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Prelude

James Smith Allen

Southern Illinois University Carbondale, jsallen@siu.edu

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A Privileged Past

**Recollections of a World Apart in Six Acts
and Every Sense**

James Smith Allen

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For Anne, once more,
my Mnemosyne

*Du bist mîn, ich bin dîn,
des solt du gewis sîn.
du bist beslozen
in mînem herzen,
verlorn ist daz sluzzelîn -
du muost ouch immêr dar inne sîn.*

- Anonymous Minnelied, c. 1180

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Comment [1]: The reader will note the enlarged right-hand margin demarcated in a faint, granular gray. It is to provide space for extended glosses, thematic epigraphs, and illustrations-in-miniature throughout the book (except for the Index, which originated as a spreadsheet instead of a Microsoft Word file). On pages without the marginalia, however, the layout displaces the text oddly upward and to the left. I am hoping that, in due time, this imperfect design will prove less of a visual nuisance. It is the best I can do for now. In popular parlance, you know, the reader just needs to get over it. OK?

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Program Note

How sage of the epigraph. As time rushes on and carries us along, yes, let us hasten, lest the moment utterly elude us. And yet, apart from this axiom, certain mental images of mine linger long, sharp and bright; they pose no risk of passing soon: ...the frail sliver of a woman, smiling wanly, at home in a metal hospital-bed; ...tall, shiny skyscrapers collapsing in billows of flame, smoke, and debris; ...row upon row of black letters deployed across a white screen to give ephemeral thought some form and substance.

Sensible to such insistent impressions, besides Boileau's poetic maxim, I began writing this book in April 2002 when my mother died. The project took eight years, off and on, to finish, long enough to confound the original, creative impulse with another, that of 9/11. Despite the perverse chronology of my recollections, these two events – a parent's death and our national tragedy – became inextricably linked. Personally as well as historically, the twenty-first century marked a new era. Perhaps.

What has actually changed in the past several years? As much as I miss my first home, keepsakes recall its former lives. My work demands and diverts, but I still profess the historian's longer view. While the country yearns for community, we are again at odds with ourselves and the world. For all I can tell, my mother never died; I practice a useful craft; and the Cold War persists, albeit with Al Qaeda not the Soviet Union.

A Privileged Past speaks to this strange normalcy after 9/11. The United States cannot shake its faith in family, self, and better times, nor can I. In the following pages, I write of this faith's manifestations in immigration, social mobility, and cultural capital, but also in individual agency, national identity, and public education, all of them his-

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Hâtons-nous; le temps fuit, et nous train
avec soi: / Le moment où je parle
est déjà loin de moi.
– Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux (1673)

torical developments of kaleidoscopic complexity and resplendent hope. Akin to many a child in the last century, I am what my folks never imagined for themselves or me, much less for the first African-American president.

These habitual obsessions of ours did not disappear just because of a fateful date. As Alphonse Karr once quipped, “Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose,” hence my reflections’ ineluctable return to the déjà vu in the present’s continuity with the past.

Such recurrence also leads to the intriguing intersection of the personal with the historical. Writing the self is less an indulgent exercise than an earnest endeavor to address an audience, setting particular details into general contexts. If only we knew, we participate in multiple communities of memory well beyond our own. Individual recollection owes much to that of others, whose *exquisite corpses* we help to craft; more often than not, they are indistinguishable in the narratives we share. Every event told right is everyone’s story.

So it is here. All of us are implicated in a past privileged by its collective elaboration, however contrived the account may be. With its theatrical apparatus, my chronicle’s resemblance to a comic opera – in six acts, no less – is thus no accident, unlike the errors, indiscretions, and infelicities that remain. Please excuse these distractions, both large and small, from an otherwise irrepressible history and its indelible effects in the images we remember, whether of a mother, a nation, or a text....

