Chapter 3. Remembering and Writing a True Story

> … with the passage of time you will always find yourself imagining that you might have said this or that, even believing that you actually said those words, so that what one narrates often becomes more real than the actual events narrated, however difficult it may be to put real events into words ….
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> – *José Saramago,* Baltasar and Blimunda

My most vivid and powerful memory of Madeline is an old one: She is Sister Mary Marlene, looking dignified and even sacred in her severe dark brown nun's habit—which covers her from head to toe, her face tightly framed in white from brow to chin and cheek to cheek, with a large crucifix dangling from a rosary around her neck and her hands folded just above the knot of the cincture at her waist—standing tall in the middle of the living room of my grandparents' home near the resplendent Christmas tree that obscures a huge picture window. She is facing a half dozen or so male elders of my family, including my father and hers, who are seated on the sofa and easy chairs surrounding the tree, with their glasses of beer or whiskey. She is calmly, almost serenely, but confidently, holding forth, this formidable Catholic nun, against their criticisms of the Civil Rights Movement and, in particular, people of color.

It was Christmas Day, 1971.

At some point that day, I had made my way from the basement family room, where dinner had been served, to the living room on the first floor, where I saw Sister Marlene standing before my father and my uncles at the Christmas tree. I did not know what was happening, but it quickly became clear that this was not a happy holiday conversation. It was, instead, an intense discussion, an argument. There were tense, even angry voices in contrast to the holiday laughter that echoed throughout the house that day. I listened from the stairs as Sister Marlene, who would have been in her late 30s at the time, refuted these family elders. She spoke on behalf of Black people, and she defended the Civil Rights Movement as right and good and consistent with Christ's message of love for others. My elder male relatives seemed to be arguing against equality and tolerance and love; they seemed to be opposing Christ's message. It didn't make sense to me.

I was thirteen years old.

Today, more than half a century later, that image of Sister Marlene, my cousin Madeline, on Christmas Day is fixed in my memory as a kind of tableau representing the endless struggle against racism and bigotry to which she devoted her life—and depicting the courage she displayed in suffering the disapproval and

anger of the family she loved. It is, perhaps, my most important memory of her. And the more I revisit that memory, the more significant that image becomes: Sister Marlene on that important Catholic holiday, standing for justice and equality, the very embodiment of Christ's message of love for others, confronting the prejudiced views of her own loved ones. That memory is central to my story about Madeline as a courageous, devoted, and selfless advocate for love and tolerance and justice. And my memory of that moment becomes even more important considering that it was just a short time after that moment on Christmas Day in 1971 that Sister Marlene left the convent. She left after nearly twenty years of devoted service, I have always thought, because she had determined that staying in the convent would actually prevent her from continuing her service to people in need. In other words, leaving the convent was the only way she could continue to do God's work. In view of that momentous and seemingly contradictory decision to leave the convent, the significance of my memory of that moment in my family home on Christmas Day, 1971 grows.

The truth of that memory, however, is more ambiguous than I have long believed. And interestingly, my memory of that time includes writing: an account of that important moment on Christmas Day that I was asked to write by a Bernardine nun who was my teacher at the Catholic school I attended at the time. That text no longer exists, but as I try to recall it now, it represents an early indication of the important role that writing would play in my life.

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Christmas in my family was always momentous. For most of the first twenty-three years of my life, at which point I moved out on my own, my parents and four siblings and I lived in the home of my maternal grandparents, whom we called Bacz (which we pronounced *bahtch*, short for Babcia, the Polish word for grandmother) and Dziadek (*jah-jee*, Polish for grandfather). That house was the site of our family's Christmas celebrations, founded on the Polish Catholic tradition of *Wigilia*, a solemn but joyful meatless meal held on Christmas Eve that always began with the ritual sharing of blessed wafers called *opłatek*, which my grandmother would obtain from our parish priest. Wigilia in our home included Bacz and Dziadek, their two children (my mother and my Uncle Paul), and their nine grandchildren (my four siblings and me along with our four cousins). In later years, the meal included the spouses and children of my siblings and cousins (including my two sons) and, eventually, their children's spouses and children. In the early years, until about the time I was in college, there were thirteen of us around the table. Over the decades, that number expanded to more than forty.

