

THE OLD WIDOW: WHAT DO YOU TAKE IF THE HOUSE IS ON FIRE

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A thesis submitted to the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Folklore in Department of American Studies.

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ABSTRACT

Rachel Mabe: The Old Widow: What Do You Take if the House is on Fire
(Under the direction of Bernard Herman)

This paper is a creative text based on intensive ethnographic fieldwork and critical ideas encountered in secondary research. It tells the story of an elderly widow, Sandy Edgerly, through her objects. It focuses on four objects that each represents a moment of transformation in Sandy's life. Through these four objects a biography materializes that can be seen as an epitome of how individuals map and navigate life through stories attached to transitional moments. This work is located at the intersection where material culture, ethnography, and performance theory meet to explore the question of identity.

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NAMES OF THE ACTORS

Sandy Edgerly, the protagonist
David Murphy, Sandy's hired helper
John Edgerly, Sandy's husband
Josh, David's predecessor
Nate Edgerly, Sandy's son
Claire Edgerly, Nate's wife
Clementine Edgerly, Nate and Claire's daughter
Molly Zaragoza, Sandy's close friend
Clarence Moss, Sandy's father
Avalee Moss, Sandy's mother
Berenda Moss, Sandy's sister
Mr. Titus, head of the Synthane Corporation
Charles Young, Mariah's husband and manager of Clarence's factory
Mariah Young, Charles's wife and Sandy and Berenda's caretaker
Lillian, a young professor's wife at the University of Tennessee
Bob, John's classmate in the PhD psychology program at the University of Tennessee
Roger and James, students at the University of Tennessee
Susan, Sandy's inspiration for going back to school to get a master's degree in special education
Pete, the psychology program head's wife and hostess of the faculty/student picnic
Flora, Sandy's replacement at Sears
Brian Edgerly, John's brother
Preston Moss, Berenda's son who Sandy raised
Mimi Watson, the first person Sandy hired to help her

AN INTRODUCTION: READ THIS FIRST (!)

This is a story of a woman. It is the story of her life as revealed through her objects. In many ways she is an ordinary woman. In every way she is an extraordinary woman.

She is white. She is seventy. She is southern. She is kind. She is intelligent. She is forgetful. She is beautiful. She is well-off financially. She lives in a large house. She is a widow.

She was a mother, and before that a daughter, a sister. She was a teacher, and before that a student. She was young and beautiful. She was in love with a psychologist. She worked, she stayed home, she went back to work. She threw dinner parties. She collected art. She owned dogs. She lived in the suburbs. She was a typical American woman of a certain kind.

Looking at her you might think her story uninteresting. Boring. Average. Not worth telling. But her life, like all lives, is grand and wild and full and small and inconsequential and world changing. Her story is one that deserves to be told. That needs to be told. That no one would miss if it wasn't told. I want to tell you her story. But first let me tell you a bit about me. About how I found Sandy Edgerly and came to learn a version of her story.

It started in Philadelphia in 2007. I was in my last semester at Bryn Mawr College. I lived in West Philadelphia and took public transportation to Bryn Mawr on days when I had classes. The apartment I was living in on 46th and Pine was closest to a Market Street Station that was being renovated at the time, so I walked the six blocks up and seven blocks over to the 52nd street station.

On these early morning walks I started to notice things on the ground, things abandoned by the people living around me—drawings by children, school photographs, rusty pieces of metal. I was drawn to these objects. And over time rather than just looking at them with curiosity and moving on I started picking them up and putting them in my pocket.

As my collection grew I started cataloging things by type. I combined these artifacts with organic matter—leaves, dried flowers, sticks—I also picked up off the ground and stuffed in my pockets. At first I combined things only in my mind. Then one day I went to an art store—I knew nothing of art—and bought some canvases, brushes, glue and oil paint. I started painting canvases and recombining objects to tell a new story.

This is how I first engaged with the world of things in any substantial way. Over time I began to appreciate my love of things and felt the need to cultivate it in an alternative way. This is how I ended up in the Folklore program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill studying material culture. I could see what objects meant to me—how they held memories and told my own story to myself and others in a way that was comforting and confirmed who I was. But what about other people? What did their possessions mean to them? I was determined to find out.

I found Sandy Edgerly by accident.

My partner, David Murphy, moved to North Carolina with me. David, who was also a student, was looking for part-time jobs. One day in the *Daily Tar Heel*, where I frequently checked for babysitting and tutoring opportunities, I came upon an ad placed by an older woman looking for part-time help around the house and yard. Soon David had the job.

Sandy was a collector and packrat and David insisted I meet her. So one night in October 2012 she took us to the K&W Cafeteria. A natural storyteller, she was forthcoming with tales about her life. I was halfway done with my food when she was only taking her second bite. The next time I saw Sandy was in her house the following week, where we talked about the objects she surrounds herself with.

Much of my initial work with Sandy focused on the relationship between her, her house, and her things. At the end of my first semester of graduate school I wrote a paper titled “A Life in Objects: Widowhood and the Exploration of Identity through Possessions.” This paper used performance theory to explore how house decorating could be considered a performance. I looked at one room of Sandy’s 7000 square foot home—the den. Through this one room I juxtaposed two performances. The first performance was what objects, and their arrangement, said about themselves—what we take them to mean at “face value.” The second performance was what Sandy said about these objects. I explored each performance and then how the narratives affected the initial reading of the objects.

I found that in Sandy’s case these performances did not contradict one another. I argued that house decoration is a performance of identity. People display artifacts in their home because of the story they tell. In regard to the audience I claimed that there is more than one audience when it comes to house decoration—visitors, the self (resident and decorator), and other residents (which doesn’t apply to Sandy since she lives alone).¹ Both performances were designed to convey to an audience, whether this meant the owner or a visitor, who Sandy *was*.² I

¹ For a detailed introduction to performance theory see Richard Bauman’s essay “Verbal Art as Performance.” In this essay Bauman clearly establishes the role of the audience in a performance—both in terms of the performer’s affect on the audience and the audience’s affect on the performer.

² Patricia Sawin’s essay “Performance as the Nexus of Gender, Power, and Desire” observes that although Bauman “firmly establishes the role of the audience...he neglects how it *feels* for either the performer or the audience” (33-

argued that the primary audience was the resident and decorator. When Sandy looked around her den at her belongings she looked around at herself—through her things Sandy constantly reminded herself of her story and reaffirmed her established identity to herself. Furthermore, I noticed that she continuously renegotiated her identity through her things³ and at the time we started working together this was especially true since working with David to declutter and organize, as well as buying new things, allowed her to revise her identity.⁴ That project was the beginning of our relationship. We started getting together regularly to talk about her life, her house, and her stuff.

Around this time I found myself drawn more and more to writing for a general, rather than a purely academic audience. I discovered creative nonfiction to be a better vehicle for telling the stories I was finding, a form the people I was working with could like and appreciate. This did not mean that the result was devoid of analysis, ideas, or critical thought, but only that these parts were not as obvious as they were in “A Life in Objects.” I entered the Folklore program at the University of North Carolina wanting to be an archeologist of the present. But archaeologists do not have access to living people, just artifacts. It is perhaps more accurate to say that I wanted to combine archaeology and ethnography—to place equal importance on things themselves and what people say about them.⁵ I have continued to transform and while I still find

34). When thinking about Sandy’s performance it was especially important to think about what it felt like for the performer and the audience.

³ Both Deborah Kapchan (2003) and Patricia Sawin (2002) provide feminist interpretations of performance theory that highlight its connection to identity and its ability to help performers “rewrite themselves” (Kapchan 2003, 135). As Sawin writes, “performance genres are intertextual fields where the politics of identity are negotiated” (35).

⁴ Also see Danille Christensen’s “‘Look at Us Now!’: Scrapbooking, Regimes of Value, and the Risks of (auto)Ethnography” for a discussion of how performing everyday life through scrapbooks is an active way to construct identity.

⁵ There is a tradition of folklorists who argue for the necessity of not only looking at the material evidence, but also at oral histories. Michael Ann Williams in *Homeplace: The Social Use and Meaning of the Folk Dwelling in Southwestern North Carolina* (2004) “reinhabits” folk dwellings through oral histories. She insists that oral history is direct evidence, not just “an artifact of an artifact” (137) and that if we do not use oral histories and merely look at

material culture captivating, I am more focused on the narratives people tell than analyzing the objects themselves. This is not to say that I have abandoned my interest in material culture, but that I am more concerned with using objects as a basis for narrative. This is perhaps because I found that objects always tell stories and these stories are richer when their biographies are illuminated by the owner/possessor. Thus creative nonfiction, focusing on the story itself, seemed like the best way to tell Sandy's story.