Makanda Township, Illinois
Rogation Days 2010

Caveat lēctor: I did not fashion out of whole cloth the people, incidents, or themes in my memoir. Its quotations and sources are referenced in the notes and bibliography at the end (pp. 275-341) to lend veracity to this autobiographical comedy in every sense.

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Nota Bene:
*Every event told right is
everyone’s story.*
(page 6)

Dialogue with *Alphonse Karr*

AK: “*Bonjour, Monsieur. I beg your pardon, but I must ask you: what is this comedy of which you write?*”

JSA: “*Ah, the satirist has arrived. How very good to see you here.*”

AK: “*You mean I’m not in hell?*”

JSA: “*Not that I know of.*”

AK: “*That’s certainly a relief. All the same, being in your book is quite bad enough.*”

JSA: “*I was hoping it wouldn’t be.*”

AK: “*Stranger things have happened. Consider, if you will, what became of my oft-quoted quip about the Orleanists during the French Second Republic: ‘Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose.’ Those scoundrels were constantly reinventing themselves.*”

JSA: “*You were talking then about politics, not history.*”

AK: “*Yes, yes, Monsieur, don’t we all?*”

JSA: “*I suppose, when we’re not talking about ourselves.*”

AK: “*Like your soi-disant comic opera.... Monsieur, your Program Note is too serious. Its belated gesture to theater caught me by surprise.*”

JSA: “*Surely any work in six acts with a prelude, an intermezzo, and a coda must resemble an operetta with its overture, intermission, and finale.*”

AK: “*But, of course. What is so amusing about these flourishes?*”

JSA: “*You don’t often see them in a memoir.*”

AK: “*That’s not comic, that’s bizarre.*”

JSA: “*The comedy is what follows, you see, the farce of my life in a book. It is manifestly improbable.*”

AK: "That remains to be seen, Monsieur – not the farce, because it is most likely, but the life, which is not. History is so very dull; it is soulless. You should have written a novel."

JSA: "But my book is the recollection of a world apart. Isn't that prospect more appealing than fiction? At least it's true."

AK: "Lies in life are all too common. I ought to know. As a journalist, I made a livelihood by writing them. That's what literature is, however: artful fabrication."

JSA: "Truth can be artful, too. You once said so yourself: 'on n'invente qu'avec le souvenir'."

AK: "So I did, my friend, so I did. But why are you bothering with these other ghostly reprobates meddling in your performance? I do not recognize a single one of them."

JSA: "You mean the conversations after each musical tableau? They are with members of my imagined audience. Like you, they deserve an interview. I have much to learn from their interrogation."

AK: "I see. Evidently these liars are also given to banter. What dilettantes! I really must read your comedy now. Au revoir, Monsieur."

JSA: "Adieu, mon vieux."

Prelude

Perched on my work-desk after years in a drawer is an old-fashioned black-and-white photograph (ill. 1). It is of my family at our home in Alexandria, Virginia, on the day of my baptism, September 25, 1949.

In a crisp, new suit and bow tie, my father Lou is dandling me on his lap, my lace gown overflowing his legs. My brother Ben, seated with Dad and me on the sofa, is pleased to be wearing the suspender shorts and matching shoes he had just received on his third birthday. Behind us, my mother “Sis” in a dark silk dress side-sits on the armrest. In their turn next to Mom are my eldest brother Lou, standing proud in a Cub Scout uniform, and my sister “Weezie,” looking mischievous in pigtails.

Everyone is beaming for the camera but me. Rather, I am gazing vaguely at my father’s face, oblivious to the scene framed by the prints on the living room wall, the flowers on the coffee table, and the photographer with one good eye. The central figure in the picture is unmindful of the moment. As the fourth and last child to arrive, I must have been mystified by my existence or by my father’s mustache.

What can I possibly recall of the sitting or the reception after church? I was 44 days old, growing rapidly from my initial 8 pounds, 14 ounces, and 22 inches, inconsequential details culled from a baby-book. The photograph itself offers little else. A birth certificate and silver christening cup engraved with my name and the date relate nothing more about those early months of life.

