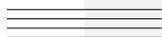


T H E P L A G I A R I S T



G R E G J O H N S O N

My mother was a writer. In the early 1970s, in college, she took creative writing seminars – they didn’t call them workshops at her school – and cranked out three or four short stories each semester. Senior year she even wrote a novella, “A House of Diamonds,” which, although set in Atlanta, was a pretty transparent knockoff of “Breakfast at Tiffany’s,” with an outdoor barbecue replacing the wild Manhattan party. Though the novella earned her a solid A, the manuscript, by the time I saw it, had a line scrawled across the title page in my mother’s shaky, middle-aged handwriting: “Pure, derivative crapola!” And so it was.

The short stories, though, were surprisingly good, and several of them were breathtaking. Unlike the novella, they had a lucid, direct, “nonliterary” style to which I responded viscerally as I sat cross-legged in the stifling-hot attic (it was June) reading while my mother lay downstairs in her room. She was dying, slowly. She had a form of inoperable brain cancer that was almost wholly painless, so there was that to be thankful for, at least. She was fifty-nine and probably would not live out the year. I was thirty-one and, as my father liked to say, not quite truthfully, had “my whole life ahead of me.” The subtext of this was, *Please, dear God please,*

get a job, but I considered that my job was taking care of my mother. Unable to bear the sight of her dying, he had absconded (a word my mother liked to use) and moved out of the house in April, and now lived in a northeast Atlanta neighborhood called Brookhaven, about five miles from the area where I had grown up, Morningside. My father had bought our ranch house in 1982 for sixty-five thousand dollars – it was painted gray, with black shutters and a two-car garage – and it was now worth “somewhere north of a million,” according to a real estate agent, a golfing buddy of my father’s. As soon as my mother died, though my father had not said this to me directly, he planned to sell the house, which would mean I would lack not only a job but a place to live. At that point, I supposed, my real life would begin, and I didn’t think it was going to be pretty.

Though my mother suffered little pain, her impending death did cause her enormous anxiety, so every afternoon after lunch she took one of the peach-colored Xanax and was out for the rest of the afternoon. It was during these hours that I liked to drift up to the attic and sift through her memorabilia – high school and college yearbooks, diaries from those same years, old photographs. Though I’d always known she’d had the ambition to be a writer (this was before she got married and, six months later, got busy raising me), I hadn’t realized the sheer amount of work she had done, nor had I suspected that she’d saved it all, in a brown accordion file bearing the label “Literary Stuff” in her youthful handwriting, all curlicues and t’s crossed above the stem. I knew from my brief interest in handwriting analysis that this was a sign of optimism. By contrast, the t in “derivative” (*Pure, derivative crapola!*) was crossed about two-thirds down the stem, which was a sign of depression. I did not believe in handwriting analysis any longer but felt these signs were true enough.

I’m not sure I believed in anything. When I was growing up, we were nominally Catholic (we never took the sacrament) and attended mass at Christ the King Cathedral on Peachtree Street. By the time I was old enough to have a car, I would tell my mother (who dragged my father to ten A.M. mass) that I was going to the five P.M. service, and then I’d drive off to a nearby shopping center, park my battered old Mustang, and read a detective novel for an hour instead. I found mass boring as hell, just as I found high

school and life itself boring as hell. Because I skipped school so much, I barely graduated with a C- average, and refused even to attend graduation. I have always hated ceremonies of any kind, and in fact, though I'm ashamed to say it, I dreaded my mother's funeral more than I can say. It, too, would be held at Christ the King, in which I hadn't set foot in more than fifteen years.

Now that my mother was dying, she had gotten more religious, as people, especially women, tend to do, and when she wasn't getting visits from a local priest she called Father Benjamin (I never learned his last name) she was murmuring to me about Mary or the saints, or quizzing me about the state of my soul. Taking care of my mother, I had become expert at changing the subject. (If my father could get me a job interview for head of a department called Changing the Subject, I would be a shoo-in.) In the late afternoon of a day I'd spent reading her stories in the attic, as she was coming out of her Xanax drowse, she asked me if I remembered what my confirmation name had been.

"Luke," I said. "After the guy in the New Testament."