Wigilia was always held in the large finished basement of my grandparents' home, which became my parents' home after my grandmother's death in 1994. My mother and sisters would arrange a variety of chairs and tables into one long banquet table, set with their finest holiday china and silverware and with Bacz's special
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blessed candles. On those tables would be placed traditional foods for the meal: home-made pierogi stuffed with cheese or potato, baked fish, fried breaded shrimp, popinki mushrooms (usually gathered by my grandmother or, later, a family friend), home-made sweet bread, pickled herring, cole slaw, and various cooked vegetables. After the table was set but before the food was served, a large *opłatek* wafer was placed on each plate. The evening began with an hour or so of mingling and sipping drinks as family members arrived and greeted one another and my grandmother, mother, and sisters made the final preparations for the meal. At the appointed time, we would all take our seats around the table, and after saying a prayer, my grandfather (and, in later years, my father) would lead a toast to the family and the holiday. At that point, the main part of the Wigilia tradition commenced.

Beginning with the eldest family member at the head of the table (my grandfather in my earliest years, then my grandmother, and eventually my father and, after he died in 2020, my mother), each person in turn would rise from their seat and move around the table, offering a piece of *opłatek* to each other person seated around the table and, in turn, taking a piece from each person. This sharing of *opłatek* was accompanied by heartfelt embraces and expressions of love and holiday joy. The names of those family members who had died during the previous year would be invoked during these exchanges. As the family grew over the years, this process could take the better part of 30 or 40 minutes, and it was always emotional. Tears were as much a part of the tradition as the *opłatek* itself. By the time the last person had completed the exchange of *opłatek*, many of us would be emotionally drained, but happily so. To me, the ritual of Wigilia often felt deeply cathartic, a reaffirmation of familial love, a purging of the previous year's inevitable pain and sadness, and a healing—if only temporary—of family grudges and conflicts.

For most of my life, that special ritual of Wigilia on Christmas Eve in my family home was the highlight of the year. After I left my hometown with my young family in 1983 and moved around the U.S. in pursuit of an academic career during the following two decades, returning home for Wigilia was the single most anticipated moment of the year for me. It was central to my sense of identity, even after I left the Catholic Church and, as Bacz used to say, lost my faith.

My family maintained the tradition of Wigilia long after my grandfather's death (in 1968) and my grandmother's (in 1994), and it wasn't until around 2018 or 2019, after my Uncle Paul (my mother's brother) died, that Wigilia in our home began to change. By then the number of family members who attended had become almost unwieldy, and some, like me, were living away from Scranton—one cousin as far away as Italy. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020, Wigilia was canceled altogether, as family members maintained their own versions of quarantine and isolation and confronted travel restrictions. A year later in December 2021, a somewhat truncated Wigilia was celebrated. My dad had died at the beginning of the pandemic lockdowns in early March 2020, and my nephew Garrett (my brother's son) died the following spring. So Christmas in 2021 was

not a very happy holiday in my family. Not everyone was able (or wanted) to attend Wigilia that year. And to my mind, the vivid joyful memories of all those past holidays made Christmas in 2021 even sadder.

Fifty years earlier, however, in 1971, Wigilia was, for me, magical and full of love and energized by the happy mysteries of a traditional Catholic Christmas. The joy of the tradition extended into the next day, Christmas Day, when members of my extended family—aunts, uncles, cousins, great aunts, great uncles, and distant relatives whose specific blood connections to me I could not explain—came to my grandmother's home to share Christmas dinner. After the solemnity and familial intimacy of Wigilia on Christmas Eve, dinner on Christmas Day always felt raucous and fun, and 1971 was no exception. Which made that moment in my parents' living room that year all the more discordant. Tension, conflict, argument—especially about political or social issues—were never part of the holiday in my memory. So it was disconcerting and confusing for me to witness Sister Marlene, this special person who seemed almost holy to my thirteen-year-old mind, having to defend the humanity of people of color and justify her advocacy for equal rights in the face of the latent bigotry and racial animosity of my own family, of men whom I dearly loved and respected and with whom I, at that young age, could find no fault. Although I only vaguely understood what they were arguing about, I somehow sensed that my father and uncles and elder cousins were wrong and Sister Marlene was right. She seemed to occupy the moral high ground, and she—not they—represented the moral values that were, I believed, the foundation of our Catholic faith, the same values that were being celebrating on that special holiday that marked the birth of Jesus Christ, who, I learned in my Catholic school classes, exhorted his followers to help those who lived in poverty and those who were sick and those who were shunned and those in despair. As I understood it at the time, Sister Marlene was living Christ's message and doing His work. The elder members of the family with whom she was arguing, as best I could tell, were not.

