twice, and we all sat. Three clicks meant we were to fold our hands, stare straight ahead, and listen—or at least pretend to listen. It was a damnable thing, that clicker, making us jump like marionettes, but at Our Lady of the Valley High, it was law.

So, we stood and swore allegiance to the United States of America and meant every fervent word. We were at war, declared by Congress just a couple of months earlier when the Japanese laid our ships to waste and snuffed out thousands of lives in an hour. We pledged because we wanted to do our part for the war effort. Twenty-three high school girls eager to do battle. Most of us knew someone newly enlisted, so patriotism was more than idle words spoken to a flag. Patriotism flooded our hearts and infused our pledge with ardor.

Zella and I were sixteen that first year of the war. We may have been identical twins, but two more dissimilar souls have never slipped out of the same womb. Me, I was shy and more than a little bookish—I prayed nightly that I’d win the Gladys P. Olander College Scholarship in my senior year. College wasn’t exactly in my future without that money, and college was my dream. So, I read everything, hoping that whatever I lacked could be learned from a novel or a textbook. Books seemed truer than life.

Zella, on the other hand, rarely read anything. *Gone With the Wind*, of course, but little else. But she made up for her lack of interest in academics

with passion, and for the way she didn't let the opinions of others bog her down. Where I was quiet, she collected friends and allies with as little effort as a cloud scudding across the February Arizona sky. And Zella never lacked courage. I'd seen her leap from the second story of our cousin's barn and swing on a tire hung from a tree on her way down. I had an awful tendency to look before I leapt, which meant I usually didn't leap at all.

The Pledge over, Sister Mary Matthew clicked us back into our seats. When we were duly settled, the clicker chirped three times. Twenty-three girls folded their hands and tried to convey a consuming interest in Hamlet, the play we were reading in Junior English.

Surreptitiously, I glanced out the window, hoping to see him, the boy I dreamed about every night, the boy I was determined to marry. A glimpse was all I wanted.

“Euphemia.”

Sister Mary Matthew had a way of focusing our attention. For instance, forty-four eyes were now fixed on me.

“Yes, Sister.” I snapped my thoughts back to the indecisive prince of Denmark and stood, my face hot with shamed blood.

“Pick up your text. Locate the section in act 1, scene 3 in which Polonius advises Laertes to be true to himself. Read it aloud, paying heed to cadence and rhythm.”

I specialized in cadence and rhythm and was on firm ground here. But, as always, I was half proud of my love of literature, half ashamed for caring so much. I dreaded the sound of my own voice quavering in the quiet classroom. But I found the passage in an instant.

Sister Mary Matthew rapped on her desk. “Begin with ‘Neither a borrower nor a lender be.’”

I cleared my throat and tried to keep my voice from cracking.

“Neither a borrower nor a lender be,
For loan oft loses both itself and friend,
And borrowing dulleth the edge of husbandry.
This above all, to thine own self be true,
And it must follow as the night the day
Thou canst not then be false to any man.
Farewell. My blessing season this in thee!”

“Excellent, Euphemia Marie.”

I wilted into my chair while my classmates giggled. They knew how much I hated my name. In fact, only Sister Mary Matthew and my mother ever called me Euphemia Marie—I was ‘Pheemie’ to everyone else. Mother often stood on the porch and called out “Eupheeeeemiaaaa Mareeeee” when it was time for supper. She’d stretch out the second syllable until everyone on our block clamped hands over their ears and prayed for mercy. For a bashful girl like me, that was torture.

There was a reason for my odd name: familial pride. Mother’s family, the Daltons, were old-guard Phoenix. Right after the Civil War, Great-Grandfather Euphie Dalton and a few Confederate soldier friends hiding from the law came across old Indian canals near the banks of the Salt River. Great-Grandfather and the others somehow closed their minds to the awful heat of the place and realized that splendid crops could grow right here in the Sonoran Desert if they could only tame the river. Within a month, Great-Grandfather organized the Dalton Ditch Company—and founded Phoenix.

