

Faith, Hope and Fiction

Rounding Home

By Louise Caiola

Randy pitched a perfect no-hitter, his second in a month. Fresh out of high school, he'd been playing summer ball for a local team, and had the minor league scouts scratching around – dogs after a tasty old chicken bone buried just below the mound. I watched him, his right shoulder packed in ice, his back sunk into Dad's easy chair (having secured the rights to the throne), his heels balanced on the red leather ottoman.

“Hey, Randy,” I said from the kitchen. He turned for a slicing glance. With the Nikon mid-air, I snapped.

“Every time, Linny?” he asked, and then looked around for something, anything, he could throw at me, with his left hand which meant he'd miss.

“Not for much longer,” I answered. I had 22 year-old itchy legs, anxious thoughts and feet pointed north.

“What's so great about New York?” Randy stuck his neck out waiting for the floor fan to present a dusty breeze. A thin film of sweat had gathered at his forehead painting his dark blonde hair brown.

“It’s not West Virginia, for one thing.” I paused for an argument but none came. Not even a minor debate. He and Dad had about had it with me and my “big city notions,” the same ones I’d been boring people with since I could manipulate a coherent paragraph.

“You’ll miss it here,” my little brother concluded. Not a warning or a threat, just a fact as he saw it.

I scanned the immediate vicinity. Green paisley wallpaper smothered the sheet rock as far as the eye could see. Coco colored carpet regurgitated itself all over the oak floorboards (had it once been beige?). Swap-meet furniture finds littered the spaces between the doorways. Miss it here? Hardly.

“Is there aspirin?” Randy asked.

Of course. Kitchen cabinet left of the fridge, behind the Morton’s salt canister. I should know; I’d put it there.

I extracted two, grabbed a Flintstones collectible glass from the drain board, and tugged at the tap. He’d have to learn to do these things for himself soon enough. I brought them to him and he swallowed fast.

“Is this what you want? This life?” I asked, my voice barely above white noise. “Really?”

“It’s as good a life as any.” It was a response supplied indirectly through our father, Andrew McCormack. Part of the McCormack Mantra. Well, maybe for *them* it was as good a life as any. Not for me. And it wasn’t for her, either. My mother, Ellen McCormack. Was she still calling herself that? Perhaps she was going by Ellen Smith or Jones or Anything New, as long as it was untied to anything in this town, this house, that marriage.

Dad swept in carting the old Igloo cooler, always nearly empty after having provided the team with some form of hydration – non-alcoholic (too bad).

“Great game, Randy. Linny, did you get some good action shots?” He tipped the cooler over into the drain. Winged ice chips obeyed the law of gravity with a collective clank.

“Yup.” I waved the camera above my head. A white flag. I was done. Stick a fork in me. Before long they’d need to recruit a new photographer/housekeeper/surrogate parental unit of the female persuasion.

Dad cast me a wink; eyes slightly flat, grin not full across. He’d never keep me back. It wasn’t his way. “Some folks got motors in their souls.” McCormack Mantra # 2.

Mom had a turbine engine inside of hers. I was guessing she was an apple tree and I was a little sour apple.

“Hey, Dad?”

He spun at the waist, his face scribbled over in pink sun streaks, his hair leaving his scalp behind. I pressed the shutter. He drew out a sigh between his words,

“Every time, Linny.” Not a question. Just a fact.

I packed light, only three small suitcases and one small bank book. I planned to stay with a friend from school until I got settled. Daisy was originally from Manhattan, went to WVU with me, and then rushed back home again. She was a flower that had grown up between the city sidewalk cracks. I’d been raised a weed in a field of grass, dirt, and anonymous rocks.

I checked my reflection in the mirror above my desk. I looked just like Ellen Whoever: Same near-set eyes, green if the light said so. Same strawberry blonde hair, twisted into spirals if the weather said so. A dozen greeting cards were tucked into the frame around the glass, Hallmark: when you care enough to send the very best. I don’t know why I’d kept them. They were unoriginal, borrowed phrases, worn-out clichés. Like the one she sent when I graduated

from college last year and she couldn't attend. It said. "Follow your dreams." Always signed with a double X single O sandwich. She didn't come this past June when Randy wore his cap and gown. His high school graduation didn't rate either, I suppose. I stifled a smile, one that proved my lips curved just like hers. I told myself she wasn't a monster even if she'd followed her own dreams in the opposite direction of her husband and two teenaged kids. That was five years ago.

She called all the time now, more and more every day. "Thinking of you, Linny." You too. "Any new boyfriends, Linny?" Nope. "How is Randy doing with those home runs?" He's a pitcher not a runner. "I'm arranging for a trip back to pay a visit." Spectacular.

I beat down the stairs, thirteen in all, fourth one from the top squeaks, hit the landing with a resounding "I'm outta here" thud. Randy reported the temperature outdoors to be a rousing 78 degrees, clear skies— ideal backdrop for being New York-bound. Dad made sure that I'd had the oil changed in my car, tires checked for the proper air pressure, gas gauge registering full. He hoisted my bags into the back seat.

"You have the directions?" He'd only asked that ten times already.

I pointed at the GPS plugged into the cigarette lighter. My father nodded. He was doing all he could to keep his tone the perfect pitch of happy. Even if he wanted to beg me to stay. Even if his throat wanted to close up tight and force out a sound that resembled a cry. He wouldn't.

Randy leaned into the hood. "Don't buy any bridges."

I smiled. "You keep them striking out."

After two tight hugs and a chorus of "call me when you get there," I was off. Past the clock tower with its sickly bongos on the hour, over the railroad tracks (slow down or lose an

axle), up River Drive where the street sign is missing the first R, by the bakery that gives out free sticky buns on Sundays if you get there before nine, and the dry cleaners where the air smells like fabric softener outside. The back-of-your-hand familiar places I'd known for far too long already. I needed new hands. The nice GPS lady predicted I had a long way to go before that would happen.

I slipped in a CD, some mixed country tunes. Daisy liked jazz better. My mother was more of an R & B person. Dad had the blues once. He didn't think I knew. It was shortly after Mom moved out. I came home from school in the middle of the day when he wasn't expecting me to – fire drill gone bad. I approached the house where the windows were up and heard what I thought was the TV blaring out loud. Surely it was set to National Geographic and one of those shows was playing about how illegal poachers arrived in Asia or Africa and slaughtered innocent elephants for their tusks. The poor animals were suffering so – writhing in pain, their calls for help booming over the tall jungle tree tops. I ran inside to turn it off. But the TV wasn't on at all. I followed the noise until it peaked just outside my father's bedroom door. Then I peered inside. He was stomach side down on his bed; his knees drawn in to his chest, his arms wrapped around them, his face swallowed up by the pillow. He hadn't ever begged her not to go. The words had to end up someplace.

I stopped at hour four for a bladder break. The restroom was different. The people were too. I tumbled back into my car, dumped my purse on the passenger seat and turned the key. My bag slipped onto the floor. The photos fell out. The ones from that afternoon at home after Randy's game. My brother with a sore arm and half a grin. My dad with a look of sweet compliance.

“Every time, Linny.”

My cell phone rang before I could put the car in reverse. Probably Daisy checking on where I was.

“Hello?”

“Linny? Mom here. How are you? Your father says you’re well on your way to New York. I’m impressed with you, darling. I always knew no moss would gather under those little toes of yours.”

I cut the motor right then. “Where have you been?”

“Oh I was out this morning for a jog. Why? Did you call?”

“No, Mom. I mean where have you been for five years? You just don’t take up and leave like that. It isn’t the right thing to do. You hurt people. Don’t you realize that? Don’t you know?”

The phone went silent. She tried to explain, the way she’d done before. I pretended the call was lost. She didn’t try me back. I started the car once more and slid it in gear.

I didn’t make it as far as the George Washington Bridge; not even close. Sometimes in life you have to hang onto your big city notions for a while longer. I figured they’d keep. Not a fact. Just an opinion.

The old clock tower croaked out 10 p.m. when I rounded home. River Drive had just closed up tight for the evening. I’d be back there in the morning for the buns, no doubt. On second thought, I’d done a lot of going and coming for one day. Maybe Dad would get the buns this time around. I’d invented a new McCormack Mantra of my own right then: New hands can happen one finger at a time. The motor idled in our driveway. I’d shut it down. For now.

Louise Caiola lives, works, writes and plays in the place she’s known best for most of her life.

She invites you to stay tuned for the debut of her first novel to be released early next year, entitled Wishless.