What follows is a creative text based on intensive ethnographic fieldwork and critical ideas encountered in secondary research. I tell Sandy's story through her objects. More specifically I've chosen four objects that each represents a moment of transformation in Sandy's life. While Sandy's house is full of possessions that she feels attached to, if we stripped away all but these four objects we would still be able to tell her story. The tangible markers of transitional moments are: One, two missing photographs of Sandy and her African American nanny, Mariah. In one photograph Mariah holds a four-year-old Sandy up to drink from a water fountain. In the second photograph Mariah drinks from it herself at a time when this was prohibited in the South. These two photographs illustrate Sandy's watershed encounter with racial and class difference. Two, the second object is an antique oil painting of an old woman that Sandy calls The Old Widow. Sandy is very attached to the painting, which she found with her husband, John, at an antique shop in Raleigh. The Old Widow embodies the fork in the road between two life/career paths that Sandy encountered as a young woman. Three, in 1995 Sandy suffered a traumatic brain injury. This event, which drastically changed her life, is documented in a black three-ring

the architectural remains we are bound to have a skewed view. Similarly, John Michael Vlach's *Back of the Big House* (1993) is concerned not only with plantation architecture, but also the people who lived in it. Since he does not have access to living memory he uses archival material. Henry Glassie also argues that it is best to examine both objects and what people say about them, "turning first to the abundant and democratic resource of material culture, assembling artifacts into independent systems, letting them have their own muffled say, and then returning to the documentary record, the work of the wordy observer, to develop explanations" (1999, 46).

binder that holds Sandy's journal entries during the year after the accident. Four, some of John's clothes still hang in Sandy's closet. Although David helped her get rid of much of his clothes, she kept some because she likes to encounter them on a daily basis. These clothes represent John's death, Sandy's difficulty afterward, and the transformation that occurred with David's help. Through these four objects a biography materializes that can be seen as an epitome of how individuals map and navigate life through stories attached to transitional moments. In the first chapter we start with Sandy and David, then we move backward to Sandy's childhood and eventually circle back to David again.

I've focused on the intersection where material culture, ethnography, and performance theory, all of which I've talked a bit about, meet to explore the question of identity. I'd like to take a moment to explore the organizing themes that frame the text that follows. These ideas are explicitly talked about here, but not in the body of the thesis so that the reader can focus on Sandy's story without being distracted by other people's words. Yet, the critical ideas are always just below the surface.

I do my best to tell Sandy's story from her perspective based on numerous interviews conducted through ethnographic fieldwork. But I also understand that inevitably Sandy's story is shaped by my preconceived notions and interpretations.⁶ In "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," Clifford Geertz discusses this very issue. He argues that ethnography is not merely observational, it is at the core "an interpretive activity" (1973, 9). He goes on to describe this in more detail, "So there are three characteristics of ethnographic

⁶ Ethnographers have long struggled with this, and attempted to ameliorate some of the burden by working with their "consultants" on interpretation. See Elaine Lawless's "I Was Afraid Someone Like You...an Outsider...Would Misunderstand" for a discussion of reciprocal ethnography; Eric Lassiter's *The Chicago Guide to Collaborative Ethnography* for an in-depth look at collaborative ethnography; and Martha King's "Documenting Traditions and the Ethnographic Double Bind" and Sarah Elder's "Collaborative Filmmaking: An Open Space for Making Meaning, A Moral Ground for Ethnographic Film" for differing accounts of the success of collaborative filmmaking.

description: it is interpretive; what it is interpretive of is the flow of social discourse; and the interpreting involved consists in trying to rescue the ‘said’ of such discourse from its perishing occasions and fix it in perusable terms” (20). I have attempted to “fix” Sandy “in perusable terms” by writing in a way that, as Paul Lichterman describes it, “preserves the meanings of a particular people in a particular time and place” (2011, 78).⁷

The primary organizing theme, which comes from Susan Stewart’s *On Longing*, is the idea of the souvenir. Stewart distinguishes between “souvenirs of exterior sights...which most often are representations and are purchasable, and souvenirs of individual experience, which most often are samples and are not available as general consumer goods” (1993, 138). But all souvenirs “authenticate experience” (135) and “create a continuous and personal narrative of the past” (140). Provided with this framework we can think of the four objects laid out above as souvenirs from Sandy’s life. As such, it is important to note four things. One, these souvenirs, when taken together, form an autobiography (139). Two, they can be used as a map of Sandy’s life. Sandy’s four souvenirs are connected to periods of transition, which Stewart notes is so often the case, since this type of souvenir “tends to be found in connection with rites of passage (birth, initiation, marriage, death) as the material sign of an abstract referent: transformation of status” (139). Three, these souvenirs not only serve as a map of Sandy’s life, but also a calendar that helps her place her personal history within a larger history. As Stewart writes, “the souvenir moves history into private time” (138). Four, the objects are made meaningful through memory. While they may convey certain things to a viewer about Sandy without her talking about them “[t]here is no continuous identity between these objects and their references. Only the act of

⁷ In terms of theory, Lichterman argues that “Geertz is saying that interpretation is theory all the way down—even if it contains much more than academic theory along the way” (2011, 79). Thus any interpretation, including mine of Sandy, is covered in theory—it’s always there just below the surface.

memory constitutes their resemblance” (145).⁸ Let us view Sandy’s objects as an assemblage of souvenirs and allow this idea to frame the narrative that follows—a narrative that is a version of how Sandy tells her story to herself and others.

⁸ While it would be easy to think of Sandy’s house as a collection, under Stewart’s definition it would not be considered one since “the collection offers example rather than sample” (151). Stewart would instead refer to Sandy’s belongings as an accumulation where the “whole dissolves into parts” (151). Each object is special and holds a story, rather than merely being representative of the whole.

CHAPTER 1: YOU CAN EVEN LOOK IN THE CLOSETS

He can't remember if she opened the door wearing a ball cap, her gray hair tied in a pony tail underneath, or if she had been a more presentable Sandy with her hair twisted on each side and meeting in a bun in the back. He's not sure if he wore shorts and a t-shirt like he always does now, or if he had been a more presentable David in jeans and a button-down plaid shirt. It was a job interview, after all. He is sure that she was wearing house slippers, but only because she always wears house slippers so she can easily push them off and fold her legs under her. He knows that when he rang the doorbell the dogs barked, and when she first opened the door Lucky stood behind her. But she had to restrain Moppy with one hand so the other could hold the door open while she said, "Come in, dear."

He remembers it smelled like animal urine and dust coated everything. He didn't get a tour that first day, but he saw enough to know that the house was cluttered and crowded. He remembers clothes and bags. (And clothes and bags and clothes and bags). The clothes were in piles everywhere. Her clothes, her dead husband John's clothes, clean clothes, dirty clothes. The bags were full of papers. Junk mail and bills, cards and photographs, important and unimportant documents, all piled together waiting to be sorted.

He remembers that she talked generally: the job would consist of light housework, small projects around the house, and yard work. She said that she would need him for about ten hours a week, they would never start before ten in the morning, and she could pay him \$12/hour. Was this something he was interested in? It was.

He remembers hearing this general description and putting it together with what he saw around him. He remembers thinking that there was a disconnect between what she was hiring him to do and what needed to be done. The house needed much more work than she led him to believe. He thought, maybe she wasn't aware of how bad it was, or how much it would take to fix it, or that it was capable of being fixed, or that it even needed fixing.

He remembers she said, "We can start whenever you want." He said, "I'll be here tomorrow at 10:00."

The next day he got the full tour. While they progressed through the nineteen rooms he saw the house was worse than he expected based on their conversation. In addition to the clothes and bags full of papers there was just stuff—out-of-date electronics, obsolete healthcare items, dilapidated office supplies. And the walls and furniture surfaces were full of art and photographs. Sandy and John had been collectors and there was art hung in every available wall space. On a strip of wall only two feet wide in the den displayed four paintings one on top of the other. When wall space ran out, Sally hung pictures from the bookshelves. Later David found paintings under piles of clothes, leaning against the walls, under the beds, and in the closets.

At her tallest Sandy was five feet two. Now she stands at five feet on a good day. Her rounded shoulders sit on a heavy torso. She carries her age well, with her big, clear green eyes looking out from a once glamorous face. Her lips appear to be permanently slanted downward in worry, but are actually often on the verge of a smile. She's usually going on a diet, but the man at the nearest McDonald's drive-through window knows her by name.

According to Sandy most people get a lot of their stuff when they get married, but she and John more often acquired theirs when people died. They were drawn to things with a history

so they kept almost everything they were given. She owns chairs that have been reupholstered numerous times. They enjoyed antiquing and over the years amassed a large collection of books, figurines, art, furniture, dishes, and clothes. In addition to the art they purchased over the years, they inherited many items from their families. They had been meaning to do a thorough housecleaning when John was diagnosed with liver cancer in April 2006. John wanted to help Sandy so she wouldn't have to deal with it on her own. But she refused to waste a moment she had left with him sorting through papers, paintings, and clothes.

He died that September, and over the next six years what had been a manageably full house spiraled into chaos. It didn't help that she had been hit on the head with an 884-pound metal door at the Carrboro post office in 1995, leaving her foggy and confused. It didn't help that it left her with a need to sleep fifteen to twenty hours a day for years. It didn't help that her memory was severely affected or that her ability to function on a daily basis was dramatically impeded. She didn't buy three shower curtains liners, ten slipcovers for her couch, or twenty pairs of scissors because she thought she *might* need them one day. She forgot she had the others and bought them because she needed them now.

That first day after the tour—or maybe it was midtour—David started working. He began by excavating walkways through the stuff. He imagines there must have been some discussion, some strategizing. But how David differed from his predecessor, Josh, who was with Sandy for three years, is that he did not wait for Sandy to ask him to do something. He saw what needed to be done and did it.

He stayed until 6:00 that first night. Leaving, he asked, “Do you want to keep working tomorrow?” For the first few weeks he ended each day with this question, and she always said yes. It never was a ten-hour a week job, as originally proposed. After a while they set regular

hours: Monday 12:00-6:00, Tuesday-Thursday 10:00-6:00, but he often found himself there on the weekends.

