

# **CABLES FROM A RESTLESS HEART**

**By Dick Sheffield**

*A novel*

## Book One

*Sometimes though...the cracked plate has to be retained in the pantry, has to be kept in service as a household necessity. It can never be warmed on the stove nor shuffled with the other plates in the dishpan; it will not be brought out for company but it will do to hold crackers late at night or to go into the ice-box with the leftovers.*

F. Scott Fitzgerald  
Esquire magazine

*Life changes in the instant.  
You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends.*

Joan Didion  
“The Year of Magical Thinking”

*Do you think God made borders?*

Mexican Immigrant  
Waiting to cross at Las Chapes

*...it's impossible to know what's important. The big decision is always the one you don't realize you're making – till the results start coming in. And then you're stuck with it.*

Arthur Miller  
“The Price”

*Life is something like this trumpet. If you don't put anything into it you don't get anything out. And that's the truth.*

W.C. Handy  
Composer and father of the blues

*What's Going On?*

Anti-war song  
By Marvin Gaye

The package arrived on a Friday morning by overnight courier and was addressed to him – Paul Wade Benjamin. It was mid-sized, tightly wrapped and he recognized the cursive strokes across the front right away.

His heart raced and his hands trembled slightly as he peeled open the gift box and found four black journals bundled together inside, nothing else. He paused and handled them gently before he approached what he figured to be the water's edge. Years ago, the pair had agreed to love each other madly and somehow had allowed this unique opportunity to slip through their fingers. There is no joy in that.

Without expectation, he opened the first page of the notebook and began.

Twenty-five years.

(The Year Before)

JANUARY

*1 January*

For as long as I (Barbara Jean Moore) can remember I've processed almost everything through writing. It is the way in which I attempt to create order out of chaos, seek understanding opposed to fear and when possible, reach for potential clarity and resolution. Writing and reading take me away; I believe I am lucky in that way.

But if forced to surrender one or the other – reading or writing – it would have to be the writing. One could hardly risk losing out on what so many others have to say and in the manner they chose to do so. Since childhood, words and ideas have stretched my imagination, sometimes making lasting impressions. Conventional or unconventional, it did not matter; like in the story *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*:

"My name is Mary Katherine Blackwood. I am 18 years old, and I live with my sister Constance. I have often thought that with any luck at all I could have been born a werewolf, because the two middle fingers on both my hands are the same length but I have had to be content with what I had. I dislike washing myself, and dogs, and noise. I like my sister Constance, and Richard Plantagenet, and *Amanita phalloides*, the death-cup mushroom. Everyone else in my family is dead."

Or the thoughts of Ms. Ester Greenwood, age nineteen:

"And then I wondered if as soon as he came to like me he would sink into ordinariness, and if as soon as he came to love me I would find fault after fault. The same thing happened over and over: I would catch sight of some flawless man off in the distance, but as soon as he moved closer, I immediately saw he wouldn't do at all. That's one of the reasons I never wanted to get married. The last thing I wanted was infinite security and to be the place an arrow shoots off from. I wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions myself, like the colored arrows from a Fourth of July rocket."

The idea of staring into one's soul is daunting. One may as well begin there.

*2 January*

One would think I would be as happy as the day is long. After all, my husband loves me and many things have broken my way.

I was taught by my parents to do the right thing, even when it did not matter; to believe character sustained us and that the truth worked and was easier to remember. But somewhere along the line I lost the conviction that promises were kept and the lights would always turn green for me. It was around then too I began to suffer the pangs of a restless heart. So far I have been unable to locate any consistent antidote for such melancholy.

Well, a girl that believes in everything – how are you going to trust her, right?

So I write. In a notebook, where one can bust loose or coast into the day upon a childhood memory. I write letters that will never be sent, navigate the secret bayous of my life or drink coffee at the kitchen table with the dead.

If fortunate, I will find a way to give voice to those rare things too – unconcealed love, forgiveness and the times one believed moonbeams came in a jar or merrily, merrily, life was just a dream.

Will I be safe inside these pages, relieved of fear and freed by the truth? Some mornings the world is drained of wonder and my soul is bankrupt; thief, bandit, and scoundrel I say on such days. The question is what lies in wait for me – a window filled with sunlight and stars or a wall of darkness.

*3 January*

Last night I watched from my window as a shaft of light crawled across the porch from the winter moon, and thought how it might be wise to remain on speaking terms with the person we used to be, flawed or not. Otherwise they may surprise us at the strangest moments. Some things cannot be undone.

