

George Singleton

Ray Charles Shoots Wife Quenching Earth

Until my wife discovered the unending tunnel in our backyard, we'd approached our record for ignoring each other, which is to say she'd not spoken to me for four days. The record was six. There'd been innumerable bouts that lasted between twelve and forty hours. Those so-called therapists, counselors, and magazine writers who're all about communication for a healthy, survivable marriage have never bothered to study up on us and discard their ancient and impenetrable findings. I had gotten up early—she discovered the unending tunnel on a Saturday—and driven away from our house. I didn't leave a note. There was no cell phone for me to take along, in case. I headed out. When I returned, a few hours after normal lunchtime, my wife said, "Hey, come out in the backyard. You need to see this."

Every window in the house was open. It didn't take abnormal auditory skills to hear her voice. When she opened every window it seemed as though we resided, quiet and baleful, inside a screen room. I looked in a number of directions, thinking that she spoke to another outdoor person, a person lounging in our backyard. We didn't have neighbors back then. The adjacent land hadn't sold, and the developers hadn't horseshoed a subdivision around us.

I reminded myself to fetch the ledger and mark down that she spoke first.

"You want a beer or anything?" I said. "While I'm in here, do you want something?"

She shook her head No. My wife held one hand up. In the other she kept our garden hose shoved straight into the ground. Our soil, for what it's worth, makes red clay seem like heated petroleum jelly. One time I planted sweet potatoes back there and when I pulled the tubers up 110 days later they looked like I'd harvested flat, flat lip-plates. "I don't want to lose my focus. I need to concentrate. And I need your assistance," my wife said.

I picked one of my Nikons up off an end table.

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Unfortunately I had never fully documented the causes of our silence.

It went both ways, of course. Sometimes Didi said I drank too much and got verbally abusive. There were matters of finance, especially after I “retired early,” at the age of thirty-nine, from my position as Photography Instructor at Calloustown County Community College, in order to “specialize” in wedding portraits, graduation photos, and annual arts and crafts show entries that offered prize money. We argued as to who bought the dog food last, who fed the dogs last, who paid for vet bills, who cleaned up after the dogs last. I couldn’t count how many times I closed my mouth, intending muteness until one of the dogs chewed on a lens cap, because Didi “made a decision” about our telephone service provider, the arrangement of furniture, laundry detergent choices, how much money to send her nephews and nieces on birthdays even though they never sent thank-you notes, how come the car’s engine threw a rod when Didi’d lied about taking the thing over to our mechanic for an oil change.

She didn’t like it when I holed up in the darkroom, listening to Ray Charles. “I hate Ray Charles,” she said about daily—or at least when we were on speaking terms.

My name happens to *be* Ray Charles.

It’s a gift to have such a moniker, to be able to own Ray Charles Photography. I’ll admit that I didn’t love third-rate community college students saying, “How hard could it be to make a A from Ray Charles?” or “How would Ray Charles know if he was in a darkroom or somewhere else?” or “What kind of crazy zoom lens does Ray Charles need?” et cetera.

Ray Charles, photographer. One time the local paper wrote a human interest piece about me. I’d just received a First Place prize at the Mule Days festival, for a photo I’d taken of a Civil War re-enactor sitting beneath a cypress tree, holding a Happy Meal box. The newspaper guy titled his piece “Ray Charles Shoots and Scores.”

Didi said he made fun of me. And then she went silent.

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“I’ve had our garden hose shoved down here since eleven o’clock,” Didi said. “It’s on full blast, and it’s not coming back up. There’s no end.” She wore her gardening attire—Bermuda shorts and a gray sweatshirt advertising Ortho.

I said, “Water’s not free,” because it’s the first thing that came into my head. “There’s also a train of thought that goes something like ‘Hey, let’s be

environmentally correct and not waste water. Let's conserve it."

Didi didn't ask about my earlier pilgrimage. She didn't spit out, "So I take it you've been sitting down at Worm's bar wasting what could've been our vacation money," which only meant that Didi stood there focused, obsessed, and infatuated. My wife said, "If the snake's size has anything to do with the length of its lair, we might need to be concerned."

