

Reaching for Redemption

By Genine Babakian

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What's keeping me positive? My dog, my family and my creative writing projects. Not necessarily in that order.

Can you publish this? Yes!

Characters:

Bella Forrest Cabelli, a white woman in her late twenties who is attending her Great Aunt Tallulah's funeral. Bella is an English teacher. She grew up in New Jersey and she lives in New York.

Frances Forrest Cabelli, Bella's older brother, in his early 30s. Also known as Frank/Frankie, he is a professional dancer from New York.

Connor Forsyth, late fifties, is the lawyer and executor of the deceased, who has known Bella and Frances since they were children, and would spend their summers with their Great Aunt in Beaufort, South Carolina

Tallulah Forrest, 90, whose funeral has just taken place at the start of the play. Tallulah is the descendant of a cotton plantation owner and decorated Confederate general, Nathaniel Forrest.

Scene opens on a quiet, summer afternoon in Beaufort, South Carolina. Bella, a white woman in her late 20s, is sitting on a porch swing of a stately home, biting the back of a pencil and balancing a legal pad on her knee. She is lost in concentration. She writes. Erases. Writes again. Frank, Bella's older brother, enters through the screen door from the house, balancing two tall glasses of ice tea. His tie is loosened around his button-down shirt.

Frank

Well, they've finally all gone home. Who knew old Tallulah could rustle up such a crowd?

[The screen door slams as he walks across the porch to the swing, stage left. He hands Bella one of the glasses.]

Frank [cont'd]

Scooch over. I'm beat. I've forgotten how scorching the summers are down here.

[Bella slides over without looking up. Frank sits down. She flips the pages of her pad and shifts on the porch to face him.]

Bella

How's this for the local paper? "Tallulah Forrest, 90, passed peacefully in her sleep –

Frank

[Guffaws, sputtering a mouthful of ice tea] Peaceful? No one who knew her is going to believe that about Great Aunt Tallulah.

Bella

Be serious, would you? And don't flake on me now. The sooner we tie up Tallulah's loose ends, the sooner we can get back home to New York.

Frank

You're right. Let me help. *[He grabs the pad from Bella and scribbles something, hands it back.]*

Bella

[Reading] Ding dong, the witch is dead! Very funny, Frank.

Frank

Too subtle? How about: Last living relic of a prominent Beaufort slave-owning, soul-crushing Confederate family is dead. Finally.

Bella

Why are you here, Frankie? All these years later – how long has it been since you’ve seen her? Spoken with her? Five? And she can still get under your skin. Even when she’s dead.

Frank

I was not about to leave my little sister alone to handle the old dame’s affairs. There *is* no one else, Bella. The proud Forrest line has run out of relatives.

Bella

Thanks for the moral support, brother. But you are not exactly a great help. You can’t even handle a simple obit for the newspaper.

Frank

Well, you are the writer in the family, Bells.

Bella

English teacher, Frankie.

Frank

Semantics, Bella. You are a yet to be published author. I can just feel it.

Bella

You still haven’t answered my question. You could have stayed in New York. Cozied up with the new guy while your dance company is on furlough. What’s his name, again? Patrick? He’s cute.

Frank

It’s Peter. And we broke up. Besides, what better time for a road trip to the Deep South with my sister when the financial future of my employer is in peril? Besides, I couldn’t let this place go without saying good-bye. We may be Yankees, Bells, but we are still “honorary citizens of Beaufort.”

Bella

All those summers here.

Frank

All those summers. Sweating at Tallulah Forrest’s School of Dance, for young gentlefolk.

Bella

How many years did we beg her for an air conditioner? *[Mimicking her aunt's voice]*
“Now Bella, darling. One needs to feel the natural air as one glides across the floor. Not an arctic blast.”

[Bella and Frank are startled by the screen door opening. Connor Forsyth, Tallulah's lawyer and executor, steps onto the porch, wiping his brow with a handkerchief.]

Frank

Mr. Forsyth! I thought you'd gone. *[Frank starts to rise from the porch swing.]*

Forsyth

Now, now – don't get up. Just wanted to take another stroll through the crape myrtles. Miss Tallulah's pride and joy. Say – remember when you two used to play hide and seek out there? There were times I'd come by with some legal papers for your aunt and catch sight of you two racing among those trees.