Today I remembered the New Year's Day at Port Aransas when I cooked black-eyed peas and cornbread, and washed it down with Four Roses bourbon. Later that evening I stood alone beside the gulf, listening. The seagulls and the smells swirled like ghosts; I was more hopeful than optimistic then. Still am.

From my place at the window I watch the snow unveil its magic. How can I be certain if this is snow falling or time passing? Both are unstoppable. The silence is kind, deafening; it defeats Monday.

The room where I write is small and private, with high ceilings. It is the perfect room to read, write, be alone or cry until one decides to stop. There is a balcony, reached by stepping through a floor to ceiling French doors inside the bath.

From there and beyond the treetops I can hear the train whistle howl at the night and see a river that runs to the sea. It is one of my favorite spots on earth, a place where you think of nowhere else.

*4 January*

When I was four, I drew. The pictures traveled from the wild imaginary places in my head onto the page, wherever the colored chalk or crayon led.

“What’s that?” someone once asked.

“Why those are my Aunt Lillian’s magic shoes,” I said.

Maybe I have always lived in an imaginary America.

At five I could read to a degree, recite and write my letters and numbers, but could not spell. I was fortunate that I had attentive parents, living grandparents, a home in a good neighborhood and if pressed, twin brothers. And we resided in this place called Texas, where kids played outdoors almost the year around.

Mother was the strong, silent type; she believed in voting, keeping a tidy house, sleeping on clean sheets and ironed pillow cases and that daughters should take piano, tap and ballet classes. And early on she instructed me in the intricacies of oyster stuffing, red-eye gravy and a table of polished flat silver, china and linen.

She valued my independent streak, encouraged my curious nature and recognized a fierceness of spirit that I did not. As far back as I can remember, I set my sights on chasing rainbows, and my gypsy soul.

I enjoyed being alone and knew that my imagination overwhelmed any innovation that I might have inside of me. I was more innocent about geography, history and politics.

*5 January*

My first notebook was a Big Chief tablet, given to me by my father with the suggestion that I write down my thoughts. I'm not sure how long it required me to fill the pages, but afterward my father numbered and dated them, one after the other.

The physical dimensions of the tablet are best described as tall and lean, with maybe fifty ruled pages wedged between a red and black cardboard cover that folded back. On the front was a dignified profile of a Native American Chieftain in full headdress. It was not much later in my life that I read about Indians, reservations, shepherds in the California desert, Americans heading towards the Pacific, and a fellow named Geronimo.

I remember being captured by the determined-looking man in the photographs and his dark eyes, black as coal, clear and sharp. By all accounts Geronimo was an intelligent man and had an emotional disposition that reflected courage, resolve and great will. How fortunate he was – to have such a heart.

Those notebooks are packed away somewhere and I have not seen them in many years. Since then I have moved onto unlined sketchbooks and fountain pens, printing now because my cursive strokes have deteriorated so.

But at no point have I recorded in the notebooks the daily events of my life. Instead I write what some would call fiction and others might say are lies; quite possibly it may be the closest thing I know about the truth. The other thing I have come to learn about the truth: that I will never be in complete possession of it, no matter how hard I try.

*6 January*

There was a time when I thought about becoming a journalist. I was attending university and working on the student newspaper, where deadlines, ideas, commitment and energy emerged on a regular basis.

I recall my first week on the job, in particular the hours when the paper neared its evening publishing deadline. The last few cut lines were being written for the photographs, final editing was almost complete, and most of the edition's pages had been laid to rest when I heard a singular voice rise above the noise.

"There's a typo on the front page," someone yelled.

"How bad is it?" the editor asked.

It was about this time too, that I met Paul Benjamin. But I'm not ready to speak to that just yet. I would not know how to begin except to say that love is never on time.

There is something unsettling about yesterday's tears – not the kind that run down the cheek (although there is that too) – but those inconsolable ones that burn and signify a deeper sadness. They can hide in plain sight or take refuge in the shadows of one's soul, but they are always pointed toward the heart. These tears last and linger, like a stalled storm.

Often I am shaken by these interior tremors.

*7 January*

I'm not a professional writer or really anything close to that. It intrigues me to read or learn about those that have chosen the creative life and how they go about it. I understand Hemingway wrote standing up in oversized slippers, with a number two pencil; that he counted the words he wrote each day and posted them on the wall next to his writing desk, always attempting to write more than his allotted amount on the days prior to going fishing. I understand too, that he always

left off the day's work knowing where he would begin on the following one. Perspectives of Hemingway are all over the map, but in the end, he was a serious man; a writer.

Inside of my notebook, I race toward the mountains on the horizon and never get there, even though I run with abandon. I open and re-open an earlier world, pull scabs off old wounds, heal others and find time for forgotten friends and foes. And I uncover some wincing moments; things that diminish me and cannot be undone.