What Mother never mentioned outside of the family was that Great-Grandfather Euphie spent his last days in prison, accused of murder. He died there, leaving behind his wife Marie, two sons, and the city, sprouted Phoenix-

like from the ashes of the old Hohokum Indian civilization. The Dalton fortune was born.

And lost by the next generation. His boy, my grandfather Dalton, frittered away the inheritance until he was left with nothing to show except a spacious home on the northeast side of town. Nonetheless, my family held an honorary place in Phoenix society. You know, poorish but proud. Anyway, I'm officially Euphemia Marie Dalton Longworth. I hated at least three-quarters of my name.

"Euphemia Marie," Sister Mary Matthew said. "I'm not finished with you."

I rose, fingers gripping my textbook.

"Explain to the class the formal meaning of irony."

Once more, easy peasy. Irony is a form of humor or sarcasm in which the intended meaning is the direct opposite of what is said. Like calling a boy a hunk of heartbreak when he's really a dog biscuit. But I knew if I gave up the answer, all the girls would roll their eyes and shake their heads. Privately, of course, so Sister Mary Matthew wouldn't see, but I'd know.

Sister Mary Matthew bore down on me, the huge rosary beads hooked to her belt clanking like a chain. "Well?"

My classmates stared.

"I . . . I'm not sure, Sister."

"What do you mean, you're not sure? You answered this correctly on last Friday's exam. Have you forgotten?"

I hadn't, but, "Yes, Sister."

She glowered as if I'd suddenly sprouted a mustache and said, *sieg heil*.

"Then I'll remind you and pray your memory recovers itself—and quickly. Irony is the method of using humor or sarcasm in which the intended meaning is the direct opposite of what is said. Is any of this familiar?"

“Ah, yes, of course. It’s all coming back.” And her own use of sarcasm was noted.

I sat, half pleased, half embarrassed.

But Sister Mary Matthew wasn’t done with my family yet. She strode up one aisle and down another, her black habit flowing behind. She stopped next to my sister and frowned. “Zella Longworth, enlighten us on Shakespeare’s use of irony in the passage Euphemia Marie just read. What message does it offer a discerning reader?”

Zella, of course, had no idea that Polonius, a lying swine if ever one existed, had never been true to anyone, let alone himself. She’d spent the night before on the phone with one of her boyfriends—a student pilot billeted at Luke Field, I believe—before Dad made her hang up and go to bed.

My sister rose and nodded wisely, her face a study in fierce concentration. “Shakespeare’s use of irony in the passage is . . . is . . . is meant to inspire irony in any reader but most especially a discerning one.”

The class giggled, of course. Sister Mary Matthew was forced to click three times for order. Once more we composed our faces and folded our hands.

“I see you have not done your homework, Zella. You were asked to consider this passage in particular. Can you give me a reason why I shouldn’t keep you after class?”

Zella pondered. Usually, we went directly from school to the train station to distribute donuts and coffee to soldiers passing through on their way Over There. Zella wouldn’t miss a chance to meet all those soldiers for anything. I was curious to see how she handled this.

Zella dropped her gaze. “You’re right, Sister. I didn’t do my homework. I’m sorry.”

Not what I expected. Nobody moved a muscle. Such a confession was bound to unleash the unabated fury of Sister Mary Matthew. She'd flay Zella alive.

Sister Mary Matthew folded her arms. "Is something wrong at home? Something that might explain your lack of preparation and Euphemia Marie's faltering memory?"

Zella wiped a tear from her eye and shook her head as if repressing unbearable sorrow.

"Obviously, something is wrong. What is it?"

My sister sniffled. "We didn't like to say anything, but . . . our father ships out next week, Sister, in the advance wave."

"But they haven't called up married men yet, Zella. Don't lie to me."

"I'm not, Sister. He was in the National Guard before Pearl Harbor, and he's going—really. We've been so worried."

I could only bow before her genius. With some gratitude for including me in it.

Sister Mary Matthew's expression softened, undoubtedly for the first time in her life. To the utter astonishment of every girl in the room, she reached over and patted Zella's arm. "I understand. These are . . . difficult days. Hard for all of us. You're excused, but only for today. Sit down."