Of course organizing the house was a joint venture, but most of the time Sandy went into her sunroom and sat at her desk, or in her recliner with the television on, iPad in her lap. She would work on checking items off her list. Her list was full of things to do for the church and her granddaughter, health bills, grocery lists, work on a beach property she owned. But when she said “they’d” been working all day she didn’t mean David on the house and her on her list. She literally meant the two of them worked together on the house. It was work for her—hard and exhausting. The house was her. It was John, her life with him, and their son, Nate. It was her sadness since John’s death six years before. The house was undergoing a transformation, and so was she. This was work, work they did together, and David intuitively knew it. So he’d always ask, “Do you want to keep working tomorrow?”

He started with the garage. It had the easiest access to the outside and once it was organized it could function as a place to sort and store things. After that he pulled up the oriental rugs, soaked in dog urine, and took them to a cleaner. Once they had been cleaned he stashed them in the basement where they would stay until the incontinent dog, Lucky, was out of the picture.

The house had hardwood floors, except for the bedrooms, which were carpeted. Sandy wanted Lucky to have free rein, but David intended to get rid of the pall of urine. So they struck a deal. They would replace the carpet in the bedrooms, buy gates that David would install, and Lucky would be confined to the den, sunroom, and kitchen where it would be easier to clean up after him.

David sorted everything into four categories: Keep and Put Away; Keep and Store in the Garage or Basement; Give to Charity; Throw Away. At first he'd show her most items and ask which category each belonged in. When he felt he had an idea of what she would keep, he did more of the sorting himself. He learned he was sometimes wrong when she pulled an old frame out of the trash and said, "Oh, that's where that is." Usually she'd check the trash after he'd gone and if she salvaged anything—old ribbon, a Halloween decoration—she'd jokingly tell him the next day. Her joking was not so much giving him a hard time for throwing something away, but rather laughing at herself for her need to keep things that wouldn't sell at a thrift store. The objects she salvaged might not have any clear value to David, or anyone else, but they held her memories and brought her comfort.

All of the bags of papers were moved to the tenantless basement apartment where they remained largely ignored, not as pressing as other matters. There are probably still forty bags keeping each other company down there. There is work yet to be done.

It was two months before David realized that part of his job was conversation. She opened up to him in phases, like we all do, but with Sandy there was also an immediate intimacy. She told him all about her sixty-eight years of life—how she met John, their life together, her head injury, her childhood in eastern Tennessee. He thought that maybe she opened up to him because he was in her employ—she had let him see her house at its worst, and so she could talk to him like she couldn't talk to other people. The stories were new to him, he didn't know any of the people in them, and there was a level of implied confidentiality. But over time he came to the conclusion that she was just more open than most people. It took another seven months for him

to be comfortable with this part of his job. In the beginning he felt like he needed to be working by his definition, which meant moving, cleaning, fixing, organizing—doing.

David is dark-haired, narrow, but not exactly slim, with rounded shoulders and a head that juts forward slightly when he's not thinking about it. The expression on his face is either obviously charmed by what he hears or his lips are slightly pursed in what looks like bewilderment, but is usually concentration. He is a thirty-two-year-old, second-time college student, what you might call a late bloomer. His first time in college at the University of Central Florida in Orlando he majored in health administration because his father founded Baycare, a health care system in Tampa. David mostly focused on partying and graduated with a 2.46 grade point average – a “gentleman’s C” in an era when Bs were the new Cs of grade inflation. He quickly learned that he didn’t have any real interest in health administration and even if he did he would need to get a master’s degree. He spent the next few years holding a scatter of unconnected jobs—first he worked at Bike America, then as a logistics coordinator for a private jet charter, and lastly as an optician and electronic medical records specialist for South Florida Vision.

He never really liked any of his jobs. After years without much focus he came up with a plan. He knew he liked working in healthcare, but he didn’t like the administrative side of it. He recognized that he wanted to be more hands-on, he wanted to help people, so he decided to go back to school to become a physician’s assistant or nurse practitioner. But his plan would take time. To compensate for his college record, he would have to take classes to demonstrate his academic aptitude and he needed to complete the prerequisites to get into a program. He started taking classes in Florida and continued when he moved to Chapel Hill in June of 2012. But never

more than two a semester. He found Sandy because he knew he didn't want a job at a desk. He was comfortable with his plan without any desire to rush forward to the getting-into-a-program finale.

Sandy learned all this from her conversations with David. He might hear more stories about her than she does about him—he has a hard time talking about himself and his stories turn sideways on the journey from his brain to his mouth, and he tells them slowly, haltingly as he mentally puts them right again. Sandy's roll off her tongue with rhythm, detail, and narrative structure, but she knows him. She knows him as well as anyone, he guesses, because she sees him in action.

Soon they were working forty to fifty hours a week. The goal was to get the house presentable for Thanksgiving. For years no one but her closest friends had been allowed to pass the threshold. And Sandy wasn't one to isolate by choice, she needed people, but the condition of her house generated aloneness. Her one-year-old granddaughter, Clementine, had never been allowed to leave her parents' arms when she visited. Thanksgiving day Sandy had a group over for the first time in years and Clementine roamed free. She told her son Nate, "You can even look in the closets."

Sandy and David often ate together. She hated to eat alone when he was around. It made her feel guilty to eat if he wasn't eating. One of first things she made him was canned pears with a dollop of light mayonnaise sprinkled with low fat cheddar cheese. He pushed as much off as he could, but as he put a pear in his mouth he could taste the remaining mayo. Even when he had just eaten, he had a hard time saying no when she made something. He didn't want to deny her

hospitality. For the first six months they frequented McDonald's once a week for lunch. Sandy would eat a fish sandwich with lactose free milk she brought from home while David ordered a Big Mac or chicken sandwich.

David encouraged Sandy to recover according to his program: clean out the clutter, organize, and limit the distractions in her life, such as the dust-collecting knick-knacks to which she was so drawn. But, she held veto power.

He wanted to donate a bubble maker that Sandy had ordered from QVC. She objected on the grounds that it was for Clementine when she got older and could possibly use it in the summer at a party in the yard. But not Sandy's yard because it has snakes in it. David came to understand that she didn't see a box from QVC, she saw a story, a future. It was difficult for Sandy to get rid of things because objects she'd had for a while had a past while unused purchases held the promise of an experience. When Sandy made a case for something she wanted to keep, he usually backed down. He addressed his frustration by discarding something else.

In December Sandy went into the garage and got her Christmas wreath down from the wall of wreaths that David had made for her. He'd hung twenty-five wreaths they found in various parts of the house in one place so she could easily locate them, see them, and pick the appropriate one.

She decided the wreath was incomplete. She knew exactly what it needed—magnolia leaves. She had David get some from the yard and she arranged them. She stood back and surveyed her work. Something was still missing. She retrieved some little plastic apples she had lying around. She held them up to the wreath. "What if we add these?" she asked. David said, "I

think it would be too much.” Sandy didn’t agree with him. The apples were glued on, but it didn’t keep her from asking his advice, or him from teasing her about the result.

By June they were done with the upstairs. The basement storage rooms and apartment still needed a lot of attention. But the upstairs was as finished as it would ever get. They both realized that the house, like Sandy herself, would always be in a state of transition. Getting the upstairs cleaned and organized was not the end of the process. Instead Sandy, through her house, continued to transform. There has been redecorating, reupholstering, rewallpapering, repainting, rearranging.

And she’s still buying things. Mostly art from eBay and auctions; clothes, presents, and jewelry from QVC. A month ago she went to a Leland Little auction with the expressed intent of buying a new sideboard for her dining room. She also had her eye on an oil painting, a harbor scene, but she didn’t tell David. She bought the painting, but when she got it in her hands she realized it wasn’t as good as she had thought. She was disappointed with herself for not inspecting it more closely. She didn’t want David to give her a hard time, so she waited until he wasn’t around to bring it inside. She knew that once she worked on it a bit, and hung it near other, superior paintings, it wouldn’t be as noticeable.

When David spends a lot of time with Sandy she doesn’t order as much from QVC. It’s about keeping her busy. She orders so much, he thinks, out of boredom and maybe a little loneliness. She has told him about how lively and energetic the presenters are on QVC.

Over the summer David had a lot of other work, work that paid better, much of which Sandy helped him find. So he wasn’t with her as often. During this time the number of packages delivered to her door increased. He felt a little bad about this, but she was so supportive of him.

He still stopped by two or three times a week. Plus, he told himself, she would call him if she needed anything.

The job is now more what she advertised it to be. She has a reasonable amount of clutter and mess to deal with, a normal amount of cleaning. He typically spends ten hours a week there, but often it's as much as thirty. Mostly this is because they like each other and also because a list of ongoing health problems (a heart condition, asthma, a lack of balance, poor gait, and poor diet) prevents Sandy from being as independent as she wants to be.

The house recently underwent a number of cosmetic changes: Sandy's bedroom and bathroom suite were repainted in bolder colors, shades of green. Chairs have been reupholstered, furniture rearranged, the TV moved from the sunroom to the den—it now hangs from a bookshelf. She's added to her art collection, the kitchen has a new checkered border, and in a corner behind the kitchen table rests a box of Clementine's toys.