In my memory of that moment—which might have lasted ten or fifteen minutes or one or two hours, I'm not sure—Sister Marlene never raised her voice or became emotional, despite blatant expressions of ignorance and bigotry that I recall being made by these men she loved, men who did, as I recall, express anger and who did become emotional, men who made derogatory statements (which are now deeply troubling to me) about "the Coloreds" who didn't appreciate what they had in America. In my memory, Sister Marlene maintained her composure and remained steadfast in her advocacy for the people whom her relatives were dehumanizing. In my memory, she was standing, in that beautifully decorated living room on that most special of Catholic holidays, for good.

That is what I remember about that moment on Christmas Day in 1971.

I have shared this memory with numerous family members and others who knew Madeline—including a few who, I am certain, were there in 1971—and none of them remembered that specific moment in my parents' living room. None of them remembered that significant moment, which for half a century has been

central to my view of Madeline as a courageous and righteous advocate for love and justice. But they all believe it happened.

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Memory is a tricky thing. The stories we tell about our lives rest on memories of past experiences. But those memories are neither static nor reliable; they are a function of our present selves, which are shaped by both past and present and by how we look at the world now, which in turn informs how we remember and understand the past. Addressing the challenge of writing about our past experiences, writing scholar Jane Bessette points out that memory is "dynamic and unstable, at odds with our attempts to grab hold of it in writing and make it permanent as a foundation for understanding our present selves," and she emphasizes "the slipperiness of our perceptions of the past: the ways in which changing present circumstances reconfigure our sense of what happened" (80). This is old news, of course. We all have had the experience of sharing memories of important events with others who remember the very same event very differently. And it is well established in neuroscientific and psychological research that memory is malleable and therefore notoriously unreliable.[3]

This contingency and instability of memory becomes problematic when we are trying to tell true stories that rely on memories of our past. Bessette asserts that "writing the past cannot be understood in terms of truth, except in Joan Didion's sense of a subjective truth: the 'truth of how it felt to me'" (80). As Bessette sees it, writing about the past cannot be an act of finding objective truth (to the extent that one accepts the existence of objective truth and the possibility of accessing it—about which I will say more in Chapter 5); it can only be about *subjective* truth. Didion was famous for promoting a "New Journalism" that not only acknowledged but actually embraced the biased viewpoint of the reporter. She rejected the conventional view of journalistic objectivity and developed a style of journalism that foregrounded the reporter's perspective as an integral and unavoidable part of the reporting (see Muggli). Writing about the past involves the same fundamental problem of navigating the choppy waters of subjectivity and trying to identify *truth* as something more than opinion. If we have no access to objectively true or even reliable accounts of our past experiences, what does it mean to try to write a true story based on our memories of those past experiences? How can I write a true story about Madeline when I can't even claim that the memories on which I am basing that story are accurate?

This problem becomes even thornier when we consider the complicated relationship between memory and narrative. Psychology researcher David Nash

3. See Gardner; Howe and Knott; Loftus. Such studies provide compelling empirical evidence that underscores the malleability and unreliability of our memories. As Nash notes, these studies "show us how our memories can change spontaneously over time, as a product of how, when, and why we access them."
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argues that "our memories are only ever as reliable as the most recent story we told ourselves" (Nash). And those "recent stories" are themselves unreliable because they are a function of belief, ideology, culture, and various social forces that shape our sense of identity as well as our perspectives on our experience. Moreover, narrative shapes memory. In other words, we create, store, access, and share our memories *as* stories, and by doing so we impose a narrative structure on them, which shapes—or *re*shapes or even *creates*—them. To put it differently, our memories are not neutral mental snapshots or videoclips of our past experiences; rather, our memories are a function of the stories we construct about those past experiences. Or as historian David Lowenthal notes, "Memories are not ready-made reflections of the past, but eclectic selective *reconstructions* based on subsequent actions and perceptions and on ever-changing codes by which we delineate, symbolize and classify the world around us" (210; emphasis added). Our memories are adapted to and by the stories we tell about the experiences we remember. In this regard, memory is wrapped up in narrative, and vice versa. As Nash puts it, remembering is itself "an act of storytelling."