I stared at her. What was she saying? Did Didi break the unspoken truce? I looked down and said, "It's because of the drought, that's why we're supposed to conserve water."

"It has to be coming out somewhere. There's no way I could be filling up an underground cavern. Walk around in circles, Ray, and see if this is bubbling out somewhere I can't see from here. Do snakes have back doors? What about voles?"

I said, "You better hope it's not a yellow jacket nest," and then, "Is this your way of telling me I'm too fat and need some exercise, walking around in circles?"

Didi remained half-hunched, steady with the nozzle below. "If I thought that, then I'd say it flat-out, Ray. Now start circling me, you know, maybe a stride farther out each lap."

I did. And I took a photo of my wife from behind with each lap until I stood in the road. The best picture, near dusk, looked like she had a tail between her legs. I thought about telling her, but we seemed to get along so well with this, a mysterious chasm, in our midst.

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If we had well water I'd've gone to the spigot and shut Didi's experiment down. Having a dry well, like a dry socket in one's jaw, is a painful situation with the inherent endless bad consequences of anticipation. Even way out here where Didi and I lived in Calloustown, we had "city" water provided by Lower Piedmont Sandhills Water. They say that if 10,000 more people move to within the town limits, maybe they'll make a sewer treatment plant, dig sewers, and get all of us Calloustowners connected. Only 9,500 to go or thereabouts.

Our water bill would go up, sure, but to be honest the mystery tunnel had me wanting an answer, too. Was there a Chinese man on the other side of the planet cursing Mandarin because of an artesian well sprung up on his property? Or maybe he praised Buddha for filling up a rice paddy more so. Were there fishermen on the Congaree River wondering how come the current took their boats downstream without warning?

If my wife filled up the septic tank—or our neighbors' down the road—how long a silence would I be able to muster after saying, "I told you"?

Didi said, "I don't expect you to keep walking circles at night, but I don't want to slack up what I've started."

"I can redirect the floodlights," I said. "Hell, with floodlights you can stand there waiting for water to bubble back up at you all night long." Because I didn't want to precipitate another communication malfunction I said, "That can't be all that great for your back. Let me take over for a while. You can go pee, get something to eat, do whatever you need."

My wife looked at me as if I'd disrespected her ancestors. Our longest "fight" occurred two weeks after she'd gotten on the computer and joined that ancestry.com ruse. Didi emerged from our "study," opened up my darkroom door without knocking, and said, "I knew it! My great-great-great-great-great grandfather was an Indian. He married a woman who's listed as "Unknown Indian," and they had a son who married a white woman!" She went on and on. "And then my great-great grandfather had a wife whose father started up a silk mill, and they had a child who lived just two days and another son who was retarded somehow. Anyway, my great-great grandfather married a Jewish woman, and she had a brother—what kind of uncle does that make him to me?—who worked for a man whose father was born in Istanbul and later became a diplomat of one kind or another!"

There was more. I listened to it all. I didn't say anything about how she could've ruined some rolls of film I had of the Cosby-Coleman wedding if she'd barged in five minutes later. I said, "Who cares? Maybe you should worry about making a mark in history your own self, so that knobheads in the future can look on ancestry.com and say, 'I had a great-great-great-great-great aunt who led the anti-Second Amendment movement in America,' instead of 'My great-great-great-great-great aunt sat around hoping to find importance in herself because of what her ancestors supposedly achieved.' Do you see what I mean? If not the anti-Second Amendment, then at least something like 'wrote a novel' or 'I won the lottery and gave half the money to an orphanage.' I mean, the whole reason I have Ray Charles Photography is so future generations can understand the importance of marriage and debutante balls, among other things."

Didi locked herself in the study for six days. I'm pretty sure that she peed in a jug the whole time, and only ate and used the bathroom otherwise

when I left to make women's trains and veils appear more spectacular than they really were, to keep a viewer's eye on the dress instead of the look of condemnation that plastered the bride's face.