See what I mean? Only my sister could have done that. If I had come up with an excuse like that, I'd be cleaning blackboards after school for a year. But Sister Mary Matthew just patted Zella's arm and left her alone.

In fact, what Zella said was true. Dad was a pilot over at Luke Field. He'd been training a batch of recent recruits—he called them "shavetails"—who would be second lieutenants after graduation, but a few days ago we got the news we'd been dreading. They needed him somewhere in the Pacific, so he'd ship out with his unit when the papers cleared. And Zella worried as

much as I did. I'd caught her crying a couple of days ago, so I knew her emotion was real, whatever use she put it to today.

Sister Mary Matthew continued the lesson, calling on one girl after another. Knowing she'd never zero in on me twice in such a short time, I transferred my attention from Polonius to the saguaro cactus just outside our classroom window. But it wasn't the saguaro I cared about.

For the moment at least, I was free to dream of Rafael Jesus Gonzalez. Or Rafe, as we called him.

We'd known him forever. His mother cooked and cleaned in the Longworth home long enough that I'd always thought she was part of the family. For as long as I could remember, Zella and I had played with her sons, Rafe and Esteban. As we grew up, we saw less and less of each other—friendships of that sort weren't encouraged among teens in those days. Esteban had gone off somewhere, and I hadn't spoken with Rafe for years. Then last August, I saw him, and our friendship . . . changed. Last Christmas season, he found a job doing maintenance work for the sisters at Our Lady of the Valley after school—he attended South Phoenix High and bicycled over after class. We saw each other nearly every day with no one the wiser. Once a week or so, we even managed to exchange a few words. It was clear that he felt the way I did.

So, on that day in February of 1942, I stared out the window, ignoring Polonius as my classmates droned on. That is, until a thunderous roar nearly broke our eardrums. Windows rattled, chalk jumped from the blackboard and shattered on the floor, the flag danced, and even the teeth in our mouths shook in their sockets. Chalk from the blackboard jumped onto the floor and shattered into a thousand pieces.

There was no way Sister Mary Matthew's clicker could keep us in our seats. In an instant, we all hung out the windows and peered upward as the

Stearman training plane streaked by, upside down and nearly scraping the school's roof.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of Zella waving frantically and blowing kisses skyward. Clearly, she'd recognized the cadet as the one she'd cooed over on the phone half the night before. Her latest boyfriend buzzing the school. I wasn't surprised. Somehow, people took chances with Zella and did things they'd never do for anyone else.

He was gone in a moment, but it took about two minutes for the class to settle back into place. When we turned, Sister Mary Matthew glowered so hard I thought the wrinkles in her face would crack.

She lifted her hand and clicked three times, and our hands folded demurely on the desks.

Sister Mary Matthew marched to the front of the classroom, a black-robed avenging angel with a snowy white wimple. She waited a full minute, allowing the tension to build.

"You are yet girls," she said, "not grown women, no matter what you may think. What you don't know is that your duty here is to grow in understanding, both of yourselves and of others. You think getting a pilot to buzz the school is romantic and daring. You don't even know your own powers yet, none of you. Do you know where that young man is going? Do you realize his orders will take him to the front within a few months? Do you think you are in love with him, whichever one of you it is?" She stopped to throw a dark frown at Zella, but when Sister Mary Matthew spoke again, she addressed all of us. "Do you think you can be true to some young man before you have learned to be true to yourself?"

We lowered our heads.

"What some of you don't yet realize is that war is not a game," she said.

She sure knew how to rub the sparkle out of life. To thine own self be true. She'd figured out a way to throw Polonius' thoughts right at us as if the words of a silly old fool mattered in our everyday lives. And what did she know of being true to herself? All she had to do was stand in front of the class and make us read. For that matter, what did she know of love? Sister Mary Matthew was a nun. She'd probably never even kissed a boy, let alone been deeply, passionately in love.

But right then, I could afford to ignore the foreboding I felt at her words. Soon I'd see my Rafe, and that was all that mattered. Furthermore, no one would suspect a thing.