We might see this role of narrative in memory as yet another manifestation of Sartwell's "teleological order": not only does *telos*—that is, our need to believe that our lives have purpose—drive the stories we construct about our lives, but narrative—that is, the act of imposing meaning on experience by constructing stories that assign purpose to our experience—shapes our memories of past experience. But whereas Sartwell approaches the problem as a philosophical one—What are the implications of our *telos*-driven storytelling about ourselves for how we should live together?—it turns out that cognitive scientists, psychologists, and neuroscientists see it (not surprisingly) as a scientific problem—What are the social, cognitive, or physiological mechanisms of memory? In fact, cognitive research seems to provide empirical support for Sartwell's claims about the powerful role narrative plays in how we understand ourselves as beings in the world and how we conceive of the meaning of our lives. The "narrative hypothesis," widely influential in neuroscience and cognitive psychology, holds that narrative is "not only a prominent form of human communication but also a fundamental way to represent knowledge and to structure the mind" (Szilas 133). The psychologist and scholar Jerome Bruner, whose theories have influenced views about knowing and learning in psychology, education, and related fields, wrote that "our experience of human affairs comes to take the form of the narratives we use in telling about them" (5). This hypothesis has been the subject of scholarly debate, but whether or not *all* knowledge is ultimately a function of narrative, as some scholars have argued (including Bruner), the problem of memory in the stories we tell one another about who we are and what we have experienced means, I think, that we must tread lightly when it comes to determining the extent to which those stories are *true* and what "truth" might mean in this context. For my purposes here, the question becomes something like this: If we accept that the memories of Madeline (mine and others') around which I am constructing this story are inherently unreliable (at least in the sense that they are not necessarily

factually accurate), to what extent does the unreliability of these memories affect the *truth* of this story? More pointedly: Can we tell a true story if the memories that are the basis of that story are unreliable or inaccurate or perhaps even wrong?

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A week or so after that Christmas Day in 1971, I returned to my eighth-grade classes at Saint Mary's Visitation School, the parish grade school I attended through the eighth grade. One of my teachers was Sister Roberta Ann, a young Bernardine nun who, as I recall, knew my cousin Sister Marlene. Perhaps they had crossed paths in their training, or maybe they had been assigned to teach at the same school at some point. (In researching Madeline's past, I learned that she actually had taught briefly at Saint Mary's Visitation School a few years before I enrolled there in 1964, but I don't know whether her time there overlapped with Sister Roberta Ann's.) Sister Roberta Ann was, as I recall her now, a progressive-minded teacher, in contrast to most of the older nuns at Saint Mary's School in those days, who were strict, traditional, and conservative in their teaching, valuing obedience over learning and rarely allowing for student voices to be heard aside from reciting the correct answer in response to a direct question. In that day of classes after the Christmas holiday, it was customary for students and teachers to talk about the holiday, and Sister Roberta Ann must have asked her students about their holiday celebrations. In response, I must have shared my story about Sister Marlene's confrontation with my family elders. I have only a vague memory of that classroom conversation. I don't even recall the subject of the class itself. I suspect it was English, but I'm not certain. I remember only that Sister Roberta Ann was curious about what had happened in my family home on that Christmas Day, and she seemed especially interested in what I told her about my cousin Sister Marlene's defense of civil rights and racial equality. After class, Sister Roberta Ann asked me if I would draft a written version of what I had said during that classroom conversation about the holiday break. She said she wished to share it with some of her colleagues.

From my earliest days in school, I was a "good" student, which meant that I followed the rules, did my homework, and scored high on quizzes and tests. My report cards always featured a lot of As and good scores for what was termed "comportment." By the time I was in Sister Roberta Ann's class, I had also established myself as a "good" writer, which meant that I produced correct texts that conformed to expectations for school-sponsored writing, which tended to emphasize grammar, organization, and related parameters such as page limits. At Saint Mary's School, penmanship was also valued. I enjoyed writing—possibly in part because I was good enough at it to earn praise in a context where it was rarely given and probably also because it pleased my mother, who expected and celebrated the good grades and positive comments I routinely earned on my "compositions." But I think I also enjoyed writing for reasons that I couldn't articulate then. Constitutionally shy in large groups, I enjoyed being able to express ideas in writing. Despite the severe restrictions placed
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on school-sponsored writing, I think I sensed the power of my voice in writing. And I found ways to engage in writing outside of school. As I have noted in the Preface to this book, I recall writing an unofficial class "newspaper" with a few friends as well as a comedic "play" that we were allowed to perform at a school carnival. These writing activities were neither encouraged nor discouraged. But the fact that they were not explicitly discouraged along with the fact that I enjoyed the responses I received to what I was writing energized me and prompted me to keep writing. I am sure I would have been excited by Sister Roberta Ann's request.

