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Writing *A Lesson Before Dying*

I WAS TEACHING AT THE University of Southwestern Louisiana in Lafayette when I came up with the idea for *A Lesson Before Dying*. And that would be around 1983 or 1984, before that school's name was changed to University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Now, the original idea was that the story would occur in the early 1980s. I wrote a letter to the warden at Angola, the state prison here in Louisiana, informing him who I was—a teacher at USL and the author of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* and several other books—and explaining that I had another novel in mind about a prisoner on death row, and would he, the warden, mind if I asked him a few questions? Question number 1: Would it be possible for someone not kin to the condemned man who was not a minister of religion or his legal advisor to visit him on death row? . . . About a week later I received a letter from the warden's office stating that the warden would not be able to guarantee me that kind of security. I immediately wrote a second letter assuring the warden that I, Ernest J. Gaines, had no intention of visiting Angola on a regular basis, but that I was writing a novel (and I emphasized the word *novel*), and I was wondering if it was possible that such a person—a teacher, for example—could visit a condemned man. Well, the warden's office never did answer my second letter, and maybe that was a blessing in disguise.

Being a writer-in-residence on any university campus, you're constantly being asked questions like, How's the writing coming along? and, When can we expect the next book? After *A Gathering of Old Men* was published in 1983, I was between books. That is, I was not writing. When a colleague of mine, Paul Nolan, asked me what I was doing, I told him I had a novel in mind and that I had written the warden at Angola. I told him the results of my second letter. I also gave him the general situation of the novel: a young man being in the wrong place at the wrong time who would be charged with murder. Paul told me that he knew of a case I might be interested in reading about. It concerned a young man, a seventeen-year-old boy, who had been sentenced to die in the electric chair here in Louisiana. Something happened that day with the chair. It did not work properly, and

the boy was *not* executed but put back into his cell to await what next step the governor would take. Paul told me he realized that the two cases—the real one and the one I was imagining—didn’t sound the same, but I might benefit from reading the real case; he had a lot of material about it if I would like to do so.

This particular case Paul referred me to, having happened about 1946 or ’47, appeared familiar to me, and around a time I had written about in previous stories —“The Sky Is Gray,” “Three Men,”—and the novel *Of Love and Dust*. Besides that, the incident it involved happened only a few miles from where I was now teaching and no more than seventy miles from where I had lived as a child, the area where most of my previous stories had taken place. There were so many similarities—the work, religion, the food that people ate, everything. The case Paul recommended hadn’t happened in the parish where I grew up and its story was different from mine; still, I decided, I would use some of the information from the case material. Both young men are black. Both nearly illiterate. Both were involved in the murder of a white man. In Paul’s case, the young man confessed to the murder. My young man would always maintain his innocence, to the end. No defense witnesses were called in either case. Only white men served on the juries. In the forties there were no women and, of course, no blacks on the jury. After reading all the information that Paul had given me, I asked myself, Why not bring my story back to the forties? If I set the story in that decade, there was so much material that I already had. I could use the plantation as home for my characters. I knew life on the plantation because I had written about it in several other books—*The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, *Of Love and Dust*, and the stories in *Bloodline*. I could use the church school for background, the church where generations of my folks had worshiped and where I had attended school my first six years. I could use the crop as background—when it was planted, when it was harvested. I knew the food the people ate, knew the kind of clothes they wore, knew the kind of songs they sang in the fields and in the church. The best thing to do was to bring my story back to this familiar period where I was most comfortable.

I read everything Paul Nolan gave me to read and all he recommended. His young man would lose and be executed a year and a week from the day when he was first placed in that chair. The case went all the way to the Supreme Court in Washington, D.C., where it lost by a decision of 5 to 4.

Because I teach creative writing at the university and because I teach at night, I have a chance to draw people from outside the university, and I always get attorneys. I’ve had one or more in each class since I started college teaching in 1981. All

have a dream of being a Scott Turow or a John Grisham. During this time when my novel's plot was developing, one of my students was representing a condemned man on death row. And I would always ask him questions about this client: for example, what emotions did he show, knowing that he was going to die on a certain date, at a certain hour. I could always tell when my student had visited with his client because of the tired and pained look he brought into the classroom. He was much older than this young man, and through the years he had gotten very close to him. He had gotten too emotionally involved, and he knew it, and it showed.

He, the student of mine, helped me in many ways. He brought me pictures of the state prison, pictures of the electric chair formerly used there—"Gruesome Gerty." He answered lots of questions. I asked him what kind of wood the chair was made of, how much the chair weighed, how wide and thick the straps were that went around the arms and legs of the condemned. And I kept a picture of the chair on my desk, especially when writing the last chapters of the novel.

