

Amends '82: Part One

by Ginnah Howard

The kitchen I snuck out of seventeen years before kept fading to black and white, with this layer of something between me and them. I could hear what they were saying, but their words were muffled, their movements slowed down. It was like I hovered over them, watching them all: my brother Bobby, who'd gone from bodywork to DeLuca's Auto Sales, from beer to Tanqueray Gin. I watched him grab all the salami from one side of the cold cuts plate brought over by the Lucianos. At thirty-one he was still Bobby. Bobby the Bad, who at fourteen was already banging against the world, hardening up as fast as he could—stealing tires, cutting school, taking his pick of the boldest chickies in the neighborhood, several who he later married, banging up against them as well. My brother, T.J., still a little chubby, with the same bad haircut—too high on his neck, too close to the scalp over his ears. Careful T.J.—rearranging the cheese and bologna to make Bobby's assault on the platter less damaging. T.J., who very much wanted us to act like a family should, sat with a yellow pad in front of him, his pen ready.

"Let's decide what the gravestone should say," he said. "Carla's going back on the bus tonight. Let's not leave it all on Ma's shoulders."

My mother^¾at the sink, her back to us, washing dishes^¾said not a word.

Trying to think of words for *His* gravestone still seems unreal; I found it hard to believe I was actually there. Before it all started to come down, I would have checked somewhere between unlikely to impossible that my body would be there in Newark, sitting in the same chair I always sat in, where I could best deflect *his* flack.

"Ma," Bobby said, "stop washing the dishes already."

Bobby's tone was so close to *his* tone, it made the back of my neck creep. Obediently, she dried her hands and sat down on the edge of her chair, like a nervous bird with one wing caught. She looked caved in and cracked along the seams, wearing one of those pitiful

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polyester suits that used to fill me with shame when she'd show up for the annual parent conference. I felt so guilty about that later, I'd try to make it up to her with offers to mop or clean out the fridge.

I hadn't seen her since Tess was born, eight years ago, when she actually came to Danford for a few days to help Steve and me get settled. We went through the motions of calling her a few times a year. Every now and then she'd call us. In either direction it was risking more bad news. I remember one Christmas I had to return to the unwrapping of our presents with the joyful news that lately he'd taken to keeping her up half the night with his harangues: the way she'd ironed his shirts, how she overcooked the green beans.

Way before I left home I'd said, So why don't you leave him? Get the hell out. Back then she'd twist her ring around her finger and look away. Later, when I'd say it over the phone, there'd be a long pause; then she'd go on about an entirely different subject in, I swear to god, a cheery voice.

I looked at her close for the first time since I'd arrived. She was only forty-nine, only seventeen years older than me^¾how troubles can flatten you, what daily worry can do to your mouth. I remember her as being pretty, my pretty mama, when I was little.

"How about 'In Loving Memory'?" T.J. said, and then he actually wrote that down.

In the piles of pictures in my mind I doubt that I could have come up with one *loving memory* ^¾sometimes things started off okay, the trimming the tree, stuffing the turkey, but by the time they'd reached the halfway mark on the bottle, we always knew we were on our way down and it was just going to get nastier. More and more dangerous. From then on you simply tried to find cover until they'd passed out and you could wiggle free to inventory the wreckage. Paydays were bad, holidays were hideous. The changing of the moon, the seasons, a round of bad luck, a stroke of fortune.

When T.J. got no response, he said, "Ma, do you think we should put Tony or his full name? Anthony, or was it Antonio?"

My mother lit up another cigarette. Her last one was still burning down in the ashtray. Bobby and T.J. followed suit. I wanted one, but

on general principle, held off. A cloud of smoke hung over the table, like the whole family connected to the same hazy talk bubble.

"Ma?"

"Tony is the only name I ever knew your father to use. That's the way he signed everything. At least what I saw him sign. He never signed much. He was suspicious of signing things."

"Well, how about his birth certificate? What does that say?"

"I don't know if he had a birth certificate."

"Ma, everybody has a birth certificate. What year was he born? We'll need that for the stone too."