I do not know exactly why Sister Roberta Ann asked me to give her that written version of my story about my cousin Madeline or what she planned to do with that text. It's possible that she asked me because she knew I was a "good" writer who enjoyed writing outside school assignments. It also seems to me, in retrospect, that she held more progressive political views than would have been common or even tolerated among the nuns who taught at St. Mary's School in those days, and my story about my cousin's advocacy for racial equality might have struck a chord with her. Maybe she herself was, like my cousin, involved somehow in the Civil Rights Movement. I have no way of knowing. But I wish I had that text right now—if it ever existed. I have a vague recollection of drafting something in response to her request, but any writing I did back then no longer exists in physical form, even if it remains in my memory. All these years later, it strikes me as ironic—or perhaps appropriate—that I was asked to *write* that story, for not only did I eventually become a writer, but I also am writing a story about that story right now: I am writing a story based on a memory of writing that is being transformed by writing it.

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Scholarly inquiry into these matters of memory and narrative reveals the significant roles that storytelling plays in our lives, from the foundational stories that define our religious, cultural, and national identities to the personal stories we tell to define our individual racial, ethnic, gender, familial, professional, and other identities within those broader contexts. To some extent, all these kinds of stories incorporate and rely on memory. For example, the story of the founding of the U.S. rests on shared, if contested, memories of specific events and historical developments that have come to be understood as somehow integral to the existence of the U.S. as a nation-state and the identity of its citizens as Americans, such as the settling of Plymouth by Europeans in the 17th century or the abolition of slavery by Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. These stories both inform and reflect our sense of identity as part of a larger entity, such as an ethnic group or nation-state, so it is no surprise that both the stories and the shared memories on which they are based are contested. But the stories we tell about our own lives rest on personal, idiosyncratic memories—what developmental psychologist Katherine Nelson has described as "autobiographical memory" (Nelson
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125). Such memories, according to Nelson, serve "as a vehicle for self-expression and definition." She argues that the different kinds of stories we tell—personal stories as well as those larger cultural stories—are functionally and structurally related. In other words, we should understand our individual stories within the larger contexts of culture, history, geography, religion, race, politics, ideology, etc. As a result, "it is necessary to see the relation between memory as an individual function, its role in the phylogenetic scheme of adaptation, and narrative as the medium of shared memories, collective memories, and fictional creations" (125). For Nelson, that set of relationships regarding the various functions of our different individual and collective memories raises the question of "the role of narrative in the composition of autobiographical memory, and whether autobiographical memory exists in a raw, non-narrative form."

In exploring this question, Nelson traces the development of storytelling as both a cultural and individual phenomenon amidst the rise of the ideology of individualism in the West in the 18th and 19th centuries, an ideology that "permeated the institutions and practices of society" (128). That momentous set of developments had significant implications for social, political, and economic structures and practices that profoundly shaped communal life as well as how individuals understood themselves and their past—and how they told stories about themselves and their past. Within this framework, Nelson argues that narrative is not, as Bruner and others believed, an inherent form of human thought but rather "a cultural invention, one that may be adopted by individuals in organising their own autobiographical memories" (129); moreover, the extent to which individuals adopt narrative as a tool for understanding varies across cultures and historical periods. In that sense, my story about Madeline must be understood as a reflection of my positionality, which is inevitably gendered, as part of Western—and, specifically, American—culture at a particular historical moment.

Especially intriguing in Nelson's analysis is the apparent effect of sharing a memory on the memory itself. In imposing a narrative structure on a memory in order to share it with another person, the teller inevitably creates a kind of "distancing" from the event or experience being remembered and therefore does not "re-experience" the remembered event in a way that some scholars believe is essential for creating an autobiographical memory (Nelson 130). "Whereas the meaning for the individual resides in the re-experience, the imposed narrative is a way of establishing shared (not idiosyncratic) meaning" (130). This "narrativising" of the memory, which is a way of sharing the memory, also can change it—and in turn affect the rememberer's "re-experiencing" of it.