"Knew that," she said, out one side of her mouth. It seemed as though she was still too tranquilized to open her mouth completely. "But why did you choose him? Because he was a doctor?"

At one time I had, in fact, cherished ambitions of becoming a doctor – this was long before I could have applied to medical school or done any actual work toward that end – but this ambition had dissolved away like every other fantasy I'd ever entertained.

"No," I said, "I just liked the name. And it rhymes with *fluke*."

"Not funny," my mother said. Her given name was Lureen but her confirmation name was Teresa, after Teresa of Avila; I had read this in her teenage journal, up in the attic. She added, "Don't be irreverent."

"And it rhymes with *nuke*. And it rhymes with *puke*."

"Don't be a comedian," my mother said with her dry lips. "It doesn't suit you."

"One more career forestalled," I said.

I don't know why I talked to her this way. I'm not a mean-spirited fellow and didn't want to cause her grief; I guess it was a way of quelling the boredom of this sad and silent room.

“Luke wrote some wonderful things in the Gospels,” my mother said. “He – ”

“Speaking of writing some wonderful things, Mom, I’ve been reading your short stories up in the attic.”

She paused a long moment. “You *have*?”

“Yes, and you know what? Some of them are really good. Amazingly good, for someone who was only nineteen or twenty.”

Her lips curved upward, just a little. “I always got A’s in creative writing. I took two courses from Mr. Maxwell, but the summer after my sophomore year he killed himself. Then I switched over to Mr. Farmington, and I liked him even better.”

“Why did he kill himself? Mr. Maxwell?”

She shrugged her thin shoulders. “Who understands these things? He threw himself down into traffic from an overpass.”

“Messy,” I said.

“Don’t be irreverent,” she repeated. “Don’t speak ill of the dead.”

“But how did you manage to write so well, at that age? There are some wonderful turns of phrase, and a natural gift for character and plot construction, and a *simplicity* that I really love. I couldn’t stop reading them.”

If a dying, pale-faced woman can beam, then my mother beamed. She glanced aside at me without moving her head.

“You can be so sweet, when you want to be.”

“I’m just being truthful,” I said, truthfully. “But why did you stop writing? After college?”

“Oh, I got a job, and I had boyfriends . . . and then I met your father. I mean, sometimes I thought about writing a new story or two, but if nobody assigns it to you, and nobody cares whether you write it or not . . . well, it’s just easier not to.”

It’s just easier not to. So I was my mother’s son, after all.

A few days after this conversation, my mother died. We’d been talking about her stories again, and though I noticed her voice was a bit fainter and raspier, I didn’t really think anything was wrong. I went to the kitchen to get her a glass of water and by the time I returned, she was gone. I called her doctor’s office and they took care of everything; it all happened quickly, and before I knew it

there I was, sitting in my tight-fitting black suit in the front pew next to my father at Christ the King. The eulogy, the choir's lugubrious hymns, the testimonials to my mother's wonderful character and personality from various relatives and friends all passed in a blur; my father and I had both declined to speak, claiming we were too grief-stricken. Then we went to the cemetery, and after the service my father and I had an awkward lunch together at a noisy, dimly lit restaurant called Houston's, where we talked about everything but my mother.

At one point, my father did question me about what I planned to "do," now that she was gone.

I looked at him as if he were speaking Mandarin, and the first words out of my mouth were "Clean out the attic, for one thing. A lot of her stuff is up there."

"Really?" he said. "Like what?"

I paused. "Oh, just yearbooks, old diaries, letters." Another pause, and then I told a whopper: "She asked me to burn everything."

My father nodded vigorously. "You should respect her wishes, then. And anyway, the last thing I want to read –"

"Are you planning to put the house up for sale?" I asked.

He looked thunderstruck by this question; in college, though he'd been a business major, and now managed a large chain of hardware stores, he'd done some acting in school plays. He said, almost meekly, "Yes."

"Can I have a couple of months? To figure out what I *am* going to do?"

I was eating an enormous cheeseburger and now took a bite, giving my father a doleful expression. We were both large men. My father was big-framed, burly; I was simply fat. I was only fifteen but weighed 240 pounds, which meant I spent Friday and Saturday nights in front of the television scarfing down ordered-in pizza.