My mother shrugged. If someone were to ask me the main thing I remembered about my mother, I'd say her shrug. That, or acting like she didn't hear us at all.

"Maybe he's got it stashed away," Bobby said, finishing off the last of his drink, and in the same flow of motion pouring himself another. Once again I noticed my mother wasn't drinking. I hadn't seen her with a glass since I got there. I remember as a kid my father would always say to her, Have a drink, Angela. She'd say, I want to finish mashing the potatoes. Sit down and have a drink, he'd say again. And she would.

"All Ma and I found were his car insurance papers and some notices from the V.A.," T.J. said.

"Check the big locked box in the back of his closet," Bobby announced.

"What box?" T.J. asked him.

"Way in the back beside the chimney," Bobby told him.

Everybody, including me, stared at Bobby. Evidently my mother didn't know anything about the box either. A big box in the closet of the man she'd lived with in that duplex for at least twenty years and she didn't know about it. I remember one of her repeated bits of advice, the phrase uttered like some prayer of caution any time one of us was about to take any kind of action: *Don't go looking for trouble*. But of course Bobby knew about the box. He'd been looking for trouble right from the go. He never got in my father's face, but once he hit his teens he stopped cowering, did pretty much

what he wanted and I guess my father signed off, split his discontent between easier prey^{3/4}my mother and T.J. I was long gone.

"What's in the box, Bobby?" I said.

More than likely he'd had a go at that lock back when. I was surprised by the sound of my voice. Beyond the opening dutiful exchanges and the Steve, Rudy, and Tess are doing okay's, I hadn't been part of the conversation much since my arrival the night before, my arrival while the rest of the family was at the funeral. Carla, I hope you can make it to the funeral home. For Ma's sake if nothing else, T.J. when he called. The way I feel, I told him, it's better I'm not there. When they got home soon after my arrival, T.J. took me aside, I could run you out to the cemetery, Carla. No, I said. I wanted to add how my curse might interfere with his ghost's final departure, how we certainly wouldn't want that.

"Bobby," I said again, "any idea what's in the box?"

Bobby didn't answer. He just stood up. I swear we all looked toward my father's empty chair, then toward the garage, still fearful *he* might catch us out. We followed Bobby up the back stairs to my parents' room, first me, then T.J., then Ma, still looking behind her.

We came to a halt outside the closed door, piled up against each other. Even my mother seemed to hesitate. Bobby turned the knob, then reached back and kind of pulled us all in. Dark. And that smell, the smell that even as a kid—though I couldn't give it a name—I knew what it meant. Even in the daytime the dark green shades were always down, the windows closed. I don't remember ever seeing the bed made and every possible surface was weighted down with dark piles^{3/4}clothes, blankets? I'd hated to go into that room. I learned to quiet my own nightmares, T.J.'s, to con Bobby back into bed, to measure out the cough syrup and get the glasses of water, even how to read the silver line of mercury rather than go into that room to rouse my mother. Once my father sent me up to get his lighter, Right on the bedside table, you damned ninny, he said to my reluctance, and I remember holding my breath before opening that door and then having this wild urge to rush in and rip down the shades, to open all the windows, to start heaving all the

dark piles down in the alley. I must have been fifteen, a few months before I finally got away.

Bobby groped around for a second, looking for the overhead switch. I almost yelled out, Don't³/₄the dread of seeing all of that despair, yes, finally I had the word for it, the *despair* of my parents' stained lives, caught in the terrible overhead light. But before Bobby found the switch, my mother crossed to the bedside lamp, and with more energy than I'd ever heard from her, said, "Open up the windows, Carla."

I opened every single one as far as they would go, with T.J. pushing ahead of me to raise the shades. Summer twilight and the sounds of birds settling in for the night filled the room. The bed was made, the dark piles gone.

"I don't know about the shades," my mother said.

Bobby smiled at her, an honest to goodness real smile. "What would the neighbors see, Ma? We're not up to any illegal activity here, right, T.J.?"

When T.J. answered with one of Ma's uncertain shrugs, Bobby raised the flat of his hand.