Bella

You were always so kind to us, Mr. Forsyth. Always brought us a sweet or a gift. Frank and I – we always appreciated that. Especially the summer Momma and Daddy died.

Forsyth

That was a dark time for you kids. Good thing your Grandma Delilah was there to pick up the pieces. I imagine she needed a rest every summer, when she shipped you two down here to her sister. Used to get such a hoot out of watching you dive into a box of pecan toffee. Popping them in your mouth as fast as you could chew.

Frank

Aunt Tallulah was not a big believer in sweet treats. “An unnecessary expense,” she used to say. We had to finish them quickly. Before she could stop us.

Forsyth

Well, your aunt was always careful about what she ate – that comes with the professional territory, doesn't it? Did I ever tell you I took dance lessons with her when I was young? I never had your talent, Frank. But I walked in there with two left feet, and damned if Miss Tallulah didn't get a decent waltz out of me.

[Forsyth holds his arms out and Bella jumps up and runs across the porch to join him. Frank hums a waltz tune and pantomimes conducting as Bella and Forsyth dance around the porch.]

Frank

[Mimicking Tallulah's voice] Heads held high, now. 1 - 2 - 3, 1- 2 - 3. Watch that posture. You are proud sons and daughters of Beaufort. No slouching!

[Forsyth grows tired and they stop dancing. He bows to Bella and then wipes his brow again. Forsyth walks down the porch steps and cranes his neck to look up at the house.]

Forsyth

Be a shame to lose this place. It's been in the family since 1850, you know. When Nathaniel Forrest inherited the estate from his uncle. I imagine it's too difficult for you New Yorkers to keep up. Your aunt didn't leave you much money, I'm afraid.

[Forsyth suddenly pats down his suit pockets, pulling out a thick envelope.]

Forsyth [cont'd]

Almost forgot! Miss Tallulah made me swear on my mother's soul that I would hand this to you two in person. *[Chuckling]* And you know how formidable she can be.

[Forsyth walks back up the porch steps, hands them the letter, then heads back down.]

Forsyth [cont'd]

I'll be on my way. See you Monday in my office? We'll go over the particulars of her will.

[Forsyth exits. Bella and Frank are standing on the porch, looking warily at the letter. Bella reads the envelope.]

Bella

To Bella and Frances Forrest Cabelli. Personal and confidential.

Frank

Well? Are we going to stare at it or open it?

[Bella starts to open the letter, but Frank puts his hand out to stop her.]

Frank [cont'd]

Wait! I've got a feeling I'm going to need something stronger than ice tea for this.

[Frank exits through the screen door, back into the house. Bella walks back to the swing and sits. She opens the letter and pulls out the pages. As she does a key falls out of the envelope and onto the porch, making a sound. The lights dim, with a spotlight on Bella, stage left. Another spotlight shines on stage right, the other end of the porch, where Tallulah enters. She is wearing formal, old-fashioned attire.]

Tallulah

How many times must I tell you, don't be so clumsy, Bella! You don't want that key to fall through the slats.

[Bella does not react to Tallulah. She is reading the letter. Tallulah sits on a high-back chair, posture erect, on the other end of the porch.]

Bella

[Reading] Dearest Bella and Frances. If you are reading this, then I am dead. How kind of you to make the trip to Beaufort to see me off...

[Spotlight fades on Bella, leaving only Tallulah illuminated.]

Tallulah

I'll leave Mr. Connor Forsyth, whose family has served ours for decades, to discuss the particulars of my Last Will and Testament. He has my utmost confidence. But since my dear sister Delilah passed a few years ago, and your mother left this earth too soon – may she rest in peace – you two are the last of us Forrests. We must have words.

First, let me start with that key, before you lose it. It is the key to a safety deposit box in my name at the Beaufort Federal Savings. You must speak with Mr. Randolph Higgins, the bank manager, who will give you access to the box. In it you will find U.S. Savings Bonds in your names. By the time of this reading – whenever it is that I decide to die – they should be worth over \$500,000.