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There exist a number of inexplicable veins that traverse planet Earth. The best one I've found, in all my research when Didi let me use the "study," occurs in Turkmenistan. It's a flaming pit of natural gas called the "Door to Hell," and measures almost a football field in diameter. No one knows how deep the pit distends, or where the gas begins.

There are strange holes in the bottom of oceans, with gases and such leaking out. People believe in portals, et cetera, like in the movie *Being John Malkovich*, a film that Didi abhorred. She wasn't president of the *Eraserhead* fan club, either. Willing suspension of disbelief didn't show up anywhere on her family tree, evidently. If you put a freakish baby or a workplace with four-foot ceilings in a movie, Didi didn't care about buying a movie ticket.

I took over atop the hole at nine P.M. on that first night. I thought about pulling out my Zippo to see if, perhaps, the "Door to Hell" had its back entrance in my yard, all the way underneath the Caspian Sea, the Mediterranean, the Atlantic Ocean, and so on. But I didn't. What if it shot up a flame and burned my eyeballs useless? How many times would Ray Charles Photography get mentioned on all those TV shows then?

I sniffed and listened and—knowing Didi—waited only ten minutes before she returned, a bag of pimento cheese sandwiches in hand. "I don't want to say I don't trust your being able to keep a nozzle in the hole, Ray, but I don't trust your being able to keep a nozzle in the hole. Go on back inside and take care of the dogs. I'll call if I need you."

I let go of the hose when she latched on. I said, "Hey, I got an idea. Maybe this endless vein holds gas. I'll leave my lighter with you in case you want to check it out."

That night I didn't sleep, same as I didn't when we lived together tongueless. The explosion never occurred. My wife didn't return inside, needful to relate the narrow tunnel's limit. Back to back to back to back I watched *Down By Law*, *Barton Fink*, *Harold and Maude*, and *Deliverance* on two of those indie film networks that Didi tried to talk our cable provider into dropping.

"Watching these kinds of movies helps me 'see' better portraits,"

I always told her.

“It helps you see freakish people in a relentless world,” Didi shot back. And then, more often than not, we’d stare through one another before walking off to separate rooms in the house.

That stuff I said about furthering humanity instead of living off past do-gooder capitalistic ancestors? Didi studied studio art in college. Somewhere along the line she gave it up and took up framing. She spent her time in a frame shop, and five generations from now some kind of insecure relative-to-be will tell everyone how she’s related to a misunderstood and unjustly-sentenced woman who suffered a series of miscarriages quietly. I don’t think it’s fair. Somebody should at least notice how Didi could use a miter box.

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I’m not the only photographer named Ray Charles. There’s another one in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Maybe there are others. The singer Ray Charles was born as Ray Charles Robinson back in 1930 or thereabouts. I’ve never typed in “Ray Robinson photographer” into a search engine, but if there is one, then there’s no way he gets the ribbing or double-takes that the Baton Rouge guy and I get, I doubt.

Here are some fun facts: There’s a photographer in Georgia named Willie McTell, and *two* photographers who go by Doc Watson—one in Pittsburgh, the other in Riverside, California. Those last two men might be professors in an art department, thus the “Doc” title.

I’d be willing to bet that more than a few professional photographers have “Homer” for a name, but who in America remembers how that old poet couldn’t see?

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Do not doubt how much I loved my wife, for the quirks she forgave of me. Back in the bad days I went off a-drinking about daily, took a uniform along with me—some days I was a soldier, others a police officer—and changed my clothes before driving home even though it wasn’t more than ten miles and the sheriff’s deputies knew me anyway. I had this notion. I believed that a cop wouldn’t think a man in uniform irresponsible enough to drink hard in a place like Worm’s, then get behind the wheel. Didi never said, “So you’re a member of the Oxford, Mississippi police force today,” or “Where exactly is the Army-Navy store where you’re spending good money on these uniforms?”