"Sure, sure," my father said. "How about three months? And if you need any money . . . Your mother didn't leave a will, but I'd be happy to supply whatever you need."

I said, "Yeah. I'll need some money."

"Okay."

"Okay."

Fortunately the check came at that moment, and as my father pulled out his wallet he said, “Your mother was a wonderful woman, you know. And she really loved you.”

“I know,” I said, having no idea what else to say. “I know.”

“I shouldn’t have moved out, I guess. That was wrong of me. But —”

“Yeah. But.”

My father didn’t say anything else of significance. *It’s just easier not to.* We walked silently to the parking lot, got into our separate cars, and drove away.

When I got home I climbed up to the attic, grabbed the accordion file, and came back downstairs. I spent the rest of the day rereading my mother’s stories. There were thirteen of them altogether, which in my perverse way I considered lucky. Reading, I stopped only to eat, and I paused one other time to use the bathroom. As I washed my hands, I stared hard into the mirror: I had a round, doughy face, and a few wisps of reddish-brown hair the same color as my mother’s. I wasn’t smiling. *What do you plan to “do”? You are thirty-one, you have no experience, you have a lousy academic record, and you look like a slob.* I wasn’t much of a masochist, so I cut this off and went back to the living-room sofa and resumed reading the stories.

After I finished, I sorted the manuscripts into piles, writing on each of them either “Just Okay,” “Really Good,” or “Superlative.” All thirteen of the stories bore enthusiastic comments from her two teachers, and all earned a grade of “A,” so this sorting of the stories by quality was according to my judgment alone. In college, I have to say, I’d been pretty good in English, and had even written a couple of stories myself for a class risibly called “Creative Writing, Creative Modes.” In that class we had to write five poems, two stories, and a one-act play. The folder in which I’d kept all these manuscripts had gotten lost somewhere along the way, and good riddance. I was an okay writer, barely a good one, and certainly not a great one. But the more deeply I’d gotten involved in reading my mother’s stories, the more I’d come to feel she was possibly in the “great” category. It’s hard to describe, but the writing in her stories was so *natural*, had come out of her with the seeming ease of an expelled breath. And as I’ve said, she had a gift for narrative

construction and for character development. I don't know what those two professors taught her, but the gift she'd had was clearly inherent. I was astonished that a writer with so much talent would have given up her craft so easily after graduation. For about a minute I wondered if it was because she was a woman and therefore accustomed to shortchanging herself, but I didn't really care why. The point was that the stories were still here and only I knew about them.

The next morning I went to the word processor and began to type. The first story was called "The Old Priest" – in the upper right-hand corner my mother had typed her maiden name, "Lureen Bailey," and in the upper right-hand corner of the new manuscript I typed, "Timothy Watkins," feeling a bitter surge of guilt that I successfully ignored; and I changed the title to "The Confession." (The climactic scene was set in a confessional in the 1970s and, presciently enough, featured a young woman who was pregnant out of wedlock.) I made few other changes, except to update certain old references to telephone cords and typewriters. I wanted the story to seem fresh and current, as though it had just been written.

Several weeks ago, I had seen a notice in the Arts section of the Sunday Atlanta newspaper about the city's largest magazine, called *Downtown*, organizing a creative writing contest whose first prize was five thousand dollars, sponsored (of course) by Coca-Cola. I had clipped out the article, thinking to submit one of my mother's stories under her name, deciding that if she won, it would give her a much-needed boost; and if she didn't win, she didn't need to know. The submission deadline was only a week after her funeral, so "The Confession," by Timothy Watkins, got submitted just in time.

I got busy typing up the other stories, too, the eight I'd put into the "Really Good" and "Superlative" piles. As I typed, I continued updating the stories, adding a cellphone here, changing a reference from Nixon to Obama there. Then I bought a book on the marketing of short fiction and targeted magazines around the country that paid at least a thousand bucks for a manuscript; I avoided the most famous magazines, fearful that if too many people read the published stories I'd be found out, but contrary to what I'd assumed there were some markets for short fiction, in-

cluding contests, that paid very well. Soon enough I became a one-man submission machine. I sent the majority of my mother's stories to eight or ten places apiece; I requested extra money from my father (for postage and envelopes), which, out of guilt, I'm sure, he gave me without asking what it was for. (I ignored the option some magazines gave of submitting online, for a small fee; though the year was 2013, I was an old-fashioned fellow and I did the submissions in the old-fashioned way, complete with self-addressed, stamped envelopes.) All this effort took about a week of my time.