"Whoa, let's stop right here for a second. Are we all agreed we should pull the old man's box out of the closet and break the lock and go through its contents together? I don't want to hear any of that, *Bobby the Bad made me do it* stuff later."

Nervous laughter.

"Well?" Bobby said.

"You honestly never managed to jimmy into this box, Bobby?" I said.

"Nope. Sorry to tarnish my dare-to-do-anything reputation, but even I was never as nuts as that."

"Okay," I said, "Of course I'm in favor of opening up the box."

My mother and T.J. nodded.

"Let's hear it loud and clear," Bobby said.

"Open it," T.J. told him.

"Yes," my mother agreed and then she laughed. I saw that my mother had pulled on a bulky pink sweater I'd sent her one

Christmas. I was amazed at how that changed her appearance and ashamed at how much easier it was for me to look at her then.

Bobby opened the closet and we watched him push back through the hangers, heavy with dark clothes I'd never seen my father wear. He pushed back through the stale smell of him. I was glad it was my brother's job and not mine. "It's here," Bobby called and we all caught our breath. "Give me a hand, T.J.," Bobby muttered. "The son of a bitch's heavy or maybe it's just catching on the floor boards."

They pushed it out into the dim light^{3/4}an old army colored footlocker, dented and scratched, with a large rusted padlock jammed through the steel ring.

"Ma, you and Carla, go on down and clear off the kitchen table. Got to set this up on something so we can get at the lock."

"What about looking around for some keys?" I said. But Bobby just shook his head.

We went down and my brothers followed, heaving and jockeying to make the turn at the narrow landing. My mother spread one of my father's old army overcoats out and Bobby and T.J. rested the box in the middle of that. We all stood and stared at its secret bulk for a minute until she turned away to make coffee. Bobby and T.J. went out the door that opened into the garage and came back with an array of screwdrivers and picks.

"Where are his big handled metal cutters?" Bobby said. "They're not hanging where they usually are and they're not in the trunk of the car."

I thought of saying how *he* probably knew what we'd be up to and once again he'd done his damndest to prevent it.

"Ma, don't you think he might have the key tucked in one of his drawers, maybe in one of those pockets?" T.J. said. "Bobby, maybe we should do a thorough search before we go any further."

Bobby shook his head again and added a little of my father's Irish whiskey to his coffee.

"Sounds like a good plan to me," I said.

We sat and drank coffee, waited for Bobby to respond, watched him continue to pick around delicately up inside the old lock.

"Why not hunt for the keys, Bobby?" I finally asked him. "What else do you know?"

Bobby looked at my mother and then he said, "Because when he got moved downstairs, when they had him pretty much knocked out on morphine, I decided to check to see if the box was still in his closet. I searched through all his stuff, thinking I might turn up the keys— drawers, pockets, tucked up under the ledges, you name it. You didn't ever see any padlock keys around, did you, Ma?"

She shook her head no.

Bobby stopped picking at the lock and again looked at my mother; this time long enough that she had to meet his eyes. And when she did, he said, "Sorry for nosing around, but I knew you'd have been afraid to do such a thing, and I figured there might be something important in there we ought to know about before he died. I gave up on the key, but somehow I couldn't quite bring myself to cut the lock. It was like against all odds he might have got off that bed and come up those stairs and found me breaking in." Bobby pushed all the tools off to the side. "We're going to have to come up with some cutters."

"What do you think is in the box?" I said to the rest of them. Each of them got an alert look, but nobody responded. "What do you wish was in the box? What do you wish we'd find down in there after we lifted the lid?" Still nobody spoke, but I could see they were all thinking.

Then my mother gave a hoot of laughter, a laugh I don't think I'd heard from her since we were kids. We'd play Button, Button Who's Got the Button and my mother would get to laughing so hard at Bobby's and my bluffing and T.J.'s stricken expression, like he had hold of something hot, that she'd beg us to quit. Stop, stop, she'd say, holding her sides and sometimes she'd just reach out and pull us all together toward her and we'd squeal and wiggle around. That reminded me of other games too¾like us hiding all over the house and her whistling her amazing whistle through her fingers to let us

know she was coming, ready or not. Those rare times happened less and less, like a slow leak of my mother's energy, around the time we moved back to Newark, when I was starting fourth grade. The year my grandmother died. And even before that such games were only played when my father was stationed overseas.