Over the past seventeen months she's established a revised version of herself. Before John passed away the house was an expression of their life together. Now that it's just her she's had to incorporate John's memory into her identity. Her story has split into pieces—there's her life before September 2006, when she had John, and there's her life since he's been gone. This is the first time she's ever lived alone. As she says, "I went from my father's house to my husband's house." As Sandy's house transformed, so did her identity. She's finding out what she likes and who she is.

Sandy and David's second Thanksgiving together: She used to have at least thirty people over and do most of the cooking herself. But this year she had half that number, and said she

couldn't have managed it without David. Most people treated him like family—Sandy even said he massacred the turkey just like her father used to, as opposed to John's father who carved it artistically. And Nate asked David where he could find a hammer, with all the relief and none of the jealousy one might expect from David knowing the house better than he does. But occasionally someone talked to him as though he were mere hired help. Molly, Sandy's sister, when either one of them are in the hospital, turned to him in post-dessert conversation and said, rather forcefully, "David, I need another coke," and then added, under her breath "please."

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CHAPTER 2: TWO PHOTOGRAPHS

I wanted to show you two photographs. Photographs taken in a state park. Photographs that belong together. One shows a four-year-old Sandy being held up to a water fountain by a black woman. The other photograph shows the black woman drinking out of the same water fountain. The year was 1948. Sandy would see those pictures and think, *what was so fascinating to Daddy about that water fountain?* It was years before she realized that if they had been anywhere other than the Smoky Mountains they wouldn't have been able to do that.

I wanted to show you these photographs and use them as a way to demonstrate how complicated Sandy's childhood was. I wanted to use them as an entry point. I planned to grab your attention with race relations and once I had it I was going to take my time introducing the characters and key events that made Sandy's childhood so specifically hers. I can't show you these photographs because they are currently missing in action.

During a snow and ice storm this winter I spent a couple of days at Sandy's house. We were expected to lose power and Sandy, who has a fireplace, invited me to share her space and warmth. I used this opportunity to recruit Sandy and David into the project of finding these two photographs. We looked through boxes and boxes and boxes. We found toys, and decorations, and an old Nintendo, and Sandy's coursework from college, and Christmas decorations, and tea cups, and John's office papers and, and, *and*. We finally came upon a box of old photographs, at which point we all became excited. But upon further inspection it became clear that while this

box had some great things in it, a small wedding album for example, it did not hold the photographs from that childhood vacation.

At this point Sandy decided, after many months of blissfully ignoring it, that the basement needed to be tackled. The boxes needed sorting. And it needed to happen immediately. She stayed down there until the wee hours of the morning. But she didn't find those photographs.

Let's go back. Way back. As close to the beginning as we can and then moved forward: Sandy was born in 1944 to Clarence and Avalee Moss in Elizabethton, Tennessee. Elizabethton was a small Appalachian town located about ten miles from Johnson City. Sandy had a brother, named Harmon who was from Clarence's first marriage, and a sister, Berenda. Because Harmon was sixteen years older and Berenda was five years younger Sandy felt, in many ways, like an only child. She spent much of her time alone. They lived in a part of town where there weren't little kids around to play with.

Before the war Clarence worked as a plant manager at a textile company. His occupation was considered critical to the war effort, but he wanted to do his part and joined the Navy when he was thirty-four. When he demobilized he went to work for a company in Pennsylvania run by people he met in the service. The company, Synthane Corporation, made the heavy machinery that was used in textile mills. They needed a Southerner to be their man in the South—to furnish plants with machinery and check on them periodically to make sure they were running smoothly.

Mr. Titus, head of Synthane Corporation, liked Clarence so much that he all but adopted him. Clarence was an inventor and engineer and Mr. Titus would build the machine parts he invented. Mr. Titus helped Clarence open his own factory—making the small parts for his big machines and serving as a trusted supplier in the South.

Clarence's job required that he travel all over the South to visit different factories so he needed someone to run his own in Elizabethton. He hired a young African American man named Charles. They met in the service. Clarence was socially liberal in the classic sense. Sandy recalls that Charles began managing the factory in 1946 and everyone knew to respect him or they'd answer to Clarence.

Avalee was sickly so Clarence hired Charles' wife, Mariah, the woman in the photograph, to take care of two-and-a-half-year-old Sandy and later Berenda. Sandy called them Tweet and Jara. Charles and Mariah were too hard for her to pronounce. She always thought they were both well-educated, lovely people. Sandy describes them as handsome, stately, well spoken. Sandy didn't see color and her parents did nothing to point it out to her. They always ate the same food, at the same table, at the same time. Tweet and Jara lived in the guest cottage, but they were part of the family unit. When Sandy, Berenda, and their parents went on vacation, Tweet and Jara went too.

When Sandy was four, her father started taking her on his summer business trips. They traveled all around the South to check on different factories. In the cities they stayed in old hotels and in the rural areas they stayed in tourist homes. Sandy stayed with the owner while her father went to work. She wandered around the house. She read. She traveled the world in books. She helped the women, learning to do whatever it was they were doing. They stayed in a place for three or four days. Usually Sandy was invited to the factory for a day to see the work and to eat with the workers. She remembers the fabric on the machines. Year after year Sandy and her father stayed in the same lodgings. It started to feel like visiting relatives. They drove from one end of the South to the other. With the windows open and an ice pack on their necks they tried to stay cool. Clarence would take out his hanky and pat himself off. He'd roll up his sleeves and

loosen his tie. They talked the whole time. It seemed they solved all the world's problems driving in that big, black Buick.

As a child, Sandy was often alone but she remembers that she didn't feel lonely. Berenda felt so much younger and they were so different. Berenda had no interest in going on the trips with their father. Berenda looked like their mother—blond hair, blue eyes—and she acted like her. She was happy to stay at home, just like their mother. Avalee's family was one of the first to settle eastern Tennessee in the 1700s. She had so many relatives in the area, she didn't need anyone else. She was a homebody, always in her own world. Sandy never felt like a part of that side of the family. She looked and felt different. Her only playmates were her cousins, John and Anne, who would sometimes come over. Clarence kept a lot of stuff to entertain children: croquet, bicycles, a swimming pool. They also played along the Little Doe River next to their house. There were a few pools where they could wade in up to their waists, but mostly it was rocky and not very deep. There was a willow tree where they picnicked in its shade. Sometimes the mothers accompanied them, but usually they didn't. Jara was always there.

Sandy never felt much like a child. She considered herself a little adult. She got to know a girl from church, probably around eleven years old, but Sandy thought her interests were just stupid. If there wasn't someone around, and most of the time there wasn't, she read. It wasn't unusual to read a Nancy Drew a day. She also loved chemistry, drawing and painting. She had a wild imagination and often wrote stories. By keeping herself busy, she didn't let herself get lonely.

Clarence valued education. As Sandy approached seventh grade he gave Avalee two options: they could either move to a good school district or send her to a private school. They spent a great deal of time pouring over brochures. And although Avalee didn't want to leave her

community, in the end she couldn't ship Sandy off so they moved to Knoxville. It was in Knoxville that Sandy first confronted prejudice. A little boy befriended her, but some girls told her not to talk to him because he wasn't in her social class. Sandy, confused and upset, went home and talked to her father about it. Although her father spent much of his time traveling, she always felt close to him. He explained to her that in their family they take people as they come. But it was still a struggle for Sandy to come to grips with the way people treated each other in the world.

Her family had been liberal for a long time. Eastern Tennessee had not been a slave holding area. But Sandy's great-great grandfather visited Charleston and wandered into a slave auction. He'd never seen such a thing. There was a little girl named Jo, seven or eight years old, and her family had just been sold. He bought her and brought her back to Tennessee with him. Sandy doesn't know exactly what Jo's legal status was, but she imagines her great-great grandfather manumitted her. She always had the impression that Jo was treated like a member of the family. Sandy met her when she was a little girl and called her Aunt Jo. She married into the black community. She was Mariah's great grandmother.

Mariah was Avalee's closest friend. She was closer to Mariah than she was to her own sisters. She was fonder of Berenda than Sandy. It was her mother and Jara and Berenda in one group, Sandy insists, and her father and Tweet and her in another. Sandy never felt like her mother understood her. She remembers Avalee introducing them to people, she would say, "Berenda is the one with the personality. I don't know what to make of Sandy." She didn't understand the constant reading. Tweet planted lilacs in a circle and made Sandy a nest of pine straw in the middle. She often read and hid out in her lilac circle. She thinks how bizarre and

incomprehensible that must have been to her mother. She never felt her mother liked her very much.

Sandy got most of her attention from her father and Tweet. Tweet would take her fishing. He would come home and say, "I bet you those fish are biting." Sometimes they'd even come home with dinner. Jara was concerned about raising them well. She said she knew if they didn't turn out well, she'd be blamed by Avalee's family. She used to test Sandy on Emily Post. She never had children of her own. She often said, "I have two and I don't want anymore." In the end it was Sandy who took care of her mother in the last years of her life. It was Sandy who raised Berenda's son, Preston, because Berenda was not in a place in her life to be the mother she wanted to be. It was Sandy who most people consider to be vivacious and full of life, but still responsible. The distance between Sandy and Berenda increased over time. They haven't spoken in twenty years.