My mother spoke often of the dutiful godparents: “Aunt” Eugenia Mackenzie, her girlhood friend from Asheville, North Carolina; Uncle James Smith, my namesake for the

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Chercher? Pas seulement: créer.
--Marcel Proust (1913)



most part, then living in Newark, New Jersey; and Reverend Arnold Lewis, the Episcopal priest at St. Mark's in Westhampton, New York, when my parents were married. Other extended family members attended the sacramental service in my honor, including Aunt "Popsie" Malone who had recently returned from Karachi, Pakistan. Or so Mom said. Popsie's memoirs do not mention a visit to Alexandria. I want to believe my mother's stories, but her mementoes are more credible.

Comparable curiosities, pictures mostly, appear every time I lift the lid to their wooden repository, an unadorned trousseau chest. Like the camphor in the clothes once stored there, a scent of cedar lingers on the baby suit I must have worn beneath the baptismal robes. After much washing the bright blue cotton cloth is soft and fragile to the touch where no moth frayed the diminutive outfit. My wife Anne took a brief fancy to it, I suppose, because we had no child of our own.

Just as forcefully, the distinctive taste of lamb brings back my earliest memories of family gathered 'round the dining room table at holiday time. I have no idea whether or not my baptism and Ben's birthday were celebrated with a roast later that evening. They may have been – my mother cooked meats to perfection before anyone knew how unhealthy they were to overeat – but I am incapable of remembering a meal I never had, much less of recalling the repast I did have from a baby bottle. Without an enduring impression to evoke, this hour is lost.

Sensory experiences do conjure up the past. As the philosopher Condillac asserted, "la mémoire n'est donc qu'une manière de sentir." But contrary to Marcel Proust's penchant for lime-blossom tea and Petites Madeleines, I find all five senses essential to memory. Their collective effect is arresting. I see the portrait, I hear my siblings speak,

I smell the cedar chest, I feel the clothes, I taste the meat, and I summon the stories that give meaning to these encounters. The synergy of them, together, informs my recollections precisely, what occasional synesthesia can only do metaphorically.

Crucial complements to these deeply personal sources are various public and private records, of course, and there are many of them. Letters and diaries, autobiographies, last wills and testaments, church and court registers, institutional archives, newspaper articles, reliable websites, and professionally-written histories, all correct or corroborate our oral lore. Literate and active, my relatives left longer than the usual traces of themselves. They never needed DNA samples to know who they were.

They also left their share of fabled artifacts – faded quilts, old furniture, familial artwork, miscellaneous silverware, and such – a trove from now distant ships, farms, and homes that once contained other, more inscrutable souvenirs such as a rusty railroad spike, a jagged piece of quartz, and a slice of wedding cake from 1901, of all things. Not least, however, are the photo albums, dozens of them, in their power to remind of earlier times, not all of which are immediately familiar.

Otherwise extraneous and excessive, these relics keep us honest and, more, they keep us sane because they entail certain needful truths (I am no longer speaking solely of family). Akin to survivors of the Holocaust in Europe, though hardly so tragic, we can neither forget nor neglect the material vestiges of such a legacy. We hold fast to what sustains us, as surely everyone knows, as inexorably as circumstances change. More than mere precious heirlooms or the accumulated rubble in our lives, possessions of personal and historical memory are veritable witnesses. They do not lie to us whatever we may say to ourselves. Their presence assures us of an indispensable past.

#

Everybody, not just the victim, the victor, or the vicious, has a past to tell. Real or imagined, one way or another, all tales of former worlds deserve our attention. People lived, settings mattered, events happened. We, too, feel this irresistible impulse to craft narratives for friends and family, although a larger audience is possible thanks to the Internet's social media or the Library of Congress's StoryCorps Project. In my account, the cast of characters worth recalling is long and capable: farmers, carpenters, fishermen, shipmasters, bankers, brewers, teachers, judges, senators, engineers, physicians, scholars, artists, war heroes, and assorted saints. The rest of us, the vast majority of us, mostly forgotten, managed to remember the likes of them.

