

*Sunday Dinners,
Moonshine,
and Men*

TATE BARKLEY

Micro Publishing Media
Stockbridge, Massachusetts, 01262

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This book is dedicated to my mom, Linda Ann Tevepaugh Barkley, whose unconditional love, courage and fierce commitment to her children made each of us exceptional in our own way.

We love you, Mom!

CHAPTER 13

BLISS ON THE BAYOU

The walk around the hospital parking lot cleared my head and eased my nerves. Yes, Dad could be an asshole, like that day at the airport, but I did love him. I was even grateful to him, especially for bringing us to Texas. Everything changed when we came here. It was also where I started drinking. My mind drifted by again to those early days in Houston.



We took about a week to pack for our trip. On our last night in North Carolina, our trailer park neighbor, a biker nicknamed “Deadeye,” had a party with all his Harley-riding friends. Deadeye looked the part, with a full beard, a bandana, square-toed boots, and a perpetual scowl. He also wore a gun strapped to his hip like a gunslinger. It was legal to open-carry in North Carolina, but his pistol was the only one I had seen. Dad said he was more bark than bite, which was true. He looked tough, but he was a softy for kids, especially my baby sisters. The whole family went to the festivities, and everyone was relaxed even when an Iredell County sheriff drove by. Everyone except my dad. He hid his head under a cap, and I could tell he didn’t exhale until the sheriff passed us.

The next morning, my dad piled us up in his 1968 Plymouth Fury. He was nervous and in a hurry. I should have realized there was a good reason Dad wanted us to leave without a lot of fanfare. To hear him explain it, his ex-wife Martha was a pure evil bitch and had warrants out for his arrest. He conveniently forgot to mention that he hadn’t been paying child support

for years. I would never have had the nerve to evade the police so openly. It would be a skill I would have to acquire much later. The day we needed to get out of town, Dad rushed to the back entrance of Cory Coffee to grab his final check. Then we went to a seedy part of town to visit a pawn shop that doubled as a check cashing place. Dad rode around the block a few times before parking behind a dumpster. We all waited quietly while he went in to make his transaction.

At this point, Dad wasn't hiding anything from us. "I have to be careful," he said, looking at me and Mom. We didn't confront him but instead knew this meant keeping the girls entertained. Dad returned and announced he had a pocket full of cash. It was about \$242, not a lot, but to Dad it spelled freedom.

Dad patted his pocket and said, "Now we're going to Texas."

We didn't even question when he stopped at a convenience store, bought a pack of cigarettes and two Miller Lite tall boys for the road. That was clearly what he needed to get us out of North Carolina and to our next destination. These same items became my go-to road trip provisions in the future. There was nothing like a pack of Marlboros, some tall boys, and the wide-open spaces.

Cars in those days didn't have the same restraints they have now. So the girls and I moved around the backseat and watched the scenery change. I didn't know anything about Texas except what I learned from the television. It sounded bigger than life, at least how Dad described it. All along the way he talked about the Alamo, John Wayne, cattle, gunslingers, cotton, and attitude. I had never seen him so excited, especially when we crossed the state line. He thought Florida was going to be the place to make his fortune, but Texas had taken its place as the land of opportunity.

My dad drove us straight through downtown Houston. I'd never seen anything like it in my life, all those tall buildings. The only thing I could think was, "Wow." I was in awe of downtown Houston the minute we made it there in July of 1977 and I've been in awe of Houston ever since.

My dad belted out, "I have to stop on the Gulf Freeway."

We drove down a freeway that didn't seem to end. I later learned this was I-45 South, also known as the Gulf Freeway. There were people in cars everywhere in this town. Dad stopped at a place called Big State Coffee where he had worked during his disappearance two years earlier. He left us in the

hot car for about thirty minutes and came out smiling.

“I start my new job with Big State Coffee tomorrow,” he said enthusiastically.

We stopped by at least six motels before Dad found one decent and cheap enough for us to spend the night. We would need a few days to find a place to live and so we squeezed all of us together into one tiny room with two beds.

We lingered in the motel for weeks with very little money. On the first day Dad left us to go to work, he had forgotten to leave Mom money and we had very little food left in the ice chest. The motel room did not have a microwave, coffee pot, or refrigerator.

I’ll never forget my poor mother walking all of her kids over to the restaurant next door to the motel. While we were at the restaurant, she looked at the menu and grimaced. She ordered a club sandwich and tea. She took a knife, cut the club sandwich up, and shared it with all of us.

Our waitress, watching the ceremonial cutting of the sandwich, came over and asked if the girls would like a Coke. My sisters looked at Mom and my mom said, “Oh, no, ma’am, no, ma’am, no Coke.”