Every year Tweet took them Christmas shopping in Johnson City so they could buy gifts for their parents. He told them he waited outside because he didn't want to know what they were getting. One afternoon they begged him to take them to get a burger after shopping. He said he didn't think it was a good idea. In the end he caved because he wanted to make them happy. They parked way in the back. Tweet ordered for the kids, but he didn't order anything for himself. After a little while the owner came out. Tweet got out of the car. They shook hands and talked for a while. When he got back in, they went home without getting their burgers. When they got home, Tweet said to Clarence, "We've got to talk." They went outside. After they talked Clarence left to talk to the owner. The owner was never welcome in their house again. When she thinks about it now she can see that there many such incidents. Sometimes they were dangerous. But she just didn't see it then. In her family everyone treated everyone the same. Mostly she's

just as confused about it now as she was in seventh grade. And like her father, she continues to take people as they come.

CHAPTER 3: THE OLD WIDOW

She remembers that she was dressed, as she dressed everyday, in heels and stockings and some trendy outfit. She worked, after all, in the fashion industry. She made fifteen dollars an hour in the early 1960s. She was proud of this. She was proud of her job as fashion coordinator and her rank, just a notch higher than assistant superintendent of personnel, the highest women were technically allowed to go in the Sears Corporation. And she loved her job. She loved the art. The design. She loved the clothes. The people. The money.

She was overdressed for a departmental barbeque, as she was overdressed for every faculty party—all the men and women in sneakers. But she went anyway to be with him. She went anyway bringing her ketchup and mustard and mayonnaise. They always asked her to bring the condiments, the plates, or the prepackaged. They never trusted her with anything as important as a casserole. She figured they assumed she couldn't cook and if she could that she wouldn't have had the time.

She set down her contribution on a picnic table. She smiled and greeted those near her as she scanned the crowd and when her eye fell upon him she stopped. John stood with two young men and a young woman, cold beer in their hands and serious expressions on their faces. Sandy and John had married in November of last year. It was now May.

It wasn't simply that she felt out of place at academic functions. She *was* out of place. It wasn't just how she looked, how she dressed, although that was a part of it. It was her job. It was fashion. It was money. It had become unfashionable to make money. To be a part of the

corporate world. To be in sales. To be a cog in the capitalist machine. The young people surrounding her were angry about the war. They were angry with capitalist America.

John caught her looking at him and smiled, inviting her over to join him. She knew she was liked. It's not as though they despised her as they despised Lillian, a young professor's wife. Lillian, who would corner you and stand much too close. Lillian, who had no respect for space. Lillian, who had no respect for boundaries. At least no one felt they needed to be saved from her. They just thought her frivolous.

She thought back to the end-of-semester party where she had gotten into it with Bob, a second year doctoral student in the psychology department, same as John. He had asked her, "Now what is it that you do for a living?" She had replied, "I'm in the fashion industry." He had snorted, "What exactly does that contribute to the well being of the world?" She had countered by reminding him that fashion was third only behind steel and automobiles in terms of pouring money into the economy. "And," she had added, "they pay me very well." He had replied, "If someone paid you twenty-five dollars an hour to stand and scratch an elephant's ear, would you do it?" She said, "Darn right I would! And if you're half as smart as you've gone around here tonight pretending you are, you would too." Her cheeks flushed as she remembered how she had stormed out, slammed the door, and went to sit in the car and cry. Then she smiled slightly as she could again see John walking out to the car to join her. That money really came in handy. John got a stipend of \$175 a month and \$60 of that went to their rent. With a car payment and gas they were pretty much out of money. Her fifteen dollars an hour kept them afloat.

She walked across the grass and joined John. The young woman was introduced to her as Susan. She knew the young men, Roger and James. Roger explained that Susan was about to start a master's program in special education. They talked about how important it was. How

selfless. How amazing. What a big difference she would make in the world.

As everyone was leaving the hostess, Pete, called out, “Michele, don’t forget your casserole dish!” And, “Betty, don’t forget your platter!” And finally, “Sandy, don’t forget your ketchup!” Everyone laughed. And laughed. And she laughed too. But on the way home she started to cry.

And she thought about that night she met John in January of 1965. Everyone knew she’d sworn off college boys. That she’d sworn off the party circuit. The third time a boy puked in the car on the way home she decided it just wasn’t worth it. Plus her fulltime job in addition to the college classes made her feel older and more like an adult than her contemporaries. But Roger called and told her about the good looking young man who had just moved from the northeast, from Massachusetts to pursue a doctorate in psychology at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Roger said, “I know you’ve sworn off and I wouldn’t ask you to do this, but he’s not like those other boys and I think he’s lonely. Would you go out with him, just so he has someone besides me to talk to? As a personal favor to me?”

And she did. Despite her best judgment she did. They had gone to a restaurant and they hadn’t ordered until 10:30 because they had so much to say to one another. She remembered going home that night to her house, her parents’ house, the house she lived in as a college sophomore and announced to her mom and her sister, that if she was ever going to marry anybody that she’d just found him.

And that’s exactly what happened. In November of that year, 1965, she married him. She hadn’t planned on marriage. She had planned on taking over as the southeastern fashion coordinator in Memphis before too long. She had planned on moving up in the fashion world. But she met John and they had so much to say to one another she decided they needed a lifetime

to do it.

One night after a fashion show she went home to get John so they could go out with the bigwigs from New York and Atlanta. John wouldn't go. He had too much to do for the next day. They got into an argument. After they were tired of arguing they sat down and were very honest with each other. He said, "I've never imagined myself to be the type of person to interfere with a woman's career, but we do have a conflict." John's anticipated career as a counselor in the academic world required that he be grounded and put down roots. Her career would have her moving every few years. It didn't look like they were going to be compatible.

She started to think that John's job was more stable, that it appeared more respectable, and that he could do more good in the world. She started to think about what she might like to do. Which was strange since she'd been working in fashion since high school and she hadn't thought about it much and because there weren't a lot of options for women.

She thought about the woman at the barbeque—Susan. She thought about the program she was about to start and how everyone had been so impressed. She looked up special education and realized it was a subject dear to her own heart. She remembered how she had gone to school with the same twenty-one children year after year before her parents had moved them to Knoxville. Some of those children, she realized, would have been eligible for special education if there had been such a thing.

She applied to the University of Tennessee and not only got in, but also got a scholarship. She graduated with her M.A. the same year John got his Ph.D. Teaching gave her a place she felt she belonged. Teaching gave her something she felt good about doing.

Now, sitting in her 7,000-square-foot home in Chapel Hill with John dead six years, she tries to sort out her feelings. She recalls the one time she regretted leaving the fashion world. A

woman, Flora, had replaced her at Sears. A woman she thought *was* frivolous. And there came a time when the political climate was such that companies were promoting a woman, a token woman, high into their ranks. Flora ended up as the manager of the Knoxville store. She ended up the first female manager of a Sears store making \$60,000 a year. When she'd opened up the morning paper and saw the beautiful photographs of Flora she was overcome with jealousy. She was teaching for \$15,000 a year, maybe less. She felt nauseous. She was furious with herself and John and the academic world and her father and the ketchup bottle. She wonders for a moment, but mostly she knows that she got over it. Mostly she knows she got her balance back. She is convinced that she was so upset all those years ago because it was that woman, that frivolous woman. If it had been someone she didn't know she could have been okay with it. Maybe even pleased.

Now, sitting on the settee in her sitting room with her two dogs, Moppy and Lucky, on the floor by her feet her mind turns to Claire. Claire her daughter-in-law. Claire, who a year ago had a child of her own, Clementine. Claire, who she wants to have everything. In college Claire studied journalism. When she graduated she secured a job at the Charlotte Observer and spent the next seven years working herself up to editor. But after Claire's mother died of cancer, after John died of cancer, Claire decided she wanted to be a doctor. Needless to say, Claire had received the support of Sandy, and Nate.

But Clementine changed things. Sandy reflects on how she'd promised herself to help Claire anyway possible to ensure that her daughter-in-law doesn't have to make the hard choices that she had to make. But she realizes now that it's not just from a career standpoint that these choices have to be made, it's in her heart. She sometimes thinks it would be nice if it had been Claire's choice to primarily be a mother. But it wasn't. She doesn't want Claire to ever look back

and think, I didn't fulfill my desires and capabilities because I am a woman.

Sandy looks across the room at the painting of *The Old Widow* hanging above her mantel. An antique oil painting, *The Old Widow* resides in an ornate gold frame. The frame shows the upper torso and head of an old woman. She has her hands folded over a book, presumably the Bible, and she is looking off to the side. She is dressed entirely in black. Her hat has a veil that comes down just below the eyes. There is white on her collar that appears to be some sort of fur, in poor condition. Her skin is wrinkled. The background is dark. *The Old Widow* reminds her of her mother's family. From the hands and face she can tell *The Old Widow* worked hard all her life. Yet, she seems to radiate serenity and satisfaction with having lived. She sits and looks at *The Old Widow*. She sits and looks inside herself and asks, "am I pleased that I put my family, that I put my husband and my son first?" She examines the last thirty years and feels that she'd undershot her economic and academic potential, and her ability to make a difference. Then she pauses, looking at *The Old Widow* who always seems to have a calming effect on her. She remembers it's easy to look back and distort life. Her eyes shift to look at a photograph of Nate and Clementine. And again to look at a photograph of her and John with the word "love" suspended in the background. She sits with these images for what seems like a very long time. She finds that she believes she did the best she could for her family within the universe of choices she was given. She realizes she's glad she's lived her life the way she has.