[Lights go up and Bella jumps up off the swing.]

Bella

FRANKIE!

[Frank comes running out of the screen door, holding a whiskey glass. Bella read on.]

Tallulah

I know you were not expecting much, given my frugality over the years. Or what was it you used to call me, Frances? Penny-pincher, I believe. Or was it tightwad? No matter. When you go to the bank you'll see that all those years of clipping coupons and rolling quarters has paid off. You did your part, as well. All those nickels you had to drop into the swear jar were funneled into those bonds.

Frank

[grabbing the letter and reading it] Fuuuuuuck

[Bella grabs back the pages, reads]

Bella

There are stipulations, of course. Did you think I'd just hand you a half a million dollars with no say in how you spend it? I am relying on your sense of honor to respect my wishes.

Frank

Good luck with that!

Tallulah

Frances! I'm leaving you the house.

Frank

What???

Tallulah

The house will be put in your name, and the adjoining properties. Your sister has advised me that your dancing career is lately in peril. Not that I ever thought dancing was a suitable career for a bright young man like you, Frances. It draws too many people of a certain ... sexuality.

Frank

Ah, there it is. What's a visit with Aunt Tallulah without a healthy dose of homophobia.

Tallulah

And yet, I must take some of the responsibility for pointing you in that direction. In all my years, Frances, I never had a better pupil. You are a natural on the dance floor. A picture of grace and dexterity no matter who your partner is. Even your sister.

Bella

Thanks, Aunt Tallulah.

Tallulah

I'd like you to take your share of the money and start a dancing school, right here on the Forrest estate. Only use your own name. Frank Cabelli studios. Yes, that sounds a bit more inclusive, does it not?

Frank

Wow. Next thing you know, she's going to endorse a Democrat.

Tallulah

[Growing animated] The dance school. I want you to feature all kinds of dance. Swing. Modern. Hip hop. Or is it Tik Tok? The point is, no more white gloves and bow ties. This

school should be for everyone. People of...all colors. Allow sliding scale rates for those who cannot afford it.

Bella

What the hell has gotten into Aunt Tallulah? The woman who once called Hip Hop the Devil's music! Was she of sound mind when she wrote this?

Tallulah

Start a local dance competition! I'm sure Forsyth can help you secure sponsors from local businesses. I'd like the winners to receive a college scholarship. Did I ever tell you I won a dance competition in my youth? For the Lindy Hop. Those were the golden years of Big Band music.

[The opening bars of a trumpet sound – the intro Bugle Call Rag, by Benny Goodman. Frank grabs Bella and spins her as the rest of the band begins to play.]

Tallulah [cont'd]

It was 1939. I was just engaged to Samuel Collins. Oh, what a dancer he was! My mother thought it was crass for her daughter to enter a dance competition, but Samuel managed to convince her. He was such a charmer...

Frank

[Looking quizzically at Bella] Samuel? I never heard about a Samuel. Never even knew she was engaged.

Bella

It was before the war. Before Samuel joined the navy. Before he was stationed at Pearl Harbor.

Frank

How do you know?

Bella

It's been five years since you've seen her, Frank. Don't act so surprised. There are things you don't know about her. Samuel Collins was the love of her life. Buried at sea.

Tallulah

Anyway, Frances. The point is, I know you could make something of this place. It could be your legacy. My legacy... And I believe you'll find Beaufort more tolerant of people like you, Frances. At least, more tolerant than I was. It is my great shame that my views on this matter drove us apart.

[Frank downs the whiskey in his glass and sits down, stunned.]

Bella

My great shame? Frank, an apology! She sent you an apology from the grave!

Tallulah

And now, for my greatest shame. You two had better be sitting down for this.

[The spotlight fades on Tallulah and Frank and Bella hover over the letter on the swing.]

Bella

As you know, this place I've called home for my whole life, belonged to my great great grandfather, Nathaniel Forrest. He inherited the cotton plantation in 1850 from his maternal uncle, who had no heirs. Along with some four dozen slaves who worked the land.

Frank

And here we go, back to the land of cotton, where old times are not forgotten.

[Bella shushes Frank. Keeps reading.]