Shared experience in effect and in fact moves many sensible souls, but especially those who feel compelled to speak. The self-appointed raconteurs, such as my parents in their day, tell of the past to delight in it, but also to understand themselves and their possibilities. Their contribution has been considerable. I wish my family had written more. As Carolyn Heilbrun noted, "we live our lives in a text," generally of our own making. These creations can bring us together and define us as individuals in relation.

This book is a history privileged by all who lived and told, but also by all who lived and listened. Like those of us with "a promising past" – "beaucoup de passé" as Heinrich Heine first put it – I return to what seems a better time than the present because of what others recounted. I join the storytelling to ponder the wealth these stories have made then and now. Our moment is longer, larger, and fuller for the effort, which I have tried hard to make worthy of the past's promise.

In similar vein my aunt Popsie entitled her tales of self and family All About Me,

and they were. These musings are ingenuous and disarming in their celebration of a charmed existence come and gone in pre-Castro Cuba. Popsie felt impelled to write in part because the clan was curious and cared about her. For our benefit she reviewed an eventful life with her in-laws, the Steinharts, and the shamelessly indolent colony of Americans in Havana. We are glad to have her memoirs.

But we are the only ones. Popsie's community of memory is oddly circumscribed. However informative about herself, she chose not to relate her past to that of her fellow islanders and the stories they told of themselves. The opportunities were inviting enough. It was an exciting era in Cuba and for the expatriates such as Ernest Hemingway, a vexing neighbor, who could have anticipated the revolution. Cuban exiles here hunger to know more. But these matters meant little to Popsie. Writing about them long after she had left her first husband there was neither her pleasure nor her duty.

As an historian, I am called to do more. My obligation is now a habit after decades of practice to see connections to people, places, and events of greater import. I believe in the novelist E.M. Forster's salutary injunction, "only connect," to render self-stories contextually intelligible and thus more broadly historical. Personal narratives are but one element among many in our reconsidering the past for everyone affected by it; so my life is of no special consequence unless it shows how others, besides close acquaintances, had a hand in what prepared our particular present together.

The task was easier for Augustine of Hippo, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Henry Adams, authors of much better known "confessions." Their exemplary autobiographies highlight the roles they played in the church, the history of ideas, or American society and politics. Far from fame's importunities or presumptions, I stake no equivalent claim

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Comment [2]: "All About Me"

Aunt Popsie penned the elegiac "All About Me, 1903-1963" (1969) not long after her personal fortunes had waned. With the sale of her family's failing brewery, her second husband's persistent illnesses, and her dismay over the Castro regime, she apparently wished to recall better times. The mood of her writing is strangely reminiscent of Carlos Eire's fantastic memoirs of his Cuban childhood before he fled the island in 1962. And like Eire's work, her book must be viewed with caution. Her account confuses important facts, such as her father's date of birth; instead of the year 1878 as reported in [The Newark Star-Eagle](#) and [The New York Times](#), Popsie repeats the year on her dad's gravestone, 1877. In that discrepancy lies yet another tale.

on the reader's attention. Writing the self assures no significance, I admit, and yet writing can make it so. Indeed language always has the last word. Over the centuries, imaginative literature has portrayed memorable characters like the improbable people I have known and whose inimitable appeal lies not in their being but in their telling. Their voices often rise to eloquence and deserve to be heard, too.

These folk remain no less real than the more august among us; the evidence at-tests as much. They represent multiple publics who will recognize something of themselves in the text. Family and friends, to be sure, are joined by neighbors and colleagues here and abroad. My stories concern them more or less directly. Other readers will view their world otherwise. In addition to educators, historians, and writers, there are the avid followers of books, travel, and memory; their filiations figure in Denise Levertov's "Illustrious Ancestors" about a seamstress, with threaded needle in hand, "thinking some line still taut between me and them." The past proposes just such poetic play.