Thoughts, words and sentences can lead to surprising places, and I make notes of these in the margins. For me, there are more questions than answers.

Do I seek to turn an ordinary life into an unforgettable one? Or find a painfully won serenity? I do know that people looking for the light will spend many nights in the dark. I know I have.

*8 January*

In today's newspaper I read a review of a book published recently. The story focuses upon the profiles of twenty American citizens, people that are for the most part unknown outside of their communities. Through their lives the author discovers the common thread of courage, integrity and the ability to continue fighting despite the odds.

Californian George Lee, a Japanese-American and barber by trade, recounted the seven-hundred days he and twelve members of his family spent interned at the concentration camp in Manzanar, California during the 1940s; a journey that took him from humiliation and injustice to an ultimate forgiveness.

My other personal favorite was the story of a Nicaraguan girl turned combatant and revolutionary soldier. Now a woman, poet, mother and American citizen, her voice from those

days still carries an emotional and passionate timbre. More and more I am discovering the miracle is often found in the mundane.

*One day fields will be forever green  
the earth black, sweet and wet.  
Our children will grow tall upon that earth  
and our children's children...  
And they will be free like mountains and trees  
and birds.  
Each morning they will wake happy to be alive  
and know the earth was claimed again for them.  
One day...  
Today we plough dry fields  
though every furrow is soaked in blood.*

*9 January*

I have seen how corrosive the hunger for fame and power can be, and believe what matters most is joy; the health of our spirit rather the acclaim of the world. Getting to that place and staying there is difficult, at least for me. I have discovered that I cannot walk away from the shadows that linger inside of me. Matter of fact I often bring them along for the ride.

Anything goes in a notebook – I constantly remind myself of that fact. When I become lazy or blue, I write; it pays my passage into the world. I've read others who have published their letters and journals and figure they figure it is a good way to keep in touch. In the end I suppose that is what a notebook is all about – attempting to think clearly.

In mine, I look for the shipwreck with my name on it; a wind that sails me toward distant latitudes, where beaches, parks and cemeteries are empty and new. There I would write about winter, happiness, love and discontent. Today my lungs suck in the cold gusts of reality. It is my nature to do so.

Today is another brisk day and I imagine being elsewhere; on a beach where the sand is warm and the sun is like a monocle on the face of the sky. At night the lions come out to play.

*10 January*

Secrets come in all shapes and sizes, and are a tricky subject. Is there justification for some secrets and not others? And where is the proper balance between secrecy, privacy, truth telling and lying, even little white ones? I wonder, does complete transparency really work in our lives, in our politics despite what we have been taught to believe since the sandbox. Any violation probably went on our permanent record, scarring us for the life ahead.

For the most part I am a practical person rather than one to go big or not go at all. And although I believe it is fine to be ambitious and in possession of a healthy ego, I find that I do hold back. Is that humility at work or an absence of courage? It has become one of my basic questions.

Then again we are all made differently. That is what intrigues me the most about those with a creative mind – the fact that it is possible, maybe even an obligation not to toe the line of conventional thinking, but to speak the truth, even when it includes darkness. My preference would be to travel to those distant places more often than I do.

I believe most of us seek goodness rather than evil, however, the reading of history indicates most human beings are capable of both. I'm certain we would be taken back by the private thoughts of others we view so differently from afar. We are alike in these ways, I think.

*11 January*

I took to the road earlier today all by my lonesome, something rare in my mother's generation, but a segment of current life that is quite liberating to me. It was a short trip by Texas standards (about two hours one-way), along winding back roads, across rivers, past farms and fenced ranches, where oaks, pecans and a few maples populate the rolling countryside. The sun was bright, the sky the most delightful blue. Light is always good for the soul.

There is a dreaminess that takes hold of me some days, especially on the road; it is the solitude and act of turning inward that shoots me off in all kind of directions – from the sincere to the impractical. In these moments, I learn the art of barrel racing and become a confident enough performer to take part at a small-town rodeo. In others, I shut myself in my room full of books, thinking about how the words and stories might have affected those that came before me and those which will come afterward.

I have always found that place to be alone – whether it is by the sea, in my childhood tree fort or on the crowded streets of a big city. I possess that particular ability, but perhaps more, the need.

Suddenly I wake from the dreaminess and find myself down the road – aware, but wondering if I have seen everything, anything?

*12 January*

As I begin this notebook I hold few pre-conceived notions other than to show up and write every day. Like my father's handshake, I consider it an act of integrity, a debt of honor that must be paid.