All this effort. I'm overstating the case, of course. Basically, I was acting as an agent, or as a secretary, to my deceased mother, though no one would know that. When my father called one night to ask what I was "doing with myself," I lied and said that I spent every day job-hunting but that it was really tough out there for someone lacking in marketable skills. "And I'm a white male," I said, self-pityingly. "Everybody's looking for —" "Yeah, I know what you mean, Son. All you can do is keep trying." "Keep trying. That's what I'll do. Oh, and Dad, did I tell you I've taken up a little hobby? I only do this at night, when the job-hunting is over for the day, but I've been trying my hand at writing. You know, fiction? Short stories?" "Short stories?" my father asked, as if requesting a translation. "Well, that's . . . that's terrific, Son. But I doubt there's much money in that." "You'd be surprised," I said knowingly. "Would I?" "Very," I said. "But I'll keep at the job search." "Okay, Son, and I'll check with some of my golfing buddies, see if any of their firms are hiring." I knew he wouldn't really do this, but I made an appreciative noise — kind of like "Un-hunh?" — in the back of my throat. Soon after that, our conversation was over.

Weeks passed. I did very little except eat, watch TV, and check the mailbox. Not only did I have no job prospects; I had no friends. My high school and college buddies were mostly married with families, or had moved away, and I'd lost touch with all of them. Caring for my mother these past couple of years, I hadn't had the chance to meet anybody but the occasional home-care worker and the pizza delivery guy. I was alone. Isolated. I think this is why I had pinned such hopes on the story submissions, yearning not only for money but for attention from the outside world.

It came soon enough. One day the doorbell rang, and there stood a UPS delivery man, wearing shorts and a big smile. He was dark-skinned and had beautiful teeth. “Mr. Watkins? If you’ll just sign right here . . .”

I knew immediately and I was right. The *Downtown* fiction contest winner for 2013 was yours truly. The citation letter, which accompanied a two-page contract and a W-2 form, advised me that my story “The Confession” was marked by great narrative skill and verbal acuity, and was “far and away” the best of the entries the judges had received. It was signed by the “Senior Judge,” Professor Anna Freecastle of the Emory University English Department. It congratulated me profusely and insisted that I had a great career ahead of me.

I danced around the living room, waving the contract. If I were the type to talk aloud in solitude, I would have yelled out, “Way to go, Mom!” But when I thought of the big check that would be arriving as soon as I filled out the W-2 and signed the contract, I was even happier for myself. The way I lived, five thousand dollars would last me a long time. And moreover, there were all those other stories still out there.

Two months later the story appeared in *Downtown*, and in the meantime I had received several letters of acceptance for other stories I’d submitted to magazines, and two letters congratulating me for being a contest winner. The cash kept rolling in, even though a couple of the magazines wouldn’t pay until the story actually came out. This was fine with me; it gave me a vague feeling of security for the future. I regretted only that there was a finite number of stories I could sell. After they were sold and I’d spent the money, what then?

I tried not to worry. Besides, I had other things to think about. A staff writer and photographer from *Downtown* had come to the house to interview me and take my picture, and I was appalled by the photograph as it appeared in the magazine, accompanied by the caption “Fiction Prize Winner.” I didn’t look like a winner. They say the camera puts on ten pounds, but for me it seemed to have added thirty. Though I’d wetted and combed my stubborn reddish-brown hair that morning, stray tufts stuck out here and there, giving me the ridiculous appearance of a stereotypical mad scientist. Whoever this “Timothy Watkins” was, I thought, you

might admire him but you certainly wouldn't care to know him. The photograph made me look as though I smelled bad.

So I made some immediate resolutions. I went down to Ansley Mall and signed up at the gym, forking over several hundred dollars of my prize money for a one-year membership. I decided I wouldn't invest in a new wardrobe – not yet, not until I had lost significant weight – but I did stop at a Big & Tall Men's Shop and purchase some gray wool slacks (never mind the waist size) along with a handsome blazing-white dress shirt and burgundy cashmere sweater. By now, it was late September and starting to get cool outside. Although at home I still wore my stained T-shirt and hopelessly stretched-out blue jeans, whenever I went out, I wore the new outfit. I even went down to a Quick-Foto shop and had my picture taken again, in the new clothes, and this made me feel better, even though no one had yet seen the photo.