The waitress smiled knowingly and said to my mom, “Oh honey, it’s on the house.” Not only did she bring us Cokes, but she brought out something we’d never seen before. She brought out a big red basket of chips. She called them “tortilla chips” and something called “salsa” and then a side of green stuff she referred to as “guacamole.”

She said, “Here, y’all try this. It’s on the house.” A sense of relief passed over my mom’s face. I looked around and thought, chips, salsa, guacamole, what the hell? We’re not in North Carolina anymore!

Here we were in Texas trying to build a new life and if that waitress was a taste of Texas, I knew that I was going to like it here. Dad finally talked Big State Coffee into giving him an “advance.” We went to the grocery store and filled up the ice chest that night. We survived off sandwiches and ice from the motel ice machine for the next four weeks. It was not long until my dad said he had found us a place to live, so we all packed up yet again. We landed in a place called the Skyline South Apartment Complex and into a two-bedroom apartment. After the motel room, it seemed like the Taj Mahal.

The Skyline South apartments were teeming with people. We had never lived with so many people in one place. We had lived in trailers of course, and in houses, but never, never like this, in an enormous apartment complex. The apartment was very basic. There must have been a standard that all rental

furniture was to be a putrid brown color so no one would think of keeping it. Everything else we had in this apartment was from thrift stores, so it was used and smelled that way. But within three hours of Mom and us working, we had the place smelling fresh and clean as a whistle.

Skyline South Apartment Complex was like the Ellis Island of Houston. There were people from all over the country. The people next door to us, Joey and Sheila Augustino, were from Brooklyn, New York. They had three kids and they had come from New York because "Houston was booming" and they wanted to "make more money." The people across the way were from Missouri. Our neighbors above us had come down from Canada for work. There were four men from North Dakota. They were Native Americans working a piping job someplace outside of town.

Everyone was like us; they were from someplace else other than Texas looking for a better life. The friends I would soon meet at the apartment complex were also like me. They were sort of wide-eyed, hoping to figure out what in the hell was going on with their lives. None of my friends had any real experience in Texas and no one seemed to be a native.

There were a lot of kids my age in the complex and they took the first step to invite me to be a part of their group. The first person to knock on our door was a girl named Kitty from Ohio who simply asked, "Is that boy here? If he is, tell him to come to the pool." That was all it took. I was identified as being someone around their age and when I got to the pool, the area was full of kids having fun.

I waded into the pool and didn't have time to have anxiety because right away Kitty introduced me to everybody. At the time, I was 12 years old and in seventh grade, and glad I was making friends who would be going to school with me. The only problem was one of the boys named Ralph was very good-looking and I found feelings rising up in me. I knew deep down that I was attracted to guys by this point, and it wasn't going away. I was never sure if Gerry was playing doctor and experimenting, but I knew that for me the feelings and desires were real. I needed to stop being attracted to guys, so I did my best to avoid getting close to Ralph.

My other new friend was a guy named Troy whose dad was a mortgage broker from Wisconsin who had fallen on hard times. Troy was yet another hot guy that I had an attraction to right out of the gate. My friend Leanne's family was from Missouri. Leanne's mom was a waitress. Her Dad had been

laid off at a factory job somewhere in Missouri, so he moved them to Houston and then promptly abandoned them once they got here. These kids seemed to struggle the way I did.

When I started classes at South Houston Intermediate School, I realized quickly I was in the minority. As early as 1977 the school had a majority of Latino students. This was an abrupt and awesome change. The hallways of South Houston Intermediate School were filled with brown kids, most of whom spoke Spanish. I met kids who had recently immigrated from Mexico and had not been in the United States for very long, and other “Mexican kids” that had been here for generations and whose English was better than mine. It was an interesting mix of folks. Seventh grade is also where you learn “Texas history,” which I found fascinating. This began a lifetime of fascination with the history of my newfound state. But it was also where I discovered the dangers of being gay in Texas. I couldn’t hide in the hayloft or run through the fields of wilderness like I could in North Carolina. I was filled with raging hormones that were unfortunately drawn to guys.

It didn’t take long for the shower after PE class to present a terrible problem for me. Seventh grade in general had less supervision than my small-town middle school, and we never had to take a shower with other boys. The worst part was I developed a fantasy attraction to the exotic Latin guys, many of whom seemed much further along in their adolescence than I was. They looked like men, and one in particular, Anthony Benevidez, became a secret obsession.