Another colleague of mine knew someone whose father-in-law was the sheriff of a small town. She asked me if I would like to meet this official—I think he was an ex-sheriff by then, but everyone still called him "Sheriff." When we arrived at the house, I was introduced to the sheriff, to his wife, and to another man. The sheriff's wife served us coffee. I was served last, and I saw how much her hands shook when she served me. I was certain that she had never served coffee to a black man before, but after all, I had written *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* and also knew someone who knew her daughter-in-law. So she, of course, could show some of her southern hospitality. The sheriff and the other man wanted to know where I came from, did I like the South, how long had I been teaching at the university. I told them I was born and raised about sixty miles from where we now sat, that my people had been there since the time of slavery, and that I had been teaching at the university for about five years, and I liked it very much. That relaxed them a bit, and we finished our coffee. I asked the sheriff the same question I had proposed to the warden in my letter: "Could someone who was not a close relation, a minister of religion, or a legal advisor visit someone on death row?" The sheriff told me it would be left entirely to the discretion of the sheriff of the jail, who was totally in charge and made all the decisions. Now that bit of information was extremely vital. I had to find a reason to pressure my fictional sheriff into allowing someone whom he may not even like, to visit the prisoner.

From time to time some of my colleagues at the university would ask me how the novel was coming along. When I would tell them that I was still trying to get everything straight in my mind, some of them would offer advice. One fellow who considered himself a writer, too, advised finding something on the sheriff that he would not want people to know about. I told him it sounded like blackmail, and I didn't want to have anything to do with that. He told me he had another idea: The sheriff's wife had had an abortion in the past, and you know how these Southerners felt about that. I told him I didn't care for that idea either. He said, Well, let's say the sheriff's wife had had a relationship with a black man, and your character threatens to expose it—by God, that would light the fire. And more than likely get my character killed before he ever got to the jail, I thought.

The original idea of the novel, when I thought the story would take place in the eighties, was that Grant, the narrator, would have been living in California, and he would come to Louisiana one summer to visit his aunt and eventually get involved in visiting Jefferson, the young man on death row. That was the original reason for the questions about whether someone other than a legal advisor or a minister could visit him because I was sure the sheriff would not want an outsider, especially someone from the North, interfering with his business. It was not until I decided that the story would take place in the forties that I would make Grant a teacher who had gone away for his education and then returned to teach on the same plantation where he was born and raised and where all of his people had lived for several generations. However, precisely because Grant was educated, the sheriff still might not have wanted him to be there.

That writing colleague at the university had given me an idea about how to solve my problem when he mentioned the sheriff's wife several times. I would not cause her to have an abortion or a black lover, but I would put her in a position where she would pressure her husband into allowing Grant to visit Jefferson in prison. On the plantation where I was born, my maternal grandmother worked at the big house as cook for many years, and I myself had worked in the yard there on several occasions, collecting eggs from chickens that laid in the grass, gathering pecans, and picking fruit from the different trees. Now, suppose I made the sheriff's wife a member of the family where my grandmother had worked all these years. Wouldn't she, my grandmother, have done favors, extra favors, for members of that family? Would that be reason enough for her to feel that she could go to them for a favor, to get the sheriff to allow the narrator to visit the prisoner? So

I created two elderly women. They were Tante Lou, the narrator's aunt, and Miss Emma, the prisoner's godmother. And those two would apply the pressure.

I have said that initially I wanted the story to take place in the eighties and that the narrator, Grant, would come from California. Once I had decided that the story would take place in the forties and that Grant had lived on the plantation all his early life, had gone away to be educated, and had returned to teach, another plot element was added. I didn't want to write just another story of someone waiting to be executed, which had been done many times before. To make my story different, I made Grant also a prisoner, of his environment: Grant teaches in a church. He hates teaching. He hates the South. He hates everything around him. This is the forties, remember, and the professions for blacks to enter were extremely limited. You could be a teacher and teach black children. You could be an undertaker, a barber, an insurance collector for other blacks. You could own a small grocery store or a nightclub. You could *not* be an attorney or a doctor. You could *not* be a banker or a politician—certainly you could *not* run for political office. Not in a small place like this in the South at that time. Grant wishes to run away. He's been well educated and he knows there's a better world somewhere else. But he has an aunt, Tante Lou, and just as she and Miss Emma exert pressure on the sheriff, they do the same to Grant to keep him in the South. Eventually he becomes involved in Jefferson's plight, and in the end it will benefit both of them. He will teach Jefferson to live for a while and to die with dignity. Jefferson, in turn, will help Grant find himself.

In 1986 a young female attorney in my class asked me if I would like to meet the lawyer who had defended the young man whose case Paul Nolan had spoken about. I told her I certainly would. She brought the old man to my house—a Cajun fellow, probably in his seventies, bent, frail. My student and I made coffee, and she had brought cookies, and we three sat on the porch. It was this man who told me about the traveling electric chair. I had heard about it, read about it, but I had not spoken to anybody who knew about it firsthand. He told me about the generator that accompanied the chair because sometimes our Louisiana weather causes the electricity to be erratic. To avoid that problem, the state prison sent its own generator. We don't use the electric chair in Louisiana now, but some type of lethal injection is given instead for execution.