#

The personal and historical meanings of time and space vary over the years and from place to place. This much we can observe. As American society evolves – immigration from everywhere forms the colorful woof and weave of our nation's unfolding cultural tapestry – baptisms pertain to an ever-smaller portion of the population. Our neighbors of other religious faiths consecrate instead by ritual circumcisions, naming rites, endowments, bar and bat mitzvahs. Family relationships drift, too, thanks to social and geographical mobility. It always surprises me how rare it is for folks to eat together each evening, to say nothing of christenings at less frequent intervals.

Moreover, the consumer economy alters our senses. It has made images electron-

ic, voices virtual, smells mellow, hands softer, and a few foods tasteless. The sensory traces we remark are transformed and the memories with them. There is no guaranteed permanence or universality to our sensations, the past they evoke, the stories we write. But evocations of private and public experience infuse some of our tales with the power of ancient myth. Think of Homer's "wine-dark sea" and "rosy-fingered dawn." In our quest for meaning, we need such empirical and narrative references where fixed spatial and temporal coordinates elude us. As the Greek philosopher Heraclitus also noted, the human search for order lies at the heart of all knowledge, not just of oneself.

Let us return to the photo where I began. Who imagined then what has betided since? More than the evening meal beckoned. One after another we children grew up, left home, and started our own families. Like our physical size, our professional work, and our new communities, our faiths changed as we married Catholics, Navajos, agnostics, and other Episcopalians. Our parents changed with us; they aged, turned frail, fell ill, and died. Accordingly, funerals in the train of marriages and baptisms assumed new meanings. Despite these alterations in our lives and beliefs, however, we were imbued by an evolving, ever-present sense of tradition.

Back in 1949 the Reverend Thomas Fraser of St. Paul's Church in Alexandria undoubtedly read the baptismal service in the 1928 Book of Common Prayer. Its passages from the King James version of the Bible still sing poetically: "Suffer the little children to come unto me" (Mark 10.14), "The wind bloweth where it listeth" (John 3.8), "And, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world" (Matthew 28.20). I find these archaic phrasings more familiar than their contemporary renderings, not because I gainsay the changing theology inherent to their revision – far from it – but because I long for the lilt

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Nota Bene:
As Carolyn Heilbrun noted, "we live our lives in a text," generally of our own making. (page 12)

of language from childhood and its implicit continuities with pieties previous to mine.

These words and others like them lingered wherever I lived. After Alexandria, they mattered most in Silver Spring, Maryland, but also where I spent somewhat less time – at school in Providence, Rhode Island, and Medford, Massachusetts – at work in La Jolla, California; Enid, Oklahoma; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Carbondale, Illinois – and for more or less extended periods overseas in Athens, Greece; Paris, France; and Freiburg-im-Breisgau, Germany. Each occasion I hear the tenor and tempo of Holy Scripture, even in another tongue, I am at home and yet somewhere else.

The christening portrait portends further echoes. Although my siblings have traveled, too, their voices still ring with those of our parents. I love these familial chimes on the telephone and at their homes in Clearwater, Florida, and Salt Lake City, Utah, as well as in Silver Spring. They bring me back in time and forward to their new settings with a larger family whose stories have now spread outward from inner kin. My in-laws were not present in the photograph, but their voices soon spoke to us from faces equally important to our expanding relations. Their reverberations are now both old and new.

We still see each other, we are still in touch, we still eat together, we still sing together, we still smell like one another, as families do, whatever our differences, which have become a modicum more pronounced with the years. Our tales have evolved, too, and rightly so as our new surroundings suggest. I doubt whether everything I say will suit my closest relatives any more than it will unrelated readers of this text. In publication, its import will change. But I trust its value to sundry collective memories will remain.