We had met at the frame shop, a place known by the odd existentially-challenging demand Hang Me Here. At the time, I'd been considering a series of photographs that involved an interesting-looking woman—somewhere between a woman with an ineffable port wine stain birthmark that covered exactly half of her face, and a supermodel with a desperate look in her eyes—half-clothed, standing amid vacant, run-down, out-of-business cotton mills throughout the southeast.

Half-clothed leaning against idle, rusted spinning frames and looms! It would be symbolic!

Upon my job offer Didi said, "I don't like to have my picture taken." She said, "I've read up on how men say they're photographers, and then the next thing you know these girls are working escort services in Tokyo, Bangkok, and Dallas."

I said, "I understand your trepidation. If you should ever reconsider," I pulled out one of my newly-printed business cards, "give me a call. I promise I'm not some kind of pederast, or human trafficker, or republican."

Didi wasn't supermodel or birthmark material, understand, but I couldn't *not* stare at her. Her green eyes hinted at thyroid problems. She stood six-one and weighed about 130, but didn't seem malnourished. Didi didn't bother waxing her eyebrows, which a less sophisticated aesthetician might consider as looking like two fragile misplaced moustaches on perfectly porcelain skin. And that hair of hers—as soft and brown as a common field rat's.

"Your name is *Ray Charles* and you want me to pose semi-nude for you?" she said on that first meeting. Didi quit framing a paint-by-numbers clown than someone from the Junior League wanted to hang in her foyer. "Get the fuck out of here."

We married three months later, alone, before a justice of the peace. Didi agreed to move to a land where Witness Protection people might be moving soon. I made some promises. For one, should we have a child—and *we wouldn't*—I was never to make the kid eat newspaper after each meal. Didi's own father—I don't have a clue about psychology, but this seems relevant and causal—believed that the ingestion of paper products helped clean out one's GI tract, thus saving money, and the environment, in regards to bathroom tissue.

"I'd like to take your father's photo," was my only response when Didi divulged her childhood, there on Date #1.

"If a skilled archaeologist dug up my childhood septic tank he could

piece together American history from Watergate to the Iran-Contra Affair,” Didi said.

“What about your mother?” I asked. What could I say? We ate Mexican food, and I wanted about cuatro or ocho margaritas.

“A skilled archeologist might find her in the septic tank, too, for all I know,” Didi said.

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At the end of the third day I had walked the perimeter of our house so far away, looking for odd springs, that I had to use a zoom lens to catch Didi stooped over filling the hole in our yard. If this kept going on I’d have to set up a magnifying glass pointed toward my wife, and then zoom in on that. I walked in circles, unconcerned with work I needed to do. I thought, I can set up a magnifying glass, and then a surveyor’s level, and finally my zoom lens.

And then I found water surging up in the middle of the Calloustown Natural Baptist Church’s adjacent cemetery, among headstones that only read Munson or Harrell. If I had a cell phone I could’ve called Didi and said “Eureka!” like that, or “Our hole is connected to the plot of little Ernestette Munson, born December 26/died December 31, 1870. So basically we’ve had a wormhole between her coffin and our backyard, so her soul can come visit on occasion, which might explain those cries we’ve thought to be feral cats coupled and stuck nighttime.”

Out loud, there on a slight bluff overlooking my own house, I probably said, “Uh-oh.” I looked around to make sure no one stood around in the church parking lot. I found a nice three-foot long fallen limb and stuck it in the hole, then kicked some dirt, then scooted a small flat rock over that. Finally—and I would have nightmares about this for the rest of my life—I kicked over little baby Ernestette Munson’s miniature headstone to cover what may or may not have been a portal of sorts to our backyard.

The coroner, later, would pinpoint Didi’s death to right about the time I covered the unnatural spring. To this pronouncement I would say “Okay,” and not explain where I stood, or what I did, at four o’clock that afternoon.

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I have photographed every Munson and Harrell in Calloustown, whether they liked it or not. I’ve placed my camera on the counter of

Worm's Bar and Grill, and tapped the shutter release button with my elbow. I've done the same at the Tiers of Joy bakery, and Southern Exotic Pet Store, et cetera. After my Interesting Woman in the Middle of a Failed Cotton Mill project never developed, so to say, I thought it necessary to encapture the blank, dull visages of a relentless people committed to proving General Sherman pointless and myopic and downright cruel for choosing to leave Calloustown unscathed, still bloomful.