That changed before long. Believe it or not, *Downtown* magazine forwarded me a few “fan” letters from local women – all of them were from women – saying how much my story meant to them, and how much they would like to meet me. A couple of them enclosed photographs of themselves, and said they were would-be writers, though they insisted they weren't nearly as talented as I was. Both were decidedly overweight, but I reasoned I wasn't in a position to take that against them. I answered all the letters, enclosing a copy of my new and improved photograph, and soon enough I had a pen-pal arrangement – by e-mail, after the first exchange – thriving with several of them. One in particular stood out. She was one of those who had sent a photograph: a relatively petite but chubby-faced girl named Debby, about my age, with attractive, electric-blue eyes (probably contact lenses) and wispy-curly hair the color and consistency of pencil shavings. It wasn't long before I suggested a coffee date at Starbuck's, to which of course I wore my new outfit, while Debby wore a too-tight wool dress that emphasized the rolls of fat at her waist but also pushed up and out her attractive, creamy-pale breasts. She fixed those neon-blue eyes on me and asked all manner of questions about my writing. At what point did I “know” I had real talent? What were my writing habits? How did I manage to write so well about a woman's character, “plumbing” (Debby's word) her very heart and soul?

I mumbled and bumbled my way through my answers – which Debby interpreted as humility. “God, you’re so *cute*,” she said. “If I’d written that story, I’d be shouting from the rooftops!”

“Well,” I said, improvising, “If I talk about writing, it takes energy away from my work.” This sounded vaguely profound, so I nodded and didn’t say anything further.

Half an hour later we were in my messy room, rolling around naked and sweaty on the bed. Other than that, I’ll spare you a detailed description, but let’s just say we pleased each other very much. Afterward we had a drink, talked a bit more about writing – Debby said she was dying to read more of my “stuff” – and then she claimed she had to leave for a dental appointment. I decided to believe her, and we made another date for the following Friday.

In the meantime, my writing career continued, as they say, to “take off.” Waiting to see what would happen, I had held back what I considered my three best stories, the ones I had marked “Superlative” all those weeks ago. The very best one, I felt, was called “The Nun and Charlie Ray,” which dealt with an elderly teaching nun and her relationship with a mentally challenged black boy. A story that could have been maudlin or exploitative was crisp, unsentimental, and deeply moving. I was immensely proud of it. One chilly November evening as we sat before the fireplace I read it to Debby. By the time I finished, there were tears standing in those bright-blue eyes. “Oh, Tim, you’ve got to send that to –” and here she named a magazine so famous, I fear being sued if I mention its name. “That’s one of the most brilliant pieces of fiction I’ve ever heard,” she wept. “You are a *genius!*”

It was true. And though I’d been too modest to think such a thing on my own, I decided next day that Debby was right, and I sent the story off to the famous magazine (which, by the way, paid so handsomely for the stories it printed that the exact amount was a superstitiously guarded secret). In the cover letter, I mentioned only that I had published several other stories in national and regional magazines, and had won three contests. Typing this letter, I felt that I had entered a kind of wonderland, or had been drugged by some pleasant and beneficent substance that had the power to change my life forever. Here I was, many weeks into my strict gym and diet routine (I’d hired both a trainer and a nutritionist), and I’d lost twenty-two pounds. I looked better, and I felt better.

Debby and I got together two or three times a week, and I had a happy sex life for the first time. We got along swimmingly: she showed me her stories, and I patiently critiqued them; I showed her my remaining ones, and she simply gushed over them. In short, we were a perfect match. Ahead of her birthday, the week before Halloween, I gave her a gift certificate from Macy's so she could buy a new dress (she had lost a bit of weight, too), and she'd come home with a beautiful low-cut blue silk number – it matched her eyes – with a swirling skirt. She wore the dress on her birthday, when my father took us both out for the occasion and, as he said, for a “celebration” of my success. He hadn't dreamed, he told Debby, that his son had such high-level literary aspirations, or that he possessed such talent. Though he quickly said he wasn't a judge of such things, himself, he'd shown some of my printed stories around at work, and to an English professor buddy of his from the golf course, and they all remarked on how amazingly talented I was, especially since, as a young man, I dealt so brilliantly with women characters in all the stories. How did I do it? Had my mother's death mysteriously unlocked some hidden reservoir of talent within me? Everyone liked to speculate, my father said, but the upshot was that he should be *so proud* to have such a son.