My plan is to address subjects and ideas that simply come to mind, some scheduled and others not. My hope is there will be some continuity to it all, but the basic approach is to face the blank page each day and see what rises to the surface. Perhaps more than anything else it is an attempt – an opportunity really – to understand what I think and believe and to consider where I have been and where I am headed.

A germ for a story may emerge between the pages, but that may result more from unintended consequences than some classically-designed English garden. My words may never

conform to a uniform circle with a beginning, middle and end, yet ultimately if I possess the courage to be imperfect and remain unafraid, I believe I will be wiser for the adventure.

Someday, someone will read these private thoughts. I hope they will wait until the end to judge them. As for myself, I will attempt to withhold any judgment and seek forgiveness for my inadequacies. My standard is to put my best foot forward daily and realize the meaning of the pages will be determined by the construction of the reader. Now that's a square deal, right?

If I am thinking clearly, I will write it clearly.

*13 January*  
*Dream 1 (The Stranger)*

It is the end of the semester and everything is on the line, graduation, prestige, being the first in my family to graduate from such an elite school like Harvard. But I am not prepared for the examinations required to graduate – in fact I have not attended most of my classes in months and have not read or discussed any of the material. I'm not sure what I have been doing, anything I suppose other than what I needed to do. The thing is – the thing is - I am scrambling and anxious, unable to cover entire textbooks and syllabuses in a single week. Round and round I go, in vicious circles, always ending up at the school library. Each night on the way to my study carrel, I pass this beautiful Ethiopian girl with chiseled features, olive skin and almond-shaped eyes sitting alone at the same, long library table. She looks at me, her dark eyes sensing my panic. But I never speak to her; I only nod to this mysterious creature from another land. It is my loss.

I feel like an imposter of sorts – that somehow I am a phony and do not belong. It is easy to lose one's confidence; I have discovered one does not have to be an absolute failure for that to occur

*14-15 January*

The Heyday Café is located on a hilltop, at the corner of the main highway and a farm-to-market road about ten miles west of Harper Point, a small town in the Texas Hill Country.

On Sunday evenings, the jazzman with bent fingers plays his trumpet in a modest-sized, often crowded room; the music bright, swinging and complicated to the ear. It is a sound that gets into your blood, like politics, baseball, love or any number of things can do. I suppose we ought to be grateful when we touch upon things that possess this sort of potential. The repertory is a clutch of tough little pieces from performers of the 1950s and 60s – Chet Baker, Bill Evans, Gerry Mulligan, Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis and others. The musicians are relaxed, playful, and to a degree have slightly wicked stage personalities – it is jazz cool, Texas cool.

The café is owned by Michael Rubio, a one-time teacher, politician and well-connected man. He opened the place about a decade ago after serving a brief stretch in prison and it is often frequented by illustrious clientele. I have heard it said that in his fast-lane days the proprietor rendered all sorts of services to politicians, lobbyists and powerful-types, mostly during election campaigns.

Heyday is well-managed, clean, and certainly unique, since it was originally a Texaco service station. It has outdoor tables situated beneath the covered drive-thru, two rooms of booths and tables inside, with large windows that look out from the hilltop on which it rests. A piano and wooden bench reside in the front, left corner of the second room.

The proprietor (he likes that title) is almost always present and every customer must observe the ritual of greeting him personally before being shown their table and served. They say he once owned a shack (dive) on the beach at Matagorda Island, near Rockport; they say the red snapper, redfish and stuffed flounder served there rivaled any on the Gulf Coast. The proprietor

is a large man, nearly three-hundred pounds dressed in starched, kitchen whites that set off his black hair, dark eyes and round, pocked-marked face. They say as a young man he once worked at Antoine's in New Orleans.

Smoke curled from beneath the door of a back room, where men play dominos and gin from early in the day until closing. Two dogs: Counterfeiter, a bloodhound and Levitan, the ageless blue heeler guard the door. On most nights some musician may wonder in and play at the old piano - that is except on Sunday nights when the jazzman plays.

*16-17 January*

"Transferred back to Baylor from a small school in Tennessee," Becky Lee Traylor said. "My sister was a student there and it seemed like the right thing to do."

"Did you by chance attend Sewanee?" the women in the next booth asked.

"Yeah," she said, "how did you know?"

"It's a gift," the woman said, smiling. "No not really, I've had several friends go there and your description sounded familiar, that's all."

The young waitress at the Heyday Cafe said she left the University of the South because it was always misty and cold, depressing. Becky Lee Traylor was smart and unpretentious, like the place where she now worked.

I nursed a dark, Mexican beer looