

FINDING BONES

By Lisa Giles

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Abbeville, South Carolina, September 2015

I.

Last September, in our electric Tesla
David and I drove to visit my sister Genie in South Carolina--
where she and I were born--to find our ancestors.
Genie is two years younger, close to family and our roots.

II.

Genie and I were on the hunt for the bones of our ancestors
in the Abbeville cemetery.

"Meet me at 11 at the mall and I'll lead you to the cemetery,"
said short, elderly Reverend Erwin--with animated round face,
laughing eyes, glasses--
minister at Rocky River Presbyterian.

We turned onto a long, rutted gravel road that went for miles,
it seemed,
way back in the woods. The September day was hot and muggy.
Who would ever drive down this isolated road?
Are my ancestors lost to civilization?

Finally we reached the Abbeville Cemetery--
old, beside the road--size of a football field,
lichen and black spots dotted eroded cement tombstones
musty, rough to touch. Some names illegible, worn down over years.
An enormous maple shaded gravestones. The heat enveloped us
as we walked through.

As we drove up, an older gray and white sedan with rumbling engine--
two women and a man--was leaving the cemetery.

Reverend Erwin stopped, backed up, got out of his car, asked the driver
to come back and meet us.

The driver was Carolyn Horton-- early 60s, slightly overweight, tall, shoulder-length wavy brown hair, sparkling eyes, fast-talking voice, dressed in a pale pink sleeveless blouse, black capris-- an extrovert--5th cousin, family genealogy queen, ready with details about the Gileses.

The other passengers in the car--Carolyn's cousin Barbara and her husband Dan--maternal Horton family side.

"You--Lisa and Genie--and I are direct descendants of Revolutionary War veteran Capt. James Hervey Giles, born in 1744, and of his son Andrew, postmaster of Abbeville," said Carolyn.

Here were our family's bones.

As I listened to her talk of our ancestors in her soft, pressured Southern voice, my eyes widened, my heart beat faster, I couldn't breathe. I smiled widely, like a monkey as I floated, trying to ground myself in this place.

III.

Carolyn asked, "Can you come to the family reunion this weekend?" My first family reunion.

At the century-old Belmont Inn, in the middle of town, we stayed the weekend with antique furniture.

Hall table--

1895 vintage cast iron round radiator--4 feet high, 5 feet across, white tablecloth, turn-of-the-century marble lamp, gold-black brocade lampshade, pearls and black pompoms.

A long stairway led to the bedrooms and our spindle bed.

IV.

At the reunion were 25 descendants of patriarch Capt. James Giles. Genie, Carolyn and I were descendants of his son Andrew Giles. The others--descendants of William Giles, another son of Capt. James.

Saturday night--reunion dinner at our hotel.

Descending the tall staircase for the meal, we smelled fried chicken and baked cornbread.

Dinner served family-style long table, white tablecloths

Southern foods, remembered and loved--salt-cured ham, sweet tea, cornbread, soft gray-green simmered collard greens, crispy fried chicken, creamy mashed potatoes, salty ham-hock flavored green beans cooked hours, peach cobbler, whipped cream.

Across the dining hall, Carolyn's book of Giles family ancestors, copies of 19th century photos, wills and documents. I pored through the pictures.

All evening, I peered into faces of our relatives looking for a resemblance to myself or Genie but did not see any.

Tonight we met a family of Gileses who attended our Presbyterian church in Greenville, SC, in the early '60s, when I was a teenager--their oldest girl was about 9.

The little girl in that family was also Lisa Giles. We were not related before, but we are now.