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A Southern Voice

STEVE YARBROUGH

Some twenty years ago I found myself sitting at the bar in the Oxford Holiday Inn beside Willie Morris. I had taken Willie's fiction-writing class that spring; he'd returned to Mississippi to teach after having lived on the East Coast for many years. During the semester that had just concluded, he'd brought a number of famous writers to Oxford, including William Styron, James Dickey, George Plimpton, John Knowles and the young Winston Groom. We'd sat with them in the living room in Willie's campus bungalow, or around the dinner table over at Larry Wells' and Dean Faulkner Wells' house, and listened while they regaled us with stories about the Hamptons, where so many of them had lived and seen one another on a regular basis. It sounded as if you couldn't walk down the street in Bridgehampton, New York, without running into James Jones or James Baldwin or Norman Mailer or Irwin Shaw or Styron or some other literary luminary.

I found it hard to imagine why anybody would want to live in Oxford, Mississippi, if he could live in a place like the Hamptons or New York City or Los Angeles. I knew little or nothing of Willie's own personal circumstances—only that he had resigned some years earlier as editor of *Harper's* and that he had written

North Toward Home, a beautiful memoir about growing up in the South and then finding, at a certain point, that the burden of history in the place he'd once called home had become a "terrible weight." Those were feelings that I indentified with. Like Willie I had been born and raised in the Delta, where apartheid was as much a fact of life as it was in South Africa. Long before I graduated from high school, I had decided that I wanted to get as far away from Mississippi as I could, that ultimately I wanted to go to New York or California, since those places seemed to be the kinds of places in which writers and artists could thrive.

It seemed to me that Willie, after returning to Mississippi, had begun to idealize the very place he'd once shined a pitiless light on. He'd talked a lot that spring about what it meant to be a Southerner, how Southerners were so often misunderstood by those who didn't know the South—and to hear him tell it, no one but another Southerner really could know the South. For all the talk of high times in the Hamptons, he seemed frankly glad to be gone from the place, to be back home in Mississippi. I thought he was on a strange nostalgic trip, and since I was young and brash and lacking social grace, that evening at the Holiday Inn bar I said, "There's something I've been wanting to ask you."

"What's that?"

"Why in the hell would you come back here, knowing all you know about Mississippi—especially when you could be someplace like New York, where everything's really happening?"

Willie took a big swallow of his bourbon, stared across the bar at his reflection in the mirror, and said, "Just wait a few years, and I imagine you'll get a chance to figure it out for yourself."

In addition to being a fine writer, Willie was a bit of a prophet.

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Since 1988 I've lived in California, where I teach at California State University, Fresno. About a year ago Barry Hannah called

me and asked if I'd be interested in coming back to Ole Miss as the John and Renee Grisham Visiting Southern Writer in Residence, to teach the same class I'd once taken from Willie. It took me about ten minutes to make up my mind, the only issue being whether or not my wife Ewa could get off from work so that she and my daughters, Tosha and Magda, could come with me.

I had not realized that I wanted to live in Mississippi again until I heard Barry's voice on the phone. I had never lost touch with the state—I've returned for readings and book signings many times in the last few years, and we pay regular visits to my parents, who still live in Indianola—but the notion that I might actually return for more than a few days was one I'd never entertained. As we drove across country in July, our car loaded so heavily that a gas station attendant in Denver suggested we put extra air in our tires, I found myself wondering how my wife and children would take to life in a small Southern town.

Ewa is from Poland, and she's lived in cities for most of her adult life. Fresno, with a population of 400,000, was the only home my daughters had ever known. On an average day out there, we put around seventy-five miles on our cars, much of it on freeways, as we haul ourselves and the kids from home to school and back, to piano lessons, riding lessons, or—and this is the big excitement—a trip to the local Borders. It's impossible to walk anywhere in Fresno: most parts of town have no sidewalks, and even if they did, stores and restaurants, schools and jobs are generally miles away. There's also the problem of crime. Children disappear from time to time, and drive-by shootings occur on a regular basis. The city is overrun by gangs. One year, if recollection serves me, we had around a hundred murders. Even though we live in a relatively safe neighborhood, we'd never think of falling asleep on the couch with the door unlocked. We have a contract with a security company for twenty-four-hour monitoring.