My own experience in trying to write this story about Madeline might serve to illustrate Nelson's analysis. The shared memories of Madeline differ—sometimes slightly, sometimes significantly—among the various people who knew her, and the remembered events that are the apparent basis for those shared memories are remembered—and re-experienced—differently by the different people sharing their memories of her. My memories of Madeline's wedding in 1979, for

example, don't exactly coincide with the memories of my three cousins with whom I attended the wedding, and my conversations in 2022 and 2023 about Madeline with other relatives revealed similar divergences in our individual "autobiographical" memories—and in the stories we each tell on the basis of those memories. Moreover, my own relationship to that event (Madeline's wedding)—and the way I "re-experience" it—has changed as I have continued to share my memories in the process of writing this book. As we have shared our individual memories of Madeline's wedding and discussed that event, my relatives and I are (re)creating a shared memory which might differ from our individual autobiographical memories but which in turn inevitably shapes those autobiographical memories and how we might re-experience that event. The significance I attach to my attendance at Madeline's wedding has, therefore, evolved over time as I have remembered and retold my story of attending that wedding, and my sharing of my evolving memory has contributed to the creation of a memory of that event that is now shared among my cousins and myself. And the story of that event continues to evolve.

This complex dynamic came into relief during a conversation I had in the spring of 2022 with Kim, Madeline's niece and my third cousin, about her relationship with Madeline. Kim shared much about Madeline that I hadn't previously known, including how close Madeline had been to her eight nieces (the daughters of her three sisters) and how much time they had all spent together over the years on "girls' weekends," as she called them, which Madeline organized in Baltimore, Washington, D.C., and elsewhere. Inevitably, Kim and I talked about Madeline's wedding and the fact that only four of Madeline's relatives attended that event because my Great Aunt Sophie (Madeline's mother and Kim's grandmother) disapproved of Madeline's marriage to Earle and made it clear to the extended family that they should not attend. Kim and I talked about the years following that wedding, during which Aunt Sophie did not allow Madeline to bring her husband to her family home in Scranton, Pennsylvania. In those years, Madeline was effectively disowned by her own mother and by some other members of her extended family. Kim remembers Madeline and Earle making visits to Scranton and staying in Kim's parents' home—the home of Madeline's sister Sylvia and Sylvia's husband Emil. (Emil—Kim's father—shared similar memories with me.) Kim described to me some of her own vivid memories of the first such visit to her home by her Aunt Madeline and her new Uncle Earle. Kim was in high school at the time. As far as she recalls, there were no people of color in her small high school back then or in their small town, and Kim worried what her friends would think about her parents hosting a Black man in their home.

Kim also shared memories of the first time she met Earle. It was on a visit to Washington, D.C. with her family sometime in the 1970s, before Madeline and Earle were married. As Kim remembers it, the visit included her family, the family of her Aunt Dolores (one of Madeline's three sisters), and my family (my mom, my four siblings, and I). There were no fathers on the trip, only the mothers—Madeline's two sisters, Sylvia and Dolores, along with my mother, Joan—and their kids.

It was summer and very hot, and Kim remembers all of us, along with Madeline and Earle, visiting the National Mall in Washington. Kim's memory sparked my own, which seems to overlap with hers but diverges in important ways.

I, too, remember visiting Washington, D.C. with my mother, brother, and sisters sometime during a very hot summer in the 1970s, but I don't remember Kim and her family being with us. What I do remember was a moment when we were visiting the National Mall. In the oppressive heat, we found an air-conditioned concession stand near the famous monuments along the Mall, and we all went inside to get cold drinks, my mother and her five children. Several teens were working the concession stand, which was empty of customers at that moment. As we entered, the teens, all of whom were Black, were chatting and joking with one another behind the counter. My mother went up to the counter and stood there, waiting to get their attention so that she could place an order. Either they didn't notice her or they ignored her. My memory of that specific moment is vague. But I do remember my mother, after waiting for a minute or two, politely calling to them to get their attention: "Boys. Excuse me, boys." At that time, I was perhaps 14 or 15 years old, and I don't think (at *this* moment, as I am writing) that I appreciated what my mother had done (inadvertently, I believe, but, as I remember it now, unforgivably). But I do recall the immediate and understandable hostility of the young people behind the counter when they heard my mother. As I recall that moment at *this* moment five decades later, we six white people instantly became racists in the eyes of those teens. I don't know if we did get our cold drinks, but I remember that moment as excruciatingly uncomfortable—and the more so as I am writing about it at *this* moment. My mother's indignation, which she made clear after we exited the concession stand, didn't help.

I had never associated this memory with Madeline and Earle, but my conversation with Kim made me revisit it and, in the process, perhaps (probably) revise it. My sense that we (that is, my family) were seen then as ignorant racist White people by those young workers in that concession stand is inevitably shaped by my perspective now as a sixty-something white man recalling that moment with embarrassment and regret—and believing himself (now) to be a tolerant and fair-minded person who embraces the ideals of equality, inclusiveness, and racial justice. That memory is also inseparable, according to Nelson, from the shared (contested) stories we Americans tell ourselves about our history—in particular, about the Civil Rights Movement, racism, and race relations in the U.S. The story I am writing now is inevitably shaped by those stories, which inform how I see myself now and remember myself then.