Meanwhile, there is always the danger of mis-remembering. It is more than a matter of names, dates, and places, which are easy to mistake in the absence of adequate rec-

ords. Our minds fail us, often unconsciously, at times deliberately, so not to give offense to just anyone, who may or may not notice. As we discard or lose unflattering documents, we displace or distort untimely thoughts. “You don’t have to go into that much detail,” my wife’s mother Fran once advised, lest our (im)prudence damn or deceive as much as it might reveal or conceal.

If asked, we have been a happy family, right? Oh, sure, but not in the banal ways that Leo Tolstoy assumed of domestic felicity in Anna Karenina. Were real life’s vicissitudes so simple. We are not sadder than we are perhaps wiser for having survived serious illnesses like alcoholism and painful personal failings like social snobbery. To forget them brings some peace of mind; but the truth is, we are a lot less smug for being more conscious of our necessary (and not so necessary) losses.

All the same, our notions of the past remain partial. We cannot remember everything, thank goodness, even if we wanted to; there is much too much of memory’s wheat-and-chafe to sift. We must thus learn not solely to recollect but also to reflect before telling our stories so not to betray our past. We need to look beyond the image to understand it more fully and fairly. It is what the insightful observer Susan Sontag meant by putting perceptions in perspective, that is to say, by “*not* accepting the world as it looks.”

In the baptismal photo, for instance, someone is missing. She is the kindly nanny and able maid Jessie, who looked after me as an infant and whose last name I never knew. There are snapshots of her with us at home and at the beach (ill. 2). Resembling the other black women who later joined my parents’ household – Harriet Kocher, Lucy Stith, and Hannah Cherry – she was family in the devotion she shared with us. I hear her voice and see her face among the African-Americans I greet and embrace. It is a moment

17: Prelude

Comment [3]: Selective Memory

However given to mutation, for whatever reason, introspection and its concomitant, memory, are both instinctive and pervasive. The poet Robert Frost captured well, I think, the spirit of this individual and social habit of wayward attention – at the beach:

The people along the sand
All turn and look one way.
They turn their back on the land.
They look at the sea all day....

The land may vary more;
But whatever the truth may be—
The water comes ashore,
And the people look at the sea.

They cannot look out far.
They cannot look in deep.
But when was that ever a bar
To any watch they keep?

I cherish, notwithstanding the sacrifice she made (and the pain she endured) in a family not her own. I wish Jessie had been in the picture because I want to remember her. She was most certainly there.

#

For the title of this book, I once contemplated “An American Buddenbrooks,” so similar is Thomas Mann’s novel to my sense of self in time. The founding father John Adams had ventured a comparable notion in a famous letter to his wife Abigail: “I must study Politicks and War that my Sons may have liberty to study Mathematicks and Philosophy in order to give their Children a right to study Painting, Poetry, Musick, [and] Architecture....” Our forebears did the same for us. They strived to provide for their progeny, who in turn took up activities inconceivable to earlier ages.

The story is a familiar one, particularly among immigrants who secured a future that their offspring can now recount. Instead of brave sailors and shrewd merchants, we have become educated professionals endowed less with military experience or business acumen than with cultural capital in an information-rich society. The result, I expect, is a more grateful appreciation of this generously expansive heritage.

For me the past is a privilege. My family has been blessed by energy, curiosity, faith, work, and (some) great good luck, which few others have enjoyed to the same extent or for so long a time. Our past is also advantaged because so much of it is located in records and artifacts, their limitations aside. Informed by more than parochial lore, our histories now include other cultures, other worlds.

This past is more apparent because it is variously written. Impressions in common have led inevitably, it appears, to memory’s mediation and inscription, which preserve

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what we know and believe. Its traces linger for still more storytellers to re-fashion in their turn, for sure, which is their special birthright, too. As well they should, and as well they will, on the imperfect palimpsests we have left them. This time-honored imperative the English contrarian, Oscar Wilde, understood: “The one duty we owe to history is to re-write it.”