She starts to wish that she'd had a second life. A parallel life. Or at least that there were more hours in the day. And then she realizes that John is gone and Nate has a family of his own. She realizes that even though she is old, and it's not exactly as she would choose it, she gets a second life.

She looks back at *The Old Widow*. She first met her in an antique shop in Raleigh and fell

in love with her right away. But they couldn't afford her. They would go back once every month or six weeks and she'd find one of the comfortable chairs near *The Old Widow* and sit with her while John shopped. The owners started teasing her. They'd ask, "Have you come to visit your friend today?" She'd admit, yes, that is what she was there for. One morning she was, as John would say, "laying-a-bed," and John convinced her to get up, promising that it would be worth her while. He said, "We're going to go pay a visit to a friend of yours."

He took her to Raleigh, to the antique shop she knew so well. On the way up the steps he turned to her. He said, "I've saved a certain amount of money." It was only a quarter of what they were asking, but he said it was worth a try. The painting had been there for years and it was the end of the year and maybe they didn't want to pay tax on her again. He said, "Maybe they are tired of looking at her. Maybe they don't think as much of her as we do."

But it turned out they didn't own *The Old Widow*. She was there on consignment. So the lady gave the owner a call. They sat together, nervous. She remembers it was like waiting for a baby to be born. The woman hung up the phone and said, "Congratulations, you've increased the size of your family." It was raining, but John put his raincoat over *The Old Widow* and she rode home in the backseat of the car.

The next week she took *The Old Widow* around town and introduced her to everybody she could think of to introduce her to. She even took her to a doctor's appointment. She was her constant companion. The fireplace they had wasn't fit for *The Old Widow* so they had a carpenter come in to redo it according to her design.

Tonight, she's been sitting with *The Old Widow* for a while, and as sometimes happens, the old woman in the painting has begun to smile ever so slightly. Sandy has always thought that *The Old Widow* has knowledge from having lived so long that the rest of us can't share yet. She

looks into the widow's eyes and says, "I'm catching up."

She wants Claire to have everything. She wants Clementine to have everything. She wishes that she and *The Old Widow* could have had everything. But she realizes now that she had to choose. She may not have chosen correctly, but she was right to choose.

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CHAPTER 4: 884 POUNDS

November 8, 1995: The day that changed her life started like any other day. She woke up and went to work. Like always, she had a lot on her mind. She and John had cared for her mother Alalee for three years before she died in 1991. During that time Sandy took over managing the apartments Alalee owned in Johnson City. The apartments fell into a state of disrepair because Sandy had trouble finding time to travel to Johnson City with work, the children, and her mother.

It took four years to get the money together to fix up the apartments. And on that day, a Wednesday, Sandy had the envelopes on her desk with the last checks in them needed to pay off the expenses of rehabbing the apartments. At 4:30 she sat at her desk looking outside at the already darkening world and wondered if she should stay and work until 5:00 before going home or if she should rush out so she could get to the post office and get this off her mind once and for all. She was feeling pretty pleased with herself for being that close to the end and a little anxious about it. So she decided to go to the post office, mail the checks, and since John was out of town she would go home, put her feet up, and have a quiet celebration on her own.

She was the last person in line at the Carrboro post office. When her turn came she stood at the counter and asked for a book of stamps. She stood there, glasses on her nose, rummaging through her purse looking for her checkbook when someone yelled, "Ma'am!" She jerked her head up, heard a terrifically loud noise and felt a blow that started in her head, traveled down her spine and into her feet. She thought, "I've been shot!" After that it all got a bit fuzzy.

When she came to she was on the floor on the other side of the room. There were people standing all around her just staring. One woman, who said she was the manager, asked if Sandy was all right. She said they had called an ambulance. Sitting there with all those people looking at her, Sandy just felt embarrassed. She couldn't understand what had happened. She kept thinking, "Will somebody please get me out of here?" She wanted them to go away and stop staring at her. Finally she asked, "What happened?" And they started to explain. She looked up and saw that the three windows where the post office workers stood were covered by a big metal wall. They were telling her about a door, a metal door that fell, but she didn't see a door, just a metal wall. A big metal wall where the desks had been.

She had no interest in going to the hospital. She kept saying, "I'm fine, I'm fine, I'm fine." And she got herself out of there. She sort of understood that she had been hit by a large metal door. Intellectually she understood, but emotionally she was not willing to accept it. She drove on the backroads with an excruciating headache and got home to an empty house.

Traumatic brain injuries had recently become something that special education programs in Chapel Hill schools were willing to take on. So Sandy was well versed on the subject. All that she had learned in twenty years as a special ed. teacher and in the previous year of workshops and trainings swarmed her head. All she could think was, "Of all things to have, I will not have that." It was as though if she didn't go to the hospital and if she didn't tell anyone about it then she could will away the fact that she had been hit squarely on the head with an 884-pound door.

She knew she should go to the hospital. That she should not go to sleep. That at the very least she should be in a neck brace, especially since she felt her spine contract. But she didn't do any of those things. Instead she wrote John a letter. If he got home and she was dead, she wanted him to know what happened to her. And then she fell asleep. Next thing she remembers is John

getting home the following day. She hid the letter. John's brother, Brian, was coming in for the weekend and Sandy didn't want to ruin their fun. She knew if she told John that he would make her go to the hospital and then they would spend the entire weekend standing over her.

That day she was scheduled to pick up two chairs she sent to Raleigh for reupholstering. So, instead of going to the hospital she went to pick them up. At one point she realized she was driving on the median and had to get herself back on the road. She must have picked up the chairs because they ended up in her van, but the next thing she remembers is being at a rug place across town. She went over the lawn and curb instead of using the driveway that led to the parking lot. It was while bumping over the grass that she realized she was in trouble and needed to get home. It was getting dark and as she approached Chapel Hill it started to rain. She couldn't gauge the distance between her and the cars in front of her. When she got home she told John and Brian that she had a little headache and that she was going to lie down. The next day she told them her headache had turned into a bug of some sort and she stayed in bed all weekend. She knew she was in trouble, but was determined to hide it.

On Monday morning she got up and went to work. Her office mate came in, gave her one look and said, "What in heaven's name happened to you? Your eyes don't look right." After trying to evade her questions for a while, Sandy finally conceded that she had a little accident at the post office. John came immediately and took her Duke Hospital. He called the post office and found out from the manager, who had made a full report, what had happened. Sitting in the neurologist's office listening to John explain the events to the doctor, Sandy began to really understand what had happened to her for the first time.

That was the beginning. And the end. She was never the same person again.

That was the beginning.

There never was any blood, no real physical evidence of the damage. The knot on the top of her head never went away. But even that was covered by her hair. It was all on the inside.

She started going to three doctors on a regular basis: a neurologist, a psychologist, and a psychiatrist. She was frustrated and angry. She couldn't live the way she was used to, she couldn't talk the way she was used to, she wasn't the same Sandy she was used to.

Her memory suffered. She could barely read. Physically she could read just fine, but she couldn't retain any of what she was reading. She could read the same page ten times and it would be new to her. This improved over time with practice. She would make lists of characters so she wouldn't have to go back and reread to figure out who someone was. She had a hard time retrieving words she wanted to use for a specific situation. She adapted: she'd talk all around the word, define it, give an example of how it was used so that most people she talked to didn't realize she couldn't find what she was looking for. But John wouldn't let her get away with it. He pushed her to find the word she wanted. Sometimes she'd get it pretty quickly and other times it would take hours. Her hand-eye coordination was also altered. Her body wouldn't do, couldn't do what her mind ordered. Punching a number into a telephone became an extremely difficult task.

The doctor had her do tests and exercises. They would give her a set of phrases or pictures and ask her to write a narrative that linked them. Before the accident she could have written pages—she used to write children's books for Nate and loved the creativity and sense of it. But doing these exercises was excruciating, she could only write a sentence or two. They would show her an image, say of three dots and then another set of images and she had to find which one matched the original image. This was difficult because she couldn't retain the first

image. She kept having to look back and forth too much. She could do it only if they allowed her an extended period of time. Everything became slow and drawn out. They had her keep a journal that she had to write in everyday to help her with memory and so that they could observe her daily progress.

They tried all sorts of medications in all variety of combinations—Ritalin, Adderall, anti-depressants, seizure medications, tranquilizers, sleeping pills, medications used to treat people with Alzheimer's. It took about five years of trial and error to get to a place that wasn't unbearable.

For years she slept nearly twenty hours a day. The idea of an uninterrupted eight hours of sleep a night became an unrealistic luxury. She'd climb into bed exhausted and then not be able to fall asleep. She'd be awake during the day doing something and sleep would overtake her, her head falling to the side. She slept in bursts of two to three hours. She started to have a whole different relationship with her dreamlife. It was as if someone had opened a door to an alien world. A world related to her real life, but also entirely different. She didn't dream about people she knew, but she would often dream about the same people. She often saw one terrifying man in particular—he was always wearing a yellow leather coat. Sometimes people spoke in foreign languages. She never had learned a foreign language, but she always understood them in her dreams. Sometimes she'd wake up screaming. Her dreams were so real and involved she thought maybe she was going crazy. But her doctor assured her she wasn't because she was still fully aware of reality during her waking hours.