But let's go back to the late forties, when Gruesome Gerty did travel from one parish to another. At that time the execution was administered in the parish where the crime was committed, not necessarily at the state prison, as it is today. This

attorney told me about how the chair with the generator was delivered in a truck, a special truck that delivered it the morning of or the night before the execution. He told me that the time of execution in that particular parish was between noon and 3:00 on Friday. He told me the generator had to be tested beforehand in order to be sure it was working in time. He told me you could hear the generator at least two city blocks away from the jail. He had witnessed the execution of a young man who had been sent to the chair a year earlier. During that year this attorney had argued the case I'd become interested in before an appellate court in Louisiana, the supreme court in Louisiana, and the United States Supreme Court in Washington. His argument was that it would be cruel and unusual punishment to send this young man back to that chair. But he failed in each court, and a year and a week from that first date, the young man was executed. Suddenly the attorney became silent and brought his hands up to his face. My student moved closer to him and held him. He lay his head on her shoulder and wept. Forty years later he could still remember that generator, that chair.

Students are always asking me, Do you know the ending of your novel when you start writing? And I have always responded with the analogy of getting on a train in San Francisco to go to New York. I know some facts. I'm leaving San Francisco for New York. It takes three or four days to get there. I also know the states I'll travel through and some of the things I'll do. I know that I'll go to the dining car to eat. I'll go to the club car for a drink. I'll read the book I brought with me. I'll get so many hours of sleep. These things I know. What I don't know is how the weather will be the entire trip. I don't know who will get on the train and how they'll be dressed or where they'll sit. I don't know all the valleys and hills that I'll cross during my trip. I don't know all the different colors of nature, the colors of the leaves on the trees, the colors of the different crops in the different fields. I don't know all the turnings and twists of the rail or when the train will make a sudden stop. In other words, I can't anticipate everything that will happen on the trip, and sometimes I don't even get to New York, but end up in Philadelphia.

When I started *A Lesson Before Dying*, I knew that Jefferson would be sentenced to die. Because in Louisiana in the forties, if he had been caught on the premises where a white man had been killed, with a bottle of liquor in his hand and money in his pocket, that added up to guilt. But would he be executed? I didn't know for certain. Maybe the governor at the last moment would pardon him when the state could not definitely prove his guilt. The story could have ended there because by then Grant could have reached him, convinced him that he was not the animal he

had been so described in court, but that he was as much human as any of them and probably even more so. But the story is not whether Jefferson is innocent or guilty, but rather how he feels about himself at the end. Fortunately, the Cajun attorney gave me a different alternative. After he described that tarpaulin-covered truck delivering that chair and that generator on an early foggy morning, I knew that I had no other ending than Jefferson being executed. I wanted the reader to see that truck and that chair and to hear that generator.

Two things that I had not anticipated when I began the novel and that would be vital in the story are the radio and the notebook. After I had gone so far into the novel and Jefferson still refused to communicate with anyone, I knew I had to find some way to make him talk. On that plantation where I lived as a child, on Saturday night the people of one or two of the homes in the quarter would give a house dance—a “supper,” as we also called it. At these suppers, there would be food and drinks and music, the music coming from an old gramophone. On one of his visits to the jail, Grant mentions the music to Jefferson. When Jefferson shows some sign of interest, Grant promises to get him a radio so he can have some music to listen to. The idea of the radio was not planned, but it turned out to be a most important turn in the story. From that moment on, there is some limited communication between the two of them. Still, Jefferson refuses to open up completely to Grant or his godmother, Miss Emma, or the minister of the church. So we know little of what he’s thinking about or what he thinks about life. And I felt we had to know him better. Once I had decided he would be executed, I knew, though he would not reveal his thoughts to anyone, still in some way he had to give the reader some information. I didn’t want any last efforts, speaking on the walk to the chair. I needed the information long before then.

Thus, the notebook. Grant would bring him a notebook and a pencil and tell him to write down anything he wished. The least little thoughts. When Grant visits again, he sees that Jefferson has written in the notebook and erased. And Grant tells him not to erase, never to erase, just go on and write his first thoughts the best way he can, which he does from then on. Jefferson is barely literate. He has never written a letter in his life. He was only barely able to write his elementary school assignments. But now, with his pencil and notebook, he tries to define his humanity—in the few days he has left to live. He does not know whether to write above the lines or across the lines, so he does both. He does not erase. He does not capitalize. He uses no punctuation marks. He writes what comes into his mind. He writes at night when he has light because he does not want others to

see him doing so during the day. He writes the night before his execution because the sheriff promises him that he can have all the light he wants on his last night. His diary is made up of small things, about the people he knew and how they affected his life, about insignificant incidents. He thinks about justice and injustice. And he wonders about God. All of this is written above and across the lines of his notebook, without capitalization and punctuation.

Grant does not attend the execution. Though he has worked hard with Jefferson, he does not have the courage to be there at his death. The young deputy brings Jefferson's notebook to him and tells him that Jefferson was the strongest man in that room when he came to die. The young deputy gives Grant this information outside the schoolhouse. When Grant returns to his class, his students are waiting, standing at attention, their shoulders back, heads high, to hear of the execution. Grant, cynical to this moment, looks at them, crying.

Writing for me is discovery. If I knew everything when I began a novel, I'm afraid it would be boring to write. I do not know everything that's going to happen in the book. I don't want to know everything. I want to discover, as you, the reader, wish to discover, what it's all about. Those little unanticipated things that happen on the train between San Francisco and New York keep me writing and you, the reader, turning the pages.