By now it should be clear, this volume is not merely about me, my family, or our fortunes. Ultimately these personal concerns do not matter. I seek instead to commemorate and anticipate better selves, irrespective of their names or fates, in a community encompassing countless generations. The exploration of one past implies others and thereby defines relationships in space with the living as well as in time with the dead and the unborn. We are all subject to history’s sway, there and then, here and now, elsewhere and later, even as we dare to make it ours.

“Every history,” Ralph Waldo Emerson proposed, “should be written in a wisdom which divine[s] the range of our affinities,” whenever or wherever they may be. This sagacity seems elusive, if not exclusive, but it is actually attainable by everyone, at least by those of us who cherish the memories we enrich with our lives and tales. In such recollection we keep faith with the fullest range of our divine and manifold affinities.

So nearly all of us know where we were when we heard the news of 9/11 (I had just finished the morning’s workout), and we all know where we were for our first amorous kiss of adolescence (would you believe on Dale Drive in Silver Spring?). By our accounts of such instants, which we have in common with family, friends, and neighbors, near and far, our immediate and subsequent life gains substance. The relation sustains us, and we are all the better for it.

After memory and forgetting comes history, Paul Ricoeur once averred. “Mais écrire la vie est une autre histoire” because, like much of life itself, the story is never final; it remains open to revision, and many others partake in its telling. May that be so for my own coming of age in another century, an event evoked for now by an old family photograph taken on the day of my baptism nearly a lifetime ago.

Dialogue with *Elizabeth Lillian Malone*

ELM: “Ah, Jimmy, why didn’t you begin with a story? That’s what life is, you see, once upon a time. That’s how I began my book.”

JSA: “Popsie!”

ELM: “Of course not, you silly boy. Like your Alphonse Karr, I’ve been dead a long time.”

JSA: “But I invited you, too.”

ELM: “Why shouldn’t you? You’re the author, I’m just another voice from the past. Apparently you read my memoirs and found them of use?”

JSA: “Yes, I wanted to learn about the family, but I found much more in your writing. You really led a rich life in Cuba, which reminds me of Carlos Eire. Just imagine, his father thought he was King Louis XVI of France. Did you know Judge Eire in Havana?”

ELM: “Wouldn’t you like to know! Now there’s a wonderful story worth imitating. Carlos didn’t need a lengthy introduction. Like me, he just jumped in.”

JSA: “That’s wonderful advice, but I’ve already written the prelude. Fortunately the narrative begins in the first act. That’s next.”

ELM: “Good. But, Jimmy, you don’t talk very much about yourself. Isn’t that enough? After reading the last ten pages, I still don’t have a feel for who you are.”

JSA: “I wouldn’t want to tell you everything all at once, now would I? Sometimes secrets are worth guarding; they keep the reader guessing. Surely you know what I mean.”

ELM: “My fortunes in life were what they were. No mystery there. You insinuate how nostalgic I was for the better days of Cuba before Castro. I’m not so sure about that. The

Steinharts were impossibly vain and arrogant. You should have seen Papa Steinhart the first day I met him in Havana. He stood imperiously on the front balcony of his villa. Looking down at me, he barely acknowledged my existence.”

JSA: *“Your account is filled with people like your former father-in-law. I mean, how about your notorious neighbor, Ernest Hemingway?”*

ELM: *“Oh, Jimmy, he was such a ghastly lowlife, lobbing fireworks and stink bombs onto our grounds during our dinner parties. But there are too many things in life I can’t explain. I guess it doesn’t really matter... I wrote because I had to. It was who I was. The rest took care of itself.”*

JSA: *“Well, that hasn’t happened for me yet. It’s impossible to please everyone. It is so easy to be misunderstood...”*

ELM: *“And to offend. You need to watch what you say.”*

JSA: *“That’s easier said than done, my dear. Forgive me if I gossip about family, but a story must have more than one character. Conflict makes a plot, you know, and not all families are happy ones.”*

ELM: *“I should say so. You don’t write anything about Frankie and me, do you? I hope not.”*

JSA: *“Ah, wouldn’t you like to know!”*