All of this, which sounds nothing short of horrific when you put it down on the page, had come to seem normal to us. We can sleep through gunshots. Sirens rarely wake us. We've learned to eat breakfast in the car, to accept the fact that we may see one another only before eight a.m. and after eight p.m. We've also learned to accept the fact that many of our acquaintances conduct their friendships via email, that they will hardly ever answer their phones when you call them unless you indicate that you're in the midst of an emergency, in which case they will prove available, reliable and helpful. Their doors, like our doors, stay locked all the time, and if you want to drop by, you need to arrange the visit well in advance. Preferably via email.

Speed and danger, of course, can become addictive. I wondered if life in Oxford would not seem too slow to my family—and if, after a few weeks here, they might not start to feel as if they were living in a small aquarium.

*

I needn't have worried. Ewa and the girls fell in love with the town. The slower pace of life here, which made it easier for me to concentrate on the novel I was finishing, also left us more time for one another and more time for friends as well. Once school started, Ewa and I made a practice of taking long, slow walks to the Square, dropping into Square Books two or three times a day, invariably running into several friends along the way. My daughters grew accustomed to wandering in the woods near our house and stopping by Beckett and Mary Harmon Howorth's pool, where they frequently found both their parents ensconced in deck chairs, befuddled by martinis strong enough to fell an elephant. Our car remained in the carport for days at a time.

And slowly, over a period of a few weeks or perhaps even months, as I settled back into life in a place I had once known so well, I realized that at some point in the last few years I had stopped

being myself and that the change had much to do with my voice. Not the voice that emerged in my fiction and essays (though eventually that would have been affected too) but the voice with which I spoke—the one I used in casual conversation with friends and colleagues or with complete strangers in grocery stores and shopping malls.

Ewa, whose English is better than my own, had told me once that she felt as if when she spoke English she was in some basic way a different person than she was when she spoke Polish. This feeling, I suspect, is caused not so much by her own auditory awareness of the sounds she's producing as it is by her awareness that people perceive her as somehow different from themselves, as a person who is other than what they are.

The first few years I lived in California, people often asked me where I was from. They frequently commented on how "pretty" my speech was. One friend from the Bay Area—a very good friend, I hasten to add, a woman that Ewa and the girls and I dearly love—convinced herself that she could imitate me. She started peppering her speech with lots of long drawn-out "y'all's" and began to call me "Honey Child" and "Sugar Dumplin'." When something I had done or said pleased her, she would smile at me and holler "Hot dang!" None of this was done in a mean-spirited way. None of it was meant to annoy. If you had asked me if it bothered me, I would have said no, and I would have meant no. Yet the fact was that I began constructing my sentences so that I could avoid the second-person plural; when it was unavoidable, more often than not I would say "you guys"—which probably sounded about as natural on my lips as "guten Tag" would have sounded on John Wayne's.

I thought about things people had said to me in California—things that they'd said because of something they believed they heard in my voice. An attorney who'd been educated at an elite private law school had once referred in my presence to a couple of African American clients who'd made him angry as "the charred

ones.” He followed that comment with another: “I wouldn’t say that to just anybody, but I know *you’ll* understand.” When Ewa and I were looking for our first house, the first real-estate agent we spoke with had tried to convince us to buy in Clovis, rather than Fresno, promising that “You’ll feel more at home over there. There aren’t nearly as many blacks in Clovis, and the schools are a lot safer.” People assumed that I wanted to hear these types of things—they may even have thought that hearing them would make me feel at home. They must have believed that those comments, when they made them, said nothing about themselves, while speaking volumes about me.

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Those of us who earn our livings teaching in universities rarely wind up where we would seem to belong. My fiction-writing colleague at Cal State, Fresno—the fine novelist Liza Wieland—grew up in Atlanta. Thus we have the oddity of two Southern writers teaching classes filled almost exclusively with students from California. I’ve met Californians and New Yorkers in Oxford, and by and large they seem as out-of-place here as I am on the West Coast.

In the last few months, during which time my voice has stopped sounding strange to me, I’ve found myself wishing for a kind of academic free agency, the equivalent of what they have, say, in the NFL. You could give Mississippi a first-round draft choice and let Dr. X go back to the Golden State, where he will probably feel at peace with himself blazing down the freeway at ninety miles an hour, communicating with his friends’ message machines via cell phone.

In the time it takes him to get from San Jose to LA, I should just about make it from my place to Square Books.^{YR}