The accident made it very difficult for Sandy to keep up with the house. And that had always been her deal with John—she ran their lives and he focused on his career. She took care of the house, the finances, and most of the cooking. She never considered herself an first-rate

housekeeper and because they were collectors their house was always full. But she was competent and didn't have the issues with clutter that came after the accident. Sometimes she felt like a machine she could be so efficient. But after the accident, it took her forever to straighten up because she had difficulty even sorting similar objects into piles. So the idea of putting things away in their proper places was incredibly difficult. She once wrote three checks to companies where she had accounts, but she mailed the checks in an envelope addressed to a fourth party. One day she went to the mailbox and found the envelope had been returned. It was unsealed and there was no stamp. When she examined the checks none of them corresponded to actual charges she owed. Cooking became a burden. She started numerous kitchen fires, not because she forgot she had something on the stove, but because she didn't remember she'd ever put a pot on the burner.

Her inability to drive made taking care of the family difficult and the isolation was sometimes unbearable. So eight months in she decided to teach herself how to cope behind the wheel. When she first tried she had no success—she would get to the end of Homestead Road and instead of turning right, which would take her into town like she wanted, she would turn left. So she came up with a sticky note system. Each note would have an arrow corresponding to the direction she was supposed to go at an intersection. She lined the inside of her car with the notes and each time she followed one of their directions she'd take the sticky note down so she wouldn't get confused. With this system she started to find her way around town again.

She decided to go back in the classroom. She did okay until the kids came and she suddenly felt like there were all these people, and all this noise, and all this movement. She fled. She literally grabbed her keys, and ran to the parking lot. After the accident she was extremely

sensitive—a light through the window could be blinding, the sound of a pen crawling across a page deafening, a roomful of people overwhelming. Life was too much.

I asked her to help me find the notebooks from after the accident. She said they were in the basement somewhere like so much else. During our hunt for the photographs the picture of Sandy, Jara, and the water fountain emerged one notebook compiled following her accident. The first one. The entries start a month or so after the accident occurred. The notebook is actually not a notebook. It's a binder. A black, one-inch binder. The pages inside are not the originals. They are photocopies. The pages are lined, the entries are dated, half of the pages are numbered. Some of the entries are long, others short. It documents her activities, her struggles, how she feels and how she perceives she is perceived by others.

She's afraid to let me read the whole thing because she's worried she was too angry and sad and frustrated. She was fragile and her present self doesn't trust her past self to have it together. She's also afraid that if she reads it, she'll find that she hasn't changed as much as she thinks she has. That she really hasn't progressed all that much. That in a lot of ways, she's exactly where she was in the year after the accident. But, she knows she's changed. She can drive without issues, she can function and run her life mostly on her own, reading is a lot easier and more of a joy than it used to be, and she's learned organizing and mnemonic tricks to pay her bills—all of her medical expenses are through UNC healthcare so she just calls every couple of months to settle the bill rather than worrying about each paper bill that arrives.

Sandy still hears ringing in her ears, she still has a knot on the top of her head, she is still forgetful, and she still sleeps more than most—she usually goes to sleep past midnight, wakes up early, and then takes a nap around ten until two or so—she still has trouble sorting—especially

papers and mail—she still has trouble making her hands do what her mind tells them to. She's not angry anymore or frustrated because she can't remember who she was before the accident. She can describe that woman, the most capable woman she ever met, but she cannot remember what it felt like to be her.

CHAPTER FIVE: FALLING APART AND BEING PUT BACK TOGETHER (AGAIN)

In her bedroom closet hangs some of John's clothes. David helped her finally give most of them away, but she needed to keep some of them. There is the bright plaid shirt he wore to Nate's rehearsal dinner. There is the vest he wore around the house—he liked to have something warm on his chest, but he didn't want anything constricting his arms. There is his bomber jacket, his pajamas, old shirts that he wore to garden or lay around and read, an ratty old coat he wore to walk the dogs every night. She keeps them in her closet so that when she goes in to pick out what to wear she can see them and touch them and feel John. She occasionally wears his pajamas just to feel close to him. Sometimes when she sees those clothes hanging there she thinks she should get rid of them. But then she thinks of all the things we are forced to part with in this life, and she thinks, "why not hold onto things when you can?"

In April of 2006 after forty-one years of marriage, John was diagnosed with liver cancer, and by September he was gone. Planning the funeral, Sandy thought about the people who would come and decided that there would be fifty-two people there. They could have it in the smaller chapel at her church, Chapel of the Cross, which she liked better. It turned out they had to have it in the big chapel and it was full. She estimates that between four and five hundred people came to pay their respects. It was because of this discrepancy, between how many people she expected to show up and how many people actually showed up, that she started to suspect that she had no

real idea who she was married to. Nate stood next to her that day and said, “All this time I thought he belonged to just you and me.”

She knew that John was kind, loving and helpful. She knew he was liked and respected. But she had no real idea what a difference he made in so many people’s lives. He made everyone feel like they were special. He made them feel, for whatever period of time he was with them, that he was concerned only about them and nobody else. He was never in a hurry. If someone needed him, he stopped to help. It didn’t have to be an emergency. She felt as though she met a man that day that she hadn’t known existed. Sometimes she feels guilty for not seeing him quite as he was. For not realizing how much he did for people. But most of the time she’s grateful that she had the good sense to marry a man who made people feel good. Who helped people and made them feel special.

Sandy and John got married the night before Thanksgiving in 1965. After the wedding they drove to Gatlinburg for their honeymoon. After John fell asleep, Sandy looked at him and thought, “What in the world have I done?” She didn’t know how to be a wife. Before she met John she had not particularly wanted to marry. She didn’t know how to cook or even operate a washing machine. Her mother had professional help so when Sandy came home from school it was all taken care of. She thought, “I can’t even take care of myself. Look at this big hulk of a man. I’m going to have to feed it something. It’s going to have to eat.”

So she got dressed and packed her bag. Then sat there and stared him awake.

He said, “Do you want to tell me about it?”

She said, “No, I just want to go home. I can’t care for you.”

He said, “Do you love me?”

She said, “Yes. But love has nothing to do with it.”

He said, “Okay. But the weather is very bad and dangerous and I’m very tired. Can we wait and talk about it over breakfast and if you still want to go home I’ll take you?”

In the morning he gave her a beautiful wool Pendleton suit. She put it on and they went to breakfast.

She said, “The best I can offer you is one day at a time.”

He said, “I’ll take it.”

And then he pulled out a second gift—Betty Crocker’s *Cooking for Two*.

He said, “We’ll learn together. I’ll teach you what I know and we’ll figure the rest out.”

The first meal she made for him was Spanish pork chops. She followed Betty’s directions of one cup of rice, but it didn’t look like enough to feed two chickens. So she kept adding until the box was gone. They cleaned rice out of the oven for a year. Another time while baking spice cake her fingers got stuck in the mixer. Once it was unplugged the mixer’s grip on her fingers relaxed a bit and freed her fingers without additional pain. She swore off spice cake and hasn’t eaten it since.

Household duties were not her specialty. After John died Sandy’s issues with cooking, cleaning and clutter were exacerbated. Her house got worse and more crowded with each passing year. Until the fall of 2012 when David showed up at her door and helped set it right again. He was the first one to respond to her ad in *The Daily Tar Heel*, and she got a feeling, like she always does, that David was going to work out.

After John's funeral she didn't know what to do with herself. Suddenly, for the first time in her life, she lived alone. Her house was full of John and their life together and Nate and Preston and Avalee and Sandy's head injury and John's illness and their collecting and inheriting and John's files and books from his campus office and Sandy's clutter. It was full of their joy and sorrow. She didn't know what to do about any of it, how to attack it, so she just moved around it. Over the next six years she added to it. Until it was unbearable and she did and did not realize how bad it was.

For years John and Sandy had hired a student to help around the house and yard. They took these students in and called them their children. It started when Preston came to live with them and Sandy realized that having two was very different from having one. She knew they needed help. She made a flier that advertised: Mother's helper needed, for household work, pick up and drop off, and occasional babysitting. She made exactly one copy and posted it in the financial aid office.

A young woman, Mimi, showed up on her doorstep with the flier in hand. She said, "I'm here about the job." Sandy thought, "Yes, and since you've taken the flier you've assured that no one else has a chance." Mimi soon moved into the apartment downstairs. The story of how the other "children" came to Sandy is remarkably similar. The right person always found her within twenty-four hours of advertising.

David was no exception. He was the first one to reply to her ad. She knew immediately that her search was over. He was the right one. The story of how she found David is a version of how she found the others, but David was different. He couldn't just do what Sandy wanted him to do, the bare minimum, like Josh had before him. He *needed* to help Sandy. And Sandy was ready to be helped. After six years of mourning—physically, through her house—she finally felt

ready to do something about it. He's good about pushing her to do things she doesn't want to do while at the same time making her feel supported and cared for.

Sandy's started another life. She feels she's gotten four distinct lives: her childhood, her life with John before the head injury, after the head injury, and after John died—a life that only really started a year and a half ago when David and Sandy found each other. She's begun to embrace aspects of living alone. When redecorating she no longer has to think about what someone else likes, she just has to adhere to her own tastes. John is still there in the house, in their things, and he informs her every decision, but she doesn't have to try to please both of them. She can be a little selfish now. And she has redecorated, repainted, rewallpapered. Her house, like herself, is in a constant state of revision. It holds all her previous selves, her current self, and the possibility of a future self.