Sometime in 2023 I asked my mother about that trip to Washington, D. C. She did not recall the moment in the concession stand as I described it, but she was certain that Kim and her family had not been in Washington with us. That was a different occasion, she insisted. A few weeks later, Kim sent me some old photos she had found. They showed all our families standing together with Madeline at the National Mall in Washington D.C. on a very hot day sometime in the early 1970s.

Madeline with members of her family in Washington, D. C., ca. 1970. Madeline is in the center, wearing a yellow blouse. The author is directly behind her. Her sisters, Sylvia and Dolores, are to her immediate left. Kim Conte photo.

There is no way to determine conclusively whether Kim or my mother is "right" about that particular family trip to Washington in the 1970s. And it doesn't really matter. What is true is that, at some point, we all visited Washington and we all spent time with Madeline there during a particularly fraught moment in the history of American race relations, which shaped my family's history and informs our individual memories of the visit. My memory of what happened at the concession stand seems important in the context of my story about Madeline as a social justice warrior fighting for racial equality. This story I am writing about Madeline inevitably (re)shapes and perhaps lends significance to my memory of that moment in the concession stand, which is also a part of my own story about who I am today. At this moment as I am writing, my story about my journey to Washington when I was 21 years old to attend Madeline's wedding a few years later in 1979 with three other young members of my family also casts me as an advocate for racial equality, an ally of those whose histories are deeply affected by racism: I see myself in 1979, like Madeline, as a young person willing to act on his beliefs about what is right and true—and willing to defy his family in staying true to those beliefs. The incident at the concession stand becomes part of this story by highlighting the intensely fraught nature of race relations in the U.S. at that time and helping to illustrate the bigotry I grew

up with that was not always acknowledged and rarely confronted—and which infected my own worldview then and complicates my memories and my feelings about those memories now. I cannot avoid acknowledging as I am writing at *this* moment so many years later that I, too, might have held racist views at that time when we visited the concession stand. That uncomfortable truth affects how I am remembering that moment, for as the sixty-something man I am now, I cannot remember that moment with any fondness, nor can I write about it without embarrassment and regret.

That moment in the concession stand also matters because it helps place my story in the context of a specific historical moment, in the 1970s, a time of great racial tension in the U.S., and at a significant location, Washington, D.C., which was the site of momentous events in the history of the American Civil Rights Movement, including Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. That concession stand stood near the public space where King spoke his famous words; it was a site of the same struggle for racial justice, literally and figuratively.

All of which is to say that I am trying to construct a certain kind of truth so many years later by writing this story of that experience that is based on memories that are being shaped by this same act of writing, *this* storytelling, which itself must inevitably be part of that truth, whatever it might be. In other words, the line between the truth—such as it is—and the act of telling a story that is supposed to convey that truth—isn't always so clear. I'm not sure the two are ever separable. One does not seem to exist without the other. And it might be that this truth I am trying to find, to construct, to realize, about that significant moment in the past, is located in *this act* of writing this story in *this* moment now.

But whatever truth I am constructing by writing this story very likely says more about who I am at *this* moment than about who I was then or about what might actually have happened at that concession stand. And for the purposes of this project, it might not matter how much of this story "really" happened as I am telling it here. That incident might not have happened exactly as I have written it here, and yet this story I have written about that incident might still be true. Or perhaps more to the point, the story might convey an important truth or truths without actually being *true*: it might bring forth truths that I need—truths that *we* need—for *this* moment.

My memories of that visit to Washington D.C., my cousin Kim's memories of meeting Earle for the first time on a visit to Washington, D.C., my mother's memories of that family trip—all these memories don't exactly tell the same story of that event. Nelson might point out that all these individual memories differ because autobiographical memory is "imaginative"—that is, "based on past experience re-imagined (or reconstructed) to fit the present and future circumstances" (Nelson 130) of the individual doing the remembering. We are all different individuals inevitably remembering the same event differently, despite our efforts to construct a shared memory of that event. I can live with that. In this sense, all these individual memories of the "same" events can differ and still be true. The

point is not accuracy but meaning. And the quest for what that moment—and the memories of it—might mean is fraught, ongoing, and contested. And necessary.