Bella

Nathaniel Forrest married soon thereafter to Agnes Cross, whose father owned a prominent mill industry in Charleston. Their union was not productive. Agnes conceived many times, but was unable to carry a child to term. She lost six babies. Agnes recorded her despair after each loss in her diary, which was uncovered some years ago by an intrepid graduate student conducting research on Antebellum Beaufort. She made a copy and tracked me down. You'll find it inside the safety deposit box.

[Bella pauses and holds up the key.]

Bella [cont'd]

Nathaniel Forrest had little patience for his wife's inability to produce an heir. He also had a vigorous appetite. He visited the slave quarters regularly, taking whatever woman he fancied.

Frank

Well, this is a different portrait of Nathaniel Forrest than the one we grew up with. Decorated Confederate Army General. Founding member of the Ku Klux Klan. Esteemed citizen of Beaufort.

[Spotlight on Tallulah, who carries on, while Frank and Bella remained focused on the letter.]

Tallulah

One of Nathaniel's regulars was a light-skinned house girl. She was still a child when Forrest inherited the estate. They called her Coffey. Her skin was the creamy color of his morning beverage. The result of the former master raping one of the kitchen slaves.

Bella

Coffey worked in the house, attending to Agnes. She was not yet 15 when the mistress noticed her belly expanding. She knew, of course, that her husband forced himself on many of the slaves he owned. She thought, given her age, Coffey might be spared.

Tallulah

Agnes was present when Coffey's labor pains started. She stayed by her side as the girl gave birth to a boy, as fair skinned as any white child. That's when Agnes got an idea. According to records of sale, Nathaniel Forrest sold Agnes two days after the child was born. Agnes and Nathaniel then claimed the infant as their own. They named him Archibald Cross Forrest. Born April 26, 1860.

[Frank and Bella jump up in amazement.]

Frank and Bella

Oh my God! Oh my God! Oh my fucking God!

Bella

Archibald Cross Forest! Tallulah's great grandfather! The son of a slave!

Frank

What would her Daughters of the Confederacy luncheon ladies say?

[Bella and Frank continue reading, heads close together]

Tallulah

You may wonder how long I've known that my great great grandmother was a slave. A child, raped by the man whose statue sits in the center of Beaufort. I have known for far too long. You were still children when I received a copy of that diary. It has been my greatest shame to conceal this secret from you, from my neighbors. I even tried to conceal it from myself. You may consider it cowardly of me to reveal this truth only after my death. And you may be correct. But I do not wish to conceal it any more. Bella. I will need your help.

Bella

[Reading the letter] You always had a gift with words, Bella. The stories you used to make up. You created whole worlds for Frances and I to listen to during those long summer evenings. Now I need you to tell *my* story. The story of a genteel southern lady

descended from a slave. You've got Agnes Forrest's diary to get you started. And my spit.

Frank

Her what?

Tallulah

My spit. I've left a small vial of my DNA inside the safety deposit box. Use it to trace my ancestry. And to find my – our – relatives. Coffey wasn't even 15 when she was sold. She may have had other children after she left Beaufort. Imagine the story you could tell. I know you've got it in you, Bella. I can just feel it.

[Tallulah stands, pats down her dress, and walks toward the porch steps. For a moment she looks tenderly toward Bella and Frank, whose heads are still buried over the letter.]

Tallulah [cont'd]

Now go on, you two Cabellis. Make us Forrests proud.

[Tallulah walks down the stairs and exits. Bella and Frank stand and walk toward the center of the porch, staring off in the direction Tallulah exited. Suddenly, Frank claps his hands together, as if he has an idea. He runs inside, and comes back out with a bottle of champagne and two flutes.]

Frank

I was saving this for another toast altogether.

[He pops the cork and pours champagne into two glasses, handing one to Bella. He holds his glass out to toast.]

Frank [cont'd]

To my darling sister, Bella. The yet to be published author of a sensational work of non-fiction. I'm thinking bestseller!

Bella

To my brother, Frankie. The visionary behind Beaufort's new dance center.

Frank

And to Tallulah, who did not want her secret to die with her. Rest in peace, dear aunt. We've got this.

[Frank and Bella clink glasses. Lights out.]

THE END