Her granddaughter, Clementine, is a large part of her life. She is a force of change. Now that Clementine is allowed to be at Sandy's, because it's clean, she spends a lot of time there. Her toys populate a corner of the kitchen and, now that Nate and Clair are expecting a second child, Sandy has decided to convert the front bedroom into a nursery. What felt like a very grownup house is influenced more and more by her grandchildren. The idea of Clementine and the baby to come take up much of her thoughts, her time and her life. She also has her interests—art, reading, church activities—but she realizes more and more that it's the people who keep us going, who change us, who make life worth it.

As a family they used to play a game where they'd ask each other "What would you take

if the house was on fire?” Nate and Clair challenged Sandy to a version of this when she was thinking about the possibility of downsizing and they told her they didn’t think it would be possible for her to get out of that house. That she wouldn’t know what she would want to take. Sandy thought, “Challenge accepted.”

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APPENDIX 1: PHOTOGRAPHS



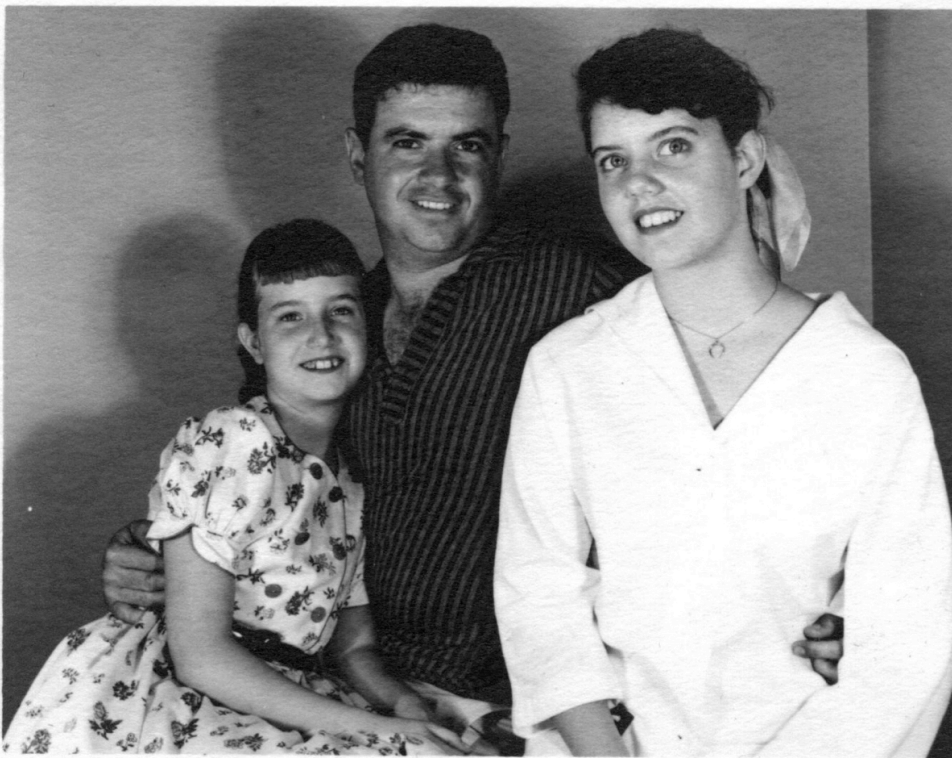
Sandy in her den, 2012.



Sandy's den, 2012. Taken in front of the fireplace and *The Old Widow*, shortly after David and Sandy made the house presentable.



Sandy's den, 2014. Notice the room has been somewhat rearranged and a television now hangs from the bookshelves.



Berenda, Harmon, and Sandy (from left to right).

Kelly in Textile Limelight



DEVELOPED PATTERN DRUM—Clarence Moss, right, textile industry specialist for Synthane Corp. of Pennsylvania, and Kelly Bridges, head of Kelly Textile Designers of Chattanooga, collaborated in development of pattern drum tube material which has enabled the local firm to gain prominence in the textile industry.

A small Chattanooga firm is capturing the limelight of the textile industry with its capacity to supply finished pattern drums to 22 leading mills in the United States and Canada.

Kelly Textile Designers fabricates laminated plastic tubing to design specifications. Statistics from the Synthane Corp., which produces laminated plastics for industry, indicate that "60 per cent of the \$2 billion tufted textile industry is literally patterned on Synthane laminated plastic tubing," used by Kelly.

Among manufacturers supplied by the Chattanooga firm are the largest producers of tufted carpets, bed spreads, area rugs, bath mats and bath sets in this country and Canada, Synthane said.

The Chattanooga designers, according to Synthane, have made possible "considerable cost and time savings in the production of the drums."

Kelly Bridges, head of Kelly Designers and widely known for his styling work in the tufted textile field, described the problem referred to as the "repeated failure of laminated plastic sheet-wrapped metal pattern drums first used on automatic tufting machines. Seams created where the laminated sheet wrapping met snapped open in the middle of production runs and the sheet often popped off the metal drum completely."

He also said the thin surface of the sheet material, necessary to provide flexibility for wrapping around the metal core, posed a problem in that it limited the depth to which a pattern could be cut into the material. Consequently, he said, the design would wear out quickly on long production runs.

Synthane Corp., manufacturer and fabricator of industrial plastics with offices in Oaks, Pa., was contacted through the work of the present laminated pattern drum was produced.

A newspaper clipping, which shows Clarence Moss, Sandy's father, (on the right) and Kelly Bridges.

The Knoxville News-Sentinel Wed., March 21, 1962

ol Talk

Her Wardrobe Is Her Own Doing—From Designing to Stitching



A DREAM—Sandy Moss, 17-year-old Bearden High senior, designed this white satin panel coat to accompany the gown she will wear to her senior prom. The coat is lined in ice blue satin.



OFF TO THE BAHAMAS—Sandy will take a trip to Florida and the Bahamas during the Easter holidays. One costume designed for the trip includes these Horl-patterned homespun capri pants and matching olive-green tunic blouse.



HER FAVORITE—Sandy's favorite outfit is this green and white tapestry matching coat and dress. "I got the idea from a movie," said Sandy. The dress features a bell skirt and a round neck with cap sleeves.

By LINDA FELTS

MEMBERS OF THE SENIOR class at Bearden High School elected her their "best dressed."

And 17-year-old Sandy Moss has added a new twist to compiling a teenage wardrobe. She designs and sketches her clothes—and with the help of her mother, Mrs. Clarence B. Moss, 8822 Hayden Dr., sews them.

Sandy gets ideas from movies, television and fashion pictures. One of her favorite collars was inspired by the fairy tale, "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs."

Two Weeks to Month

"IT TAKES me from two weeks to a month to sketch an outfit," Sandy learned basic ways of putting a dress together in home economics. In actual dress composition Sandy and her mother combine pieces of various patterns. "Often we will switch front and back parts of blouses—and I've even taken the front part of one sleeve and used the back of another."

With several fur pieces in her closet Sandy interchanges them on outfits. Her "Snow White" collar was made of white fur.

Daddy Is Proud

NATURAL TALENT in designing was culminated in art courses at U-T. Sandy has also done family portraits—a favorite is of her little sister, Everinda Kay.

Sandy's preferred fabric is wool—because it "holds up better." When looking for material she goes to a cloth shop and makes notations on choices and prices before selecting.

With approximately 85 per cent of her wardrobe designs of her own, Sandy says she definitely has more clothes than she would if she had to buy them.

"Needless to say, Daddy is proud of my economy," said Sandy. He often brings her materials from business trips.

Getting Ready for Trip

SANDY IS presently designing outfits for a trip to Florida and the Bahamas with her parents during the Easter holiday.

A dream in her wardrobe is the coat which accompanies her senior prom gown. She calls the floor-length creation a panel coat. The coat is slit up the sides to the arm and lined with ice blue satin. The blue satin matches a necklace which Sandy also designed.

Shows Her Talent

SANDY DESIGNED her first dress—a flowered-chiffon—when she was in the seventh grade. She also designs all her mother's clothes and a few things for her little sister. "Girls at school ask for advice, and I sketched a basic wardrobe for a friend."

Preparing for a career, Sandy is vice president of her distributive education class. She goes to class half a day and works two or three afternoons a week at Hall's in Western Plaza.

Very Versatile

SCHOOL ACTIVITIES include being senior class treasurer, a member of the leadership council, the Thompson, Sub-Deb social club and the West Knoxville Teen Center.

Her other talents include playing the piano, dancing, and dramatics which she tops off by modeling on the side.

A newspaper clipping which is a profile of young Sandy who designed her own clothes.



Sandy and John on their wedding day, 1965.



Sandy and John when they graduated from the University of Tennessee, 1968.



Sandy, John, and Nate on the day they brought him home from the hospital, 1976.



The Old Widow, 2012.



John's clothes in Sandy's closet. You can see his plaid shirt here, 2014.



Sandy at the mirror. To the right you can see one of John's favorite ties that she keeps in a closet hanging with her robe, 2014.



Sandy and John at Nate and Claire's rehearsal dinner, 2004.



Clementine's easel, which Sandy has allowed to infiltrate her living room, 2014.



Sandy and Clementine, Easter 2014.

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