Anthony was tall and muscular. He always undressed beside me in the gym, even though we rarely spoke. I would do the most awkward things to steal a glance at him as he undressed or as he dried off. Often, he and his other insanely hot friends would linger in the shower, and I would just stare at them whenever I didn’t think that they were looking. I was so embarrassed to feel myself growing erect as I stood near him taking a shower. I couldn’t help but stare at him but thought I was being careful, only glancing his way for a few surreptitious seconds.

One time I cut my shower short because I was afraid of getting an erection in the open where I couldn’t hide it. I was horrified that my body was betraying me. Somehow, I was able to prevent what would have put me in a terrible situation. I knew that if I ever got an erection in the shower during gym class that I would be labeled a “fag.” And once you were labeled a “fag,” they would

proceed to beat the shit out of you for the rest of the year.

I struggled with these desires, with a mixture of terror and awe, as I went through seventh grade. I ached to have someone like Gerry again. I found myself thinking about sex constantly. My friends also talked about sex all the time, but they had no idea I was thinking about guys when they were fantasizing about girls.

After school, I started hanging out with another guy named Gary who may have had the same tendencies as I had. He started the school year later than the rest of us. His family had moved down from Pittsburgh to find work. Gary was an anxious guy who was quick to smile and talk shit. He had green eyes, jet black hair, and looked like an old-fashioned Hollywood movie star. He and I became fast friends. Our friendship was also constantly strained by a very real, palpable attraction for each other that both of us resisted. We never spoke about it; I joined in with everyone else spewing hate about “fags and queers.”

I quickly learned that urban schools were different from the schools that I had attended in Florida and North Carolina. There was a real edge, constant friction, and fighting with fists, knives, and brass knuckles. I wasn't about to bring any attention to myself if I could help it. You had to be vigilant in Houston. This was the first time in my life that I was around real troublemakers. Half of my friends were truants on any given day, and many would be in detention or suspended from school at various times.

If any of these kids were struggling like we were, it was understandable that they would vent their rage in school and upon each other. My dad's job at Big State Coffee was not going well. That fall he became devastatingly sick with an ear infection and had to stay home for over a month. At first, he just tried to beat it with rest because we had no money for a doctor. By the time a neighbor lent my dad some money to go, the infection had nearly reached his brain. The doctor all but begged my dad to go to the hospital, but he wouldn't do it. There was no money for such things.

Big State Coffee fired my dad. The rent fell into significant arrears, and the world closed in on us. My Dad cut a deal with Joyce, the property manager, to do work around the apartment complex, and became the handyman for Skylane South. I was proud that he was being resourceful rather than leaving us high and dry again.

This job proved to be one of the best things to ever happen to Dad. No

one passed judgment on me, and no one passed judgment on him. We were living with working people no different from us. They understood what was happening to us. They realized that Dad had been sick and that we were struggling financially. Never once did anyone in the complex make fun of my father, me, or my family in any way. What happened, though, was they would come out and talk with us, give my dad beer, make his lunch, and one neighbor even gave him a new pair of gloves, while another brought him a new pair of sunglasses. People helped each other and we made friends with people from different cultures.

A man named Baker was one of the most interesting people we met at Skylane South. Baker was the epitome of cool and everything the seventies fashion had to offer. I never knew much about Baker, other than he played football at the University of Alabama. He talked rapturously about how he played football in the “early days” for Bear Bryant. Baker had a white wife named Lynn. The two of them were both expert card players, but I think they were hustlers. Almost every night Baker had six to eight people playing poker at his dining room table. They were not playing for fun, and inevitably, he and Lynn wiped them out. I asked Dad why he never played, and he explained in no uncertain terms that Baker was a professional and he could lose money without any help from the cards.

I know Baker and Dad were friends and liked to shoot the shit over beer. My Grandma Tevepaugh died in the spring, and my dad did not have the money to carry us to North Carolina for the funeral. He went to Baker, who said, “Brother, you don’t even need to give it a second thought.” Baker lent him the money and never asked for anything in return. I’m sure he knew it would be impossible for Dad to pay him back any time soon. But he didn’t care. He just lent him the money. The more surprising thing was Dad let him do it.

The Boulevard Methodist Church was packed full for Grandma Tevepaugh’s funeral. North Carolina looked different to me now. After seven months in Houston, my view of the world had already changed. The families were all happy to see us, but something inside me was different.

But Dad had let his guard down during this trip, and Martha heard we were back in Statesville. She alerted the sheriff, and my dad was arrested the day of the funeral for back child support. Dad now found himself in the Iredell County jail. We were broke and stranded in North Carolina, just like

old times. Ma Barkley cashed a life insurance policy to make bail for Dad and Dad called Baker who wired us more money so we could afford to get home. The day after Dad made bail, we tore out of North Carolina in a dash. Not a lot had changed in North Carolina, but a lot had changed for our family. Personally, I felt like I was going home when we left North Carolina and headed back to Houston.