“And I am,” my father said, toasting Debby and me with a glass of champagne. We'd gone to a restaurant called Canoe, a white-tablecloth place where people dressed up for holidays and special occasions, which boasted a beautiful view of the Chattahoochee River.

“Thanks,” I said modestly.

“You *should* be proud!” Debby chimed in.

Then my father cleared his throat, and said he had a little announcement to make. Since I was doing so well in my new profession, and since I'd found such a lovely young lady to spend my free time with – he smiled graciously at Debby – he'd decided that it would be selfish of him to sell the Morningside house (which was, after all, my “family home”) and put his brilliant son out on the street. He'd decided instead to deed me the house, for the sum of one dollar. Business was good for him these days, he said; life was good. He didn't need the money, and I could either sell the house and buy something smaller, keeping the difference, or simply continue to live there.

I was flabbergasted. “Dad, that’s so generous!” I said. It occurred to me at once that I’d been made an instant millionaire. Of course, I would sell the house and buy a little condo somewhere, and live like a prince for the rest of my life.

“*Very* generous!” Debby said. She looked as though she were on the verge of tears. We were into our second bottle of champagne, and liquor tended to make her emotional. I anticipated that we were going to have some very terrific birthday sex when we got home.

And we did. Afterward I lay there next to her thinking that I had somehow been transformed from a worthless, hideous slob into a million-dollar man, a literary legend in my own time. For if you think my good luck could not possibly have continued in this vein, you’d be wrong. The very next day, a Friday, I went to the mailbox and saw the beige, silky-feeling envelope with the logo of the famous magazine in the upper left-hand corner. I knew before even opening the envelope what this meant. The famous magazine, according to the letter, had deeply admired “The Nun and Charlie Ray,” and would be pleased indeed to publish it in the magazine. They hoped I would agree to change the title, and make certain minor cuts and revisions, but on the whole they considered my story a fine one, and would be proud to include it in their pages in only a few weeks’ time, for which privilege they would pay me the amount of seventy-five hundred dollars.

If the *Downtown* contract had thrilled me, this letter nearly brought me out of my skin. Of course, I called Debby, who was ecstatic; then I called my father, who said proudly that he wasn’t surprised at all; and then I reread the letter several more times, and poured myself a drink, but then forgot to drink it. I walked around the house in a dream. It was a well-known fact that the famous magazine made its writers famous, too, and I understood that my life was now ascending to a new level. Soon there would be agents calling. Editors from major publishing houses. I knew I should get busy and start a novel, and wondered idly if I could expand “A House of Diamonds” to book length, copying the style faithfully in the added material. Probably I could. Of course I could. Rather than seeming to plagiarize “Breakfast at Tiffany’s,” I would be seen as writing a brilliant, updated, southern version of that novella, and would be praised for my ingenuity and literary

savoir-faire. The book would probably become a best seller, and might even win a prize or two. I'd be asked to visit New York, where I'd be wined and dined, and no doubt would be surrounded by countless gorgeous, sophisticated women. By then, I'd have slimmed down further, and the literary press would crow about how handsome I was, in addition to being so talented. All this lay ahead of me, bright and sparkling. I would not be denied.

There is a famous short story that ends with a boy's eyes burning with "anguish and anger." My own eyes would burn soon enough – in fact, only a few days before Christmas, when the famous magazine printed my story. Lately I'd been busy buying gifts for Debby and for my father, and new clothes for myself. I'd purchased a midnight-blue Ralph Lauren suit to replace that old black number I'd worn in June to my mother's funeral. I went to Nordstrom's and bought expensive designer shirts, sharply creased wool slacks, tasseled shoes. Thanks to my hard work at the gym, and to losing the take-out pizza place's number, I was down to 195 pounds, and had only 20 more to lose before reaching my target weight. In recent weeks people had asked me when I "found time to write," but I simply told them that mornings were sacrosanct, and that I tried to compose three pages every day. I'd read that a famous, recently deceased writer had boasted about that daily goal, and decided it was good enough for me.