As I noted earlier, Nelson would emphasize the extent to which my memories of Madeline and those of my relatives who knew and loved her are inseparable from the social, cultural, and historical contexts within which the experiences we are remembering took place. Madeline and Earle's wedding took place in the late 1970s, when the Civil Rights Movement was redefining American society and altering attitudes about race. No doubt each of us is sharing—and thus reshaping, very likely even creating—these memories in the context of our experiences with and feelings about more recent events, such as the Black Lives Matter Movement and the protests around the world after the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police in 2020, as well as more recent incidents of racial violence, including the Trump administration's violent suppression of immigrants in 2025 and 2026. How we remember our past, as I've already noted, is a function of our present selves, which is shaped by these recent events and the way others portray and react to them. In the same way, as Father Gamrot pointed out to me, Madeline's decision to leave the convent and, eventually, to marry Earle, a divorced Black man who was not Catholic, took place against the backdrop not only of race relations in the U.S. at the time but also of the continuing impact of the Vatican II Council, which dramatically altered the Catholic Church and resulted in changed policies, practices, and attitudes among Catholics regarding things like marriage and divorce, even as old prejudices and beliefs persisted. At the same time, the women's movement was changing attitudes about those same issues of marriage and divorce and the roles women can take on, not only in the contexts of institutionalized religion but also in families, like my own, with deeply held traditional beliefs about gender roles. Our memories of what happened then are shaped by how we understand those developments now, and Madeline's story is inextricable from both those historical developments and our memories of them.

These complexities of memory and storytelling are important to confront, given the sustained assault in recent years on truth as well as the intensifying conflicts about our shared identity as Americans. Writing in 2003—well before the era of fake news and the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on January 6th, 2021 that, one might argue, was energized by questionable and demonstrably "false" but nevertheless influential stories about American democracy and identity—Nelson highlighted the importance of understanding autobiographical memory within cultural and historical context. In contemporary American culture, she argued, autobiographical memory is particularly important, "because, in the light of the vanishing mythic or fictional models that instruct individuals how they are to live their lives, lives must be individually composed" (Nelson 133). It seems to me that Madeline's own story derived its truth, at least in part, from such "mythic models"—in particular, the stories of Jesus and his life that reflect the progressive Catholic theology that she embraced as well as the collective stories of historic change and social justice that energized the Civil Rights Movement and

the women's movement—in ways that my story (and perhaps those of my cousins with whom I attended Madeline's wedding) have not been driven by similar shared mythic narratives. Nelson sees the need to establish an autonomous self in American society as greater than ever; therefore, "autobiographical memory is more important to the individual today in both its social and personal functions" than might have been true of previous generations (134). Autobiographical memory in the U.S. today, according to Nelson, is necessary for "maintaining identity within a somewhat fractured community." As I am writing two decades or so after Nelson published that article, I am tempted to removed the qualifier ("somewhat") from that statement, but the point nevertheless rings true today. It may well be that these memories and the story I am trying to tell on the basis of them are a reflection of this need that Nelson has described to create and maintain identity at a time and in a society in which doing so has become fraught and challenging. In that regard, my memories of that visit to Washington D. C. and the incident in the concession stand and my attendance at Madeline's wedding are all part of my own evolving story about who I am, not only as a certain individual human being and lifelong writer but also as an American citizen in the third decade of the 21st century. I share these memories as part of a story I am telling that presents my younger self (*not*, I hope, entirely self-servingly) as an advocate for racial equality, a young person trying to disavow the bigotry of his upbringing and reject the racism of the time and place in which he came of age and trying to live that advocacy by attending Madeline's wedding. A young person, like Madeline, trying to act according to moral values.

If Nelson is right, my memories of those events have been narrativized, their truth, such as it is, a function of the story I am writing right now. So as I am writing this story, I am still trying to negotiate among conflicting and changing memories—my own and those of my relatives and others who knew Madeline—in light of the information I am gathering that is related to those memories (dates and places and photos and similar "facts"). In part, that's why this act of writing about these memories and trying to tell this story is, I believe, as important—indeed, *more* important—than the text of the story you are reading right now. At this moment, this writing I am engaged in feels necessary and true. This experience of writing in this moment is an experience of truth-seeking that, I hope, is leading to some kind of truth—for you as well as for me.

And as I remember Madeline in this moment of writing—as I try to understand her life in the context of the social and political turmoil that she experienced in the U.S. during her lifetime, turmoil that we all experienced—I feel an urgency to tell this story about her. This true story. Or more accurately, my version of this true story.