

I Write Because . . .

by Colin J.S. Thomas Jr.

Prologue

I have been asked any number of times about a series of stories that I have written—the first of which dealt with the coming together of an old man and a young boy—my grandson. Until now I have felt unable to respond. Why do I write? I do so because . . .

Story

Catherine. Lovely, wonderful Catherine. My grandson's wife of three years, mother of my almost two-year-old great grandson, little Marshall. Now, a widow. To see me.

I was back in the hospital. Age and genetics. And, I suspect, the strain of having to attend my grandson's funeral.

"Hi, Granddaddy."

Catherine had called me that from the first time we met.

"They won't let me stay long. I brought you something to look at, and I have a favor to ask."

I remembered their wedding. Together they had asked me to be one of the readers. I agreed. Standing in front of the church looking at them and families and friends and the old man's widow, I had done my best. I remember practicing by myself. I didn't want to let them down.

Marshall was my only grandson. Early on we shared a mutual love of fishing. When he was young, he saw an old man on Hatteras cleaning fish. He rode his bicycle to that old man's house. The old man was a retired Virginia lawyer who loved to fish. He saw in Marshall all that I did. They fished together. They understood each other. And so a little boy grew up with two elderly mentors. Now the old man was dead. Marshall was dead. They say my heart is not strong.

Marshall had been commissioned a second lieutenant in the United States Marine Corps. At his graduation from Virginia Military Institute the old man's widow had given to him the engagement ring that the old man had given her. I looked at Catherine. I saw the ring.

Catherine now resides in Augusta County. She lives on four acres beside her parents' place. Her dad is a banker who still lives where he was raised. Catherine is beautiful—even in mourning. She can shoot. She can fly fish. She loves the outdoors. Before they married, she and Marshall camped at one of my favorite spots at the top of the St. Mary's River. I recalled Marshall telling me about her for the first time. I wondered if anyone could be as perfect as he described.

"I love her Granddaddy. I hope she loves me."

"I guess I hope so, too", was all I could say.

They had first met when one of his friends invited him home for a few days over Christmas break during his third year at VMI. For Marshall it had been love at first sight.

"You've got to meet her, Granddaddy. She's perfect."

When we did meet I realized that Marshall was right. She was perfect—for him. And for me. She had called me granddaddy right off. I loved it. I knew: She was a keeper.

They had little time for a honeymoon. I loaned them my small house on Hatteras Island. Catherine had never been there at wintertime. It was cold. The wind blew. They built fires and walked cold beaches. They watched white caps. They held each other and went to sleep with the sound of the ocean. They loved it. I still have the letter they sent before they left.

I had a friend in Wilmington, North Carolina who rented them a garage apartment when Marshall was sent to Camp Lejeune. Catherine's dad and I had helped them to set them up. For Catherine and Marshall those were happy days.

When little Marshall was born I cried because I am sentimental. I wrote him a letter saying that I hoped that he and I and his dad might all three be together when he caught his first fish. I told him that I hoped that he would allow me to give him his first fishing rod when he got old enough. I explained that he would be the third generation for which I had done that.

It was that letter that Catherine brought.

Catherine, Marshall and little Marshall came to see me before Marshall shipped out. We all knew it would come. Still it was hard. I must have said that everything would be fine a thousand times. I did my best. I did not cry until after they had left. When they did leave, I cried and I prayed.

I understand that Marshall led his platoon to secure some airfield. They took the brunt of a counterattack. They gave Catherine two Silver Stars. She received a letter from some Marine Corps general saying that Marshall deserved the Medal of Honor.

When they returned Marshall's body there was no place for him to be buried. I had a place. I told Catherine there was room. There were other offers, including Arlington. Marshall is buried beside his grandmother. When Catherine accepted my offer, she said that Marshall would have wanted it that way.

And now, two weeks after the funeral, she is here. With my letter. She is still beautiful. Is there a God, I wondered. How could You let this happen? I'm coming, Marshall. We can catch early morning fish in the surf. Granny can fry them up with grits and eggs. Soon enough, I thought.

You and I can be together again, Marshall. Soon.

Catherine wanted a favor.

“Sure,” I said. “What?”

She handed me the letter that I had written to little Marshall.

“He is way too young for his own fishing rod. I want you to tell me that you will keep your word and be around to give him his first fishing rod when he is old enough.”

I looked at her. Tears came. To both of us. “Ok,” was all I could say.

“And, Granddaddy, write. You can do that. Write about little Marshall’s father. You knew him all his life. I can tell little Marshall some things about his dad. You must tell him the rest. As he grows older, he will want to know.”

I write because

Author’s Statement

The first of a series of stories was published in the October 2003 issue of Virginia Lawyer. The story immediately preceding this statement is an attempt to conclude the series. As my mother always said, “Best to leave before you wear out your welcome.”

I have received many kind notes and calls. I am overdue making the following explanation:

The entirely fictional happenings are to some extent drawn from real-life experiences. The entirely fictional characters are to some extent modeled on different people whom I have known.

I have been asked many questions. I will try to respond.

“Who is the old man?” He is, I hope, all of us who have practiced long enough to become senior lawyers. He represents those lawyers who have spent a lifetime giving of them-

selves and passing on good values. Those who have made a difference and served as an example for the next generation. Those who are participants, not spectators.

“Who is the grandson?” Little bits of many people. With his values he is the next generation—I hope.

“Who is Catherine?” Every man’s dream. Some men’s reality.

“Are you Granddaddy?” When I write, I have tried to become Granddaddy, thinking and acting as he might. I do not claim that all of his thinking and all of his conduct is what I would have done under the circumstances. I can only hope that, were I to be involved in similar circumstances, I would do as well.

“Is any of it true or real?” Hard to answer. True? No. Real? Maybe. More than just a little bit. Other times. Other places. Other people.