

I did not know Alabama was home, until we pulled into the drive and I saw them: the fat magnolias, broad leaves sparkling above dull grey draping strands of spanish moss. One tree at each front corner of the house. Fifty-five years of change, nothing else familiar. But they stood, welcoming sentinels.

With my first glance, I realized that these two trees matched those in a picture that had floated through my mind for as long as I could remember. In the picture, they grew beside what seemed to be a different house, a greying unpainted wooden farm house that I knew to be my grandmother's home, the place where my father had grown up, the place my mother had purged from our thoughts after she and my father divorced when I was four.

I wonder if some part of me yet grows inside those trees. Perhaps cells left when my pudgy two year old hands last poked the tough trunks are now held deep in their core. Perhaps it was those cells of mine vibrating in tune with their descendants, my body, that set my fifty-two year old hands

and arms atingle, set me humming, "Sweet Home Alabama," a song I did not know that I knew.

Curiosity brought me back to Alabama. Who were the people whose name I claimed? Why did just the funny village name, Clopton, sometimes bubble to the surface of awareness to be quickly lost in the mud of my mother's sneer? With the sight of those two magnolias, curiosity burst into hunger and I knew that I had searched for these very trees for forty-five years. .

Suddenly, I craved not just magnolias but the whole place and began to look around. Progress had robbed me. The shaded yard under the magnolias where I had sat with father and grandmother was now grass, not carefully swept dirt. Flowers were planted around the new porch. How could I crawl beneath it? All this was beside a paved road, not red dirt. Grey wood was covered with yellow plastic siding and brown shutters. Still the magnolias said, this is home -- Grannie's magnolias that she planted when as a young mother she came to her new home over one hundred years ago.

What else remained? Looking east, toward the place of my grandfather's barn, cow stall, and pig pen, I saw a shed with an old wooden wagon. Was it the one we rode in to church--three miles down this dirt road, pulled by the mules who had no rest even on Sunday? There in the space midway between the barn and house, was the oak tree, branches spread wide. A stump sat beneath it. An accident? But, have you ever seen a ghost? I did. There, on the stump, sat my grandfather, wearing his clay covered overalls, just as he had each summer evening for fifty years of his life. And, the checkerboard was on the stump in front of him. Have you ever played checkers with a ghost? He was waiting for a partner so I joined him one last time. All over again he tricked me, just like always. Let me believe I was winning only to make his hidden quadruple jump, ending the game just as sun set, just at bedtime.

So, I turned back to the house. Have you ever prayed for a ghost? Said, "Please, Grannie, come out of that house. Take me to bed one more time?"

Magnolias -- Kephart

Have you ever pretended your Grannie's cells lived in her magnolia trees  
curled right around yours, loving you forever?

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