

*This is an exercise from a memoir writing class I took a few years back. We'd talk about things for a few minutes, then they'd offer a prompt in class. When I started, my assumption was I'd write something completely different. As often happens to me, I defaulted to my 1973 setting.*

“Assumption”

Charles Moses Walker was a sharecropper's son in Alabama, an Army cook in the South Pacific, and my ride to school in New Rochelle. I don't recall how my mother first met him and brought him inside our family, but it's enough to say that he was from Birmingham and she was from Birmingham and we kept everyone from Birmingham in Westchester County within arm's reach.

My mother's family had been around the South for hundreds of years in the old-line holdouts along the Mississippi and the Gulf. They had the honor of digging the canals of New Orleans and the privilege of dying on the fields of Virginia in the Civil War. They received a land grant to settle Birmingham after the war and mother's father was the first child born there. He became a judge and his parcels turned into valuable real estate as the city grew. The Depression wiped them out, the parents died, my mother's brother turned from a promising sports career to a paying job on the railroad to support the family, and the women all came North. My mother and her two sisters—who called each other by their childhood names their entire lives—resided within a five-mile radius of each other in a city in Westchester County. Charles fit right in with this group. They had all left people behind to come to this place with the strange accents and the cold, cold winters.

It was a strange household. My uncle's daughter lived with us for a few years, my brothers and sister were almost a decade older than me, and all these Alabamans lived happily in the heart of Yankee territory. We kept everyone happily confused, too. We were the Roman Catholics from the Protestant South living in suburban New York with the Jewish last name. We went to Catholic school filled with people with O's at the front of names, A's at the end of them, and as many Macs as the Dublin phone book. We were taught not to judge others but to open our hearts to them. It was easier to say than do.

I tried to follow the teachings at the grammar school, let's call it Assumption, but I could not help tweaking my third-grade teacher, Mrs. Chambers, known to older kids at the school as “Godzilla.” I was always making jokes and it was easier to put a smile on the crucifix than on her tight, angry lips. She kept her red hair on top of her head with an occasional curl. I guess it was the latest thing because it was the kind of hairdo I saw on TV, but I mostly watched reruns of old shows, so what did I know. Mrs. Chambers desperately wanted to break me of the habits that served me well in Mrs. Voto's second grade. She forced me to hold the pencil the “right” way, standing over me with her hot, stale breath making my fingers succumb long enough for her to move on to the next desk. She handed me my first detention. A pink slip of paper that entitled the bearer to a

psychologically ruinous hour after school writing out pages from the encyclopedia at random, only to have Brother Galway tear them up upon leaving.

And she wasn't afraid to embarrass someone she thought would wilt under stress. My book report on *The Star-Spangled Banner*, which some teachers would have hailed as a patriotic triumph during the final year of an unpopular war far away, became a controversial subject in her classroom. Granted, the only words in the visually stunning book were those of the National Anthem, but I never forgot them. (Could Martin Citardi today tell me the last line of *Johnny Tremaine*?) After consulting with my mother, Mrs. Chambers told me in front of the class, "I've written 'fair' on your book report, but I thought it was poor." Thanks.

There were two students in the class who had been left back, serving their second term in Godzilla's cell block. That was a haunting specter and a true threat, but there was only one third grade class, and I wanted to make the thought of me spending another year with her as repugnant to her as it was to me. One spring morning I unexpectedly got my chance.

My brothers needed to be at high school much earlier than I did, so it didn't make sense for them to drive me. Charles elected to transport me to school a few mornings a week. We happily made the 10-minute drive in his blue Chevy Malibu, listening to WINS Newstime in the morning and laughing as Bob Grant berated callers in the afternoon.

Mrs. Chambers watched one morning as I stepped out of the Malibu. I knew she'd demand to know the situation, in her fake innocent tone. Indeed, she inquired before the whole class, "Who was that man that dropped you at school this morning?" I paused. Charles Moses Walker was the most likable man I knew. I saw him more often than my father. He told me about how things used to be, and walked carefully around my soldiers set up in every corner of the house, and he made the best egg sandwich with ketchup I've ever tasted. I didn't know much about grandparents—mine were dead long before I was born—but I decided that those were the kind of things grandparents might do. Whether they were paid or not.

"He's my grandfather," I said. It was a fair answer, but she probably felt it was poor. Still, she didn't say anything. I thought she might say, "But he's a Negro," but it never came. We moved on to the next lesson. Come June she passed me along with everyone else. Or, I guess I should say, I passed her.