

Book of the Dead

by Virginia Archer

1985. My mother's fake tits nearly killed me on the way in. I came out blue as a fish and breathless. Not enough room for the milk I would need and all that plastic beauty in one body. When the doctors decided I'd make it, my father smoked his wooden tobacco pipe and played Chopin on the piano. Bad sign when a newborn doesn't cry.

1991. We'll fry some fish when I get back, my father said. He and the dog loaded the boat to check the trot lines behind the cypress. He left the just opened can of Budweiser on the white stone table where I sat making clover crowns. When he was out of eyesight, I grabbed the icy, silver can and had my first taste. "Original sin" they call it. Astonished, I walked over to the water's edge and poured my fizzy, gold questions out into the bayou. Hide and seek under water oaks. Crickets, cattails and bottle rockets. Moonlit barbeques amid the cicada and mosquito repellent. His foul moods. The silence we kept. Poured it all out. A banishing. Did you do this? he asked, holding the empty can. Swear to God, and say you didn't do it. I looked squarely back at him, swore to God and, for reasons I didn't understand, told my first lie.

1995. With my best friend in tow, I climbed the magnolia tree around the corner to spy on the boy making a sugar baby for class. I wore a black corduroy jumper with large girlish pockets and a small bouquet of jasmine tucked behind my ear. We watched through the window as the boy's tan hands cut the nylon stockings that his mother had gotten from the drugstore. One day, he'd be valedictorian. He filled the peach-colored mesh with white Domino sugar like the teacher said. Cup after cup, he made our baby. I wished I could knock on the door and help him sew on navy blue buttons as eyes, but his mama was narcoleptic, and it embarrassed him to have company. I hoped he knew I was in his tree and that I hid my mother too. I hoped that my watching helped him make our baby right. I'd never been kissed. Would he want to kiss me now that we had a baby together? It's only a sugar baby, said my friend. Are we old enough to have real babies?

2003. By junior year, I knew that I needed out of that town with only one stoplight. Still, I was nice to the over-caffeinated band guys that never knew what to say and the journalism kids that had too much ambition. I skipped class to go to the library and liked the teachers but refused to follow the rules. In town, my father never smiled and my mother, who was on disability, was always stoned. She'd stand up in church during prayer requests and say things to get money. People thought she was sad and sweet, so they gave. I remember the day I left. Behind me: the miles and miles of cow pastures and rows of sweet potato prone to rootworm, the noxious chemical plant that made paint emulsifier and the washed-up marines who rushed virgins to third base. The Baptist

church lock-ins, the rich kids who snuck out at night and smoked on the ninth hole and who stole for fun, the stray trailer park kittens, the meth heads that got tried as adults at

seventeen and the Friday night tailgates at the Quickstop. The children's home where run-aways played table tennis and memorized the New Testament, the glowing, green fields where boys crashed into each other for glory and sex. My father's no-smiling face, my mother half-awake at the wheel. All behind me. And that one stoplight slowly fading in the distance, a menacing eye winking in the rearview mirror.

2006. We married in the spring of 2011 because his grandmother wanted to throw a real wedding with cake and dancing, but I'd already married him in my way back in July of '06. We'd met in the stairwell of a beige condominium in a gentrifying neighborhood. I was reading Mrs. Dalloway and living out of a car after my father lost his job and then his money and then our house. I was all freedom and words, no roots. He was training for baseball season and knew how to play the piano. His apartment smelled like clean laundry and cold air. He did sit ups with perfect form while I watched. He was orderly and embodied. All structure and discipline. He liked that I was strangely innocent and always said the right thing. I googled "Love at first sight."

2012. The tiny white pills that took my father. It was a long way down. Lost his eyeglasses and was put in solitary. He forgot my name. Forgot the tiny white pills and his pain too. The soup kitchen ladies looked after him in the June heat. Served him mercy spoon by spoon. The autopsy report read "heart attack," but anyone could tell you what did him in was all that mercy at once. Grew his heart too fast and too big for any one man to handle.

2013. See you later, Mom. Not if Jesus comes back first, my mother said, cheerful as a daisy at rapture.

2014. I'll break it off with her and move us to Paris. Say the word. Prideful, no words came. I'd googled "How to be the perfect wife," but that was all over now. Bury your heart in New Orleans. Like an old Western, but broken, no one pulled their gun at sundown. No duel to satisfy justice. We kept warm on the edge of the lake by having impeccable oysters with beer and making funny noises. We laughed at the strangeness of life, at the art of kissing, and at how despite it all we'd known real love. A wire. Go to Paris anyway, he said.

2016. That December, flamboyant Nativity scenes electrified front yards. Believers with candles flocked from all over to the house on the corner with a towering, kitsch statue of the Holy Mother said to have bled tears. Our very own suburban stigmata. It was nearly Christmas when he called to say they were pregnant. He didn't know if she'd keep it. But she did. They did. It was supposed to be your baby, he said but shouldn't have. He played me a song about the sun on his guitar, and we said goodbye one last time. I didn't let him hear me cry, but I should have. He put up the biggest tree in town that Christmas. I fed my friends hot chocolate and told ghost stories by the fire. But neither one of us forgot how we had biscuits with butter and instant coffee after sex or how we decided time travel was possible but not nothingness.

2018\.

“Gone to Glory” they call it in the South when someone dies. It was a long drive through rolling cow pasture, speed traps and falling-down barns to see my dying mother, whose third and most devoted husband refused to leave her side or to change his “Life is too short not to be Irish” t-shirt. I made white beans and cornbread, which burned, and prayed to apocryphal faces of Mary while my three aunts took shifts reading aloud from Psalms. We ignored someone’s “She’s a Brick House” ringtone for the better part of the night and draped sleepy, overweight dachshunds across my mother’s failing body like luxurious furs. She told me what she knew for sure. That God is everything good. That, to her, Heaven was a baby doll house with a porch and two dogs. And a vegetable garden in case you still need to eat in Heaven, which was endearing because that had been her life. When she finally passed, we gathered under some pine trees and planted daffodil bulbs to remember her by. As I drove past the last stop light on the way out of town, through the football fields and the hypnotic whirl of snowy white cotton rows, I realized her triumph: despite it all, Mama died right.

Revision #1

Created 2026-08-10 20:53:15 UTC by Michael Moore

Updated 2026-08-10 21:10:26 UTC by Michael Moore