Instead of writing, I simply lingered at the gym, or stayed home and watched TV. One morning I drifted up to the attic, aware that I had only one more "Superlative" story left (I planned to send it, too, to the famous magazine, after a bit of time had elapsed). I thought I might find other work of my mother's that she had not deposited into her accordion file. I turned the file upside down and shook, but nothing more came out. Then I noticed a pile of books and typed pages near where I'd found the file, and I seized upon the pages greedily. But they were nothing more than academic term papers: "Images of 'The Monster' in *The Faerie Queene*" and "More Green Lights: Sexual Profligacy in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*." My mother had gotten A's on these papers, too, but of course they were worthless for my purposes. Then I began flipping through the books, thinking some pages might be tucked inside them. Most were textbooks, but a few looked like library books

that had been checked out and never returned; one in particular caught my attention because it had an almost-new appearance. When I looked at the back inside cover, I saw this was indeed the case: there was only one “Due Date” stamped: “October 18, 1973.” This would have been the fall of my mother’s freshman year. Why had she not returned the book, I wondered. I saw that it was a work of fiction – *The Collected Stories of Elizabeth Alice Neel* – and that it had been published by an outfit called Blakewater Press in 1972. Curious, I flipped to the contents, and there I received the shock of my life.

My eye flew immediately to the title of the third story listed, “The Old Priest,” and then to the seventh one, “The Nun and Charlie Ray.” All the other stories were there, too, and at the end was an “Author’s Note” informing me that Elizabeth Alice Neel had been born in 1938, and that she was the author of a novel, *Swan Song*, which had been issued by the same publisher. The book I held in my hands seemed cheaply designed and produced, and I suspected that Blakewater was a small press, and that my mother had correctly supposed that no one, including her teachers, had ever heard of the author or read her work.

My blood had chilled. My hands had begun trembling. Finally I let the book drop to the attic floor. Then, trying to impose rationality on a nightmare situation, I picked up the book, along with the accordion file, took them downstairs, and arranged them with a few logs in the fireplace. I turned on the gas starter and listened to the loud *Whoosh!*

So my mother had not been a writer, after all! She’d been a plagiarist! I lived for the next couple of days in a state of numbed disbelief. When my father or Debby or other new friends telephoned – my across-the-street neighbor, a pal from the gym, an assistant creative writing instructor at the state university downtown – I simply let my old-fashioned answering machine tape their messages. I hadn’t yet gotten around to buying a cellphone.

It was on December 23, 2013, that I got a thick envelope from the famous magazine. (I had never given them my phone number.) It included a copy of my signed contract, with the clause promising that mine had been “original, previously unpublished work” highlighted, and the copy of a typewritten letter they had received that was signed, shakily, “Elizabeth Alice Neel.” You can

guess at the general contents of the letter. You can guess at the benumbed detachment with which I read it.

The next day, as the vulgar saying goes, the shit hit the fan. The famous magazine had issued a major, unprecedented press release that of course had been picked up by the Atlanta paper, which saw fit to republish my original slob-photo from *Downtown* magazine. This time, the caption read “Alleged Plagiarist.” Now that I no longer looked like the photo, viewing it was especially painful.

The phone continued to ring, and to ring; soon the answering machine tape filled up. People came to my door, including Debby and my father (I peeked at them from behind closed blinds), but luck stayed with me in one small way: because my mother’s former health-care workers had keys, my father had advised me to change the locks. The house, after all, was mine. My father and Debby did not have keys, so they stood out front along with a couple of local reporters and TV video photographers, knocking, endlessly knocking.

I had retreated up into the attic, where the air was still overwarm and stuffy, though it was now winter. The winter of my discontent, I thought, randomly. I was hungry but decided not to go downstairs before nightfall, fearing that people would glimpse my shadow as I passed through the house. Lacking anything else to do, I picked up the manuscript of “A House of Diamonds,” which I presumed, at least, my mother had written herself. For that, I admired her. And I began to read.