When we returned, Dad figured out a way to pay Baker back. One small loan was okay, but this larger loan didn't sit well with him. A few days in jail were also humiliating.

More importantly, at least for the future of our family, Dad found a job at the Arco Lyondell Chemical plant in Mont Belvieu. Dad had no experience in the refineries, but he knew an opportunity when he heard one. All it took was a guy telling Dad there would be a "shutdown" at the Lyondell Plant and that he could get him a job as a "laborer." Dad knew how to fit in and learn as Texas refineries became our mainstay.

Dad's buddy picked him up daily, and they would perform maintenance on the plant. My dad was always looking to get ahead, and in short order, he became a Foreman at a chemical plant in Pasadena, Texas. Dad had a natural aptitude for all things mechanical, and it wasn't long before he made his way up the chain of skilled labor. Despite his lack of experience, he excelled at the refineries.

There was a bayou that ran behind the apartment complex, which became the perfect place for the kids to hide from the world of adults. We had graduated from pool games like "Marco Polo" to Spin the Bottle and experimentation. We became a close-knit group.

Our friend and neighbor, Bruce, worked at Putt-Putt, next door to the complex, and not only did he help us have fun without funds, but he did something that would change my life forever. Bliss's common definition is "perfect happiness and great joy." I do not find that definition too strong or too expressive for what I experienced on the muddy bayou that night. I had experienced something like it with Gerry, but now Bruce scored a box of Miller High Life beer. Some of us had gathered on the banks of the bayou when Bruce introduced us to these small seven-ounce beers. The commercials billed Miller High Life as the "champagne of beers." The beers weren't cold, but I didn't care. So that night, I was with my friends Troy, Bruce, and Ralph, all of whom were a little older than me. They encouraged me to join in because

it was not their first time drinking. Ironically, Dad had forbidden me to drink even though he did constantly. He had also forbidden me to smoke, but I would smoke a cigarette whenever I had the chance. But there was something about drinking that gave me pause. Bruce twisted off the cap and he handed me a beer. He was a lean 16-year-old with curly, wiry hair, and a Midwestern “aw shucks” persona.

Bruce swigged back a beer and smiled. My friend Ralph soon followed suit, and I said, “What the hell.” For the first time in my life, I drank a beer. I drank one, then I drank another, and I lost track at three. But the one thing I do remember is that I’d never felt greater peace and ease in my life than when I fell into this buzz on the banks of that bayou.

It was the first time in my life that I felt relief, I felt free. I loved the courage that coursed through me as I eased into my first deep beer buzz. I felt totally separated from this oppressive place and my problematic life. That night on the banks of the bayou, Miller High Life, the champagne of beers, gave me my first taste of bliss. Frankly, I’ve chased that feeling the rest of my life.

There was a water pipe that ran across the bayou. I had always been afraid to walk across to the other side. On that night, I actually ran across the pipe. It was like I was Superman; I ran across and then I ran back. I had no fear and total confidence.

Ralph and Bruce were laughing. I remember Ralph tackling me; he was buzzing too. He began to wrestle with me, his body touching mine. He was Mr. “I’m not a fag” but now he was fondling me, touching me, and holding me like never before. I loved every minute of it. The guys gave me the last beer out of the bunch as they left to go home. I laid back, alone, drinking the last beer. It was like I was floating away, separated from everything, experiencing peace. I guess I drifted off, but Ralph came back and shook me awake. He said, “You need to go, it’s late.” I followed him back to the complex. He walked me to Apartment 2 and hugged me. He had never hugged me before.

Flash forward from that night on the bayou, through all the self-loathing and failed relationships, and I wish I could have told my younger self to put down the beer and go home. I wish I could show that innocent boy it is better to sometimes feel pain than the nothingness of advanced alcoholism. That’s what I felt when I hit bottom: nauseating nothingness.

Twenty-one years later, there was nothingness, not bliss. You lose track of time in a semi-blackout. I had no clue how much time had passed, my whole

body ached, my head was killing me and I was lying on my back in my mom and dad's garage with no idea how I got there. Then I felt a grotesque wetness in my sweatpants. What I feared was true; I had pissed all over myself.

In my haze, I realized, "I can't live with or without alcohol." It was destroying me. That moment not long in the future was a far cry from that night on the bayou when everything was silly and fun. Alcohol was a solution and made me feel invincible. The water pipe that I ran across over the bayou was my proof. All the boys in the complex would walk across it easily, but until that night, I was always too scared to try. But with my beer buzz, I was a new man, no longer a boy.