There are the "natural" and "unsuspected" photographs, and there have also been the normal family Christmas portraits, the near-coming-out pictures of eighteen-year-old girls walking down a staircase, the "Fifty Year Anniversary" photographs intended for newspapers, engagement and wedding photos. I shot Biggest Watermelon! photos, and the odd favorite dog/cat/mynah bird portraits with said animal standing in front of a Rocky Mountain or Niagara Falls backdrop.

Good God I wish I had more photographs of my wife.

Why did I find it necessary to chide her when she bought expensive dresses from catalogs, had them delivered, put them on, then sent them back for a refund, only so she could say, "I've worn Marc Jacob, Valentino, and Sue Wong"?

Why didn't I say "Fuck you," and click my camera in her direction even though she made such demands against it? Why, over these years, did I not show up at Didi's job and snap some seemingly inconsequential and inconspicuous photographs of her, face close to a miter box, checking forty-five degree angles?

"She had a massive heart attack," a man told me at the hospital. I had requested an autopsy in order to make sure—call me selfish—she hadn't taken an overdose of pills, finally tired of our long silences.

"Women have heart disease and heart attacks more than people think," someone else told me, a man who taught Biology 50 to students who needed to be able to identify arms from legs on their remedial tests at the community college. "Dead men on the golf course get all the headlines, but women have just as many heart attacks, if not more. They call it 'the silent killer.' Wait. That might be wrong. The brown recluse might be the silent killer. Or coral snake. Now that I think about it, just about everything's a silent killer."

This monologue took place at Didi's visitation inside Harrell's Funeral Home. I didn't know what to say, shook the biology professor's hand, and tried to remember his name. I thought, Are you making fun of me? I

thought, I'm about to be *your* silent killer. I thought, If only I'd made the decision to cut off that water on the first day.

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I could've walked back home and said, "Hey, pour some food dye down the hole and let me run back over to the graveyard to see if it comes out." I could've said, "Food dye would get diluted beyond recognition. Let's put a marble down that hole and see if it comes out in the cemetery." I could've said, "You remember that time we got in a fight, Didi, a day before we flew to New York for a vacation? I have a confession to make. When I went to the e-ticket kiosk, I requested that my seat be changed so we wouldn't have to sit next to each other for all that time." I could've said, "I wonder if we can send a piece of kite string down the hole, then knot both ends to empty lima bean cans and talk to one another, you know, like people did back before everything got so goddamned complicated."

Luckily there were available plots at the Calloustown Natural Baptist Church's graveyard. Didi would've never agreed to such an eternal resting place. I bought the plot right next to hers, too, even though I had no love of Christians in general and Baptists in particular. Fuck it, I thought. Would I be able to see anything in the so-called afterlife? Does anything matter? If, by chance, things turned out differently than I believed, couldn't Didi and I take the mysterious tunnel back home nightly?

Oh Didi, Didi, Didi—how I wish you never roamed the Earth out back. How I wish I'd've either shot you more, or never.

R.T. Smith

The Source

In autumn my grandson, four,
takes me out to appraise the stamens,
seeking a treat to spoil his dinner,
and when a screech owl in the beech

spinney calls, he hears the cry
as a horse's whinny. "Grandolf," Henry
says, "I think there's a pony
in the tree," but sadly I resort

to the teacher in me and explain
it's just a bird who can whimper
like a colt. Reaching the orchard
knoll, we find only ruined fruit.

Things are not as we'd hoped,
but when we turn to leave, a rusty
apple on one haggard branch stirs
and releases from its center

a hummingbird. In the blurry
hovering moment just before
the apparition whirrs away,
we're both struck dumb,

till Henry points with glee
and laughs, "so that's where
those little boogers come from."
I'm tempted to correct him,

but too delighted to disagree.