My mother poured more coffee. T.J. tucked in next to me for protection like in the old days; my mother on the other side of the table where she always sat^{3/4}within arm's length of my father; Bobby, the most distant, at the foot, closest to the door. We stared at the box, now blocking the head of the table, that empty place where he no longer was.

"Button, button, who's got the button?" I said. I opened both of my hands. "Bobby, what did you hope you'd find when you came on that box in the back of his closet?"

"You know I didn't give that much thought. Mostly it pissed me off that it was locked. But then it kind of steadied me too. You know, Jesus, right to the end he's not going to give an inch."

T.J. leaned forward, his face so earnest I felt that fear I'd always had when he used to go up to bat or when the ball would head straight for him in the outfield. I'd be the only one from the family at his Little League games. Just do your best, I'd tell him. But when he'd miss, and he pretty much always did, he'd look crushed and on the way home he'd say, I'm glad he didn't come; better he wasn't there. Sometimes it was all I could do not to shake him and scream, Don't care so much. Toughen up for Christ's sake.

T.J. spoke softly, looking right at the box. "Sure, I'd like to find something nice. Like maybe some of those goofy cards we used to make in school for Father's Day. You remember that card I made him in fifth grade? Mrs. Ormsbie said it was the most beautiful Father's Day card she ever saw. Certainly it was the biggest. Made out of a giant sheet of construction paper. Remember it had a strip of paper folded down like a jack-in-the box so that when you opened it, *I love you* was supposed pop out? But of course by the time I got it home, I'd opened it so many times, the strip had lost its spring. Remember that card, Ma? It was green, bright green."

"I remember the Mother's Day gift you made for me from first or second grade^{3/4}your hand print in plaster."

My mother's eyes welled up and I wasn't sure of what I'd gotten going here. None of us said so, but I was pretty sure that hand print plaque was something Bobby brought home from kindergarten.

"Well, anyway," T.J. said. "Whatever's in it, I'm for getting it out in the open. There's this saying 'Only your secrets can make you sick'."

Some more Al-Anon lingo I knew. But I wasn't going to touch that line with a ten foot pole. I felt confident we were not going to find any confessional journals in that box.

"Maybe the Lucianos have some cutters," I said. Better to get on with this before the good of my mother's laugh was completely drained away.

"I'll go," T.J. said.

"Thank them again for the cold cuts," my mother called after him.

"Did you ever write him letters?" I said.

"Yes," was all my mother offered.

Both Bobby and I stared at her, surprised I suppose, though I don't know why. We both wanted her to say more.

"Maybe some records of his family?" Bobby said. "Where he was born. Maybe his parents immigrated from Italy. I know we're Italian. And not just on your side. The name DeLuca. Just look at us."

My mother twisted her ring. Would she keep on wearing that ring? "I never remember your father mentioning anything about his family. Sisters. Brothers. Nothing. When I first met him, I asked him questions, but right away he said. 'I don't want to talk about it.' The evening we knew he most likely wasn't going to live through the night, I asked him again, 'Don't you want me to get in touch with someone in your family?' He just shook his head no. 'Don't you want a priest?'" I said.

"What did he say?"

"He just gave me that terrible look."

I knew exactly the one she meant. So did Bobby.

"Where did you meet him anyway?" I said.

She laughed. "I met him at a church dance. Saint Mary's."

Bobby leaned her way in surprise, "You met him at a church dance?"

"Well, sort of. That's what I told your grandmother. In truth, I met him on the corner outside the church dance. He was driving by with a buddy. Home on leave. 1949. I was just a little high school girl."

"And how old was he then?"

"Old enough to know better, he told me. I always thought he was about twenty-five then. I knew he was a lot older than me. He certainly knew more than I did. I didn't know anything. Nothing. It's hard to believe I could have known so little."

"You mean he never even told you how old he was?" I said. "And how long before you got married?"

"A few months after." And then she looked away. "Not too long after that I had you."

Something in me kept me staring at her even though I knew it was a mean thing to do.

After what felt like a long time, she looked back at me, "Yes, sooner than I should have," she said.

I'd always figured that, but somehow it seemed good to make her say it.

"He wasn't always so hard. He was such a good looking guy," she said. "Especially in his uniform. Whether you like it or not, you all look like him. Especially Bobby. Especially you, Carla."

"What about his army records? Maybe they're in the box," Bobby said. "If not, probably we could get some more information from the V.A."

The mention of the V.A. made my mother shrink a little. "He wouldn't go to the hospital, Carla. He said terrible things about the V.A., but finally I had to get somebody to come in. He got so bad. Mrs. Luciano got somebody from Hospice. She said, You've got to have some help. He's got to have something for the pain. Don't be afraid. And they came in the end. I think if he could have, he would have raised up and hit me for bringing strangers into the house. As

weak as he was, he did grab me; 'You better not get a priest,' he said. That's why we had it at the funeral home. He told me I was to have him cremated. Burned up, Carla, put in the fire. But I just couldn't do that; I couldn't." She started to cry.

Bobby looked at me like I was supposed to do something; both of us sat frozen in our chairs. After a minute of her sitting there, crying into her hands, Bobby spoke in a gentle voice, "It's all right, Ma. You did it the way you had to do it, and T.J. and me felt that was right. I know Carla does too."

"Of course," I said and went to get her something.

T.J. came in with a large pair of metal cutters and turned them over to Bobby. "You okay, Ma?" he said and put his arm around her shoulders. Dear sweet T.J.

Bobby gestured toward the cutters. "Are you up for this, Ma?"

She wiped her eyes and blew her nose on the wad of toilet paper I'd handed her. "I am," she said. "Yes, I am. And I don't want any of you to be afraid." Again she surprised me with a laugh. "We aren't going to find anything worse than what we already know. And we survived that."

I could feel T.J. sort of hovering^{3/4}mother-henning us^{3/4}like he might be going to try to cluck us all into one of those love circles. Now everyone join hands. I was certainly not ready for that.

Instead my mother raised her hands, push-pushed her fingers, a photographer signal that if we didn't get in closer we wouldn't all be in the shot. We all leaned in a little. Then she said, "Well, didn't we?" and we all three shook our heads yes. Yes, we did.

"All right, Bobby, might as well have a go at it," I said, before things got out of control further. We awkwardly pulled back into our places. My mother and I moved out of the way, and Bobby and T.J. approached the box. They pushed it over to get a better grip. Then Bobby stopped and turned my way.

"What?" I said.

"I was just thinking that after bringing up the idea of us telling what we thought might be in the box, you didn't commit yourself on a thing."

T.J. and my mother were also looking at me. "Yeah, Carla, you must have had something in your head to get us going," T.J. said.

"You know, I think it was just that I was buying time, trying to do something with the fear I felt pressing up under my ribs. What do they call it...random dread?"

"Dread of what, Carla?"

"I'm not sure? I guess that's the point."

"Yeah," Bobby said, "but why not take a stab at it?"

"Okay, but this is going to sound pretty negative. But then what else is new, huh? I don't think I want to find something nice. What would I do if we opened up this box and found our school cards, Ma's letters, the article from the paper when you got that Scouting award? Jesus, then I might have to bring it all up again, start sorting through it."

"Really, Carla. Couldn't you use a little *nice*?" T.J. said.

"Oh, get on with it, will you, Bobby. I'm not sure of anything."

With that Bobby fastened onto the old lock and ping, ping the lock dropped into T.J.'s hand. We just stood there.

"You open it, Ma," Bobby said.

But T.J. motioned us all back a little and slowly eased up the lid as though there might be some unknown beast lurking in that darkness. We all leaned over and stared in. Old newspapers stacked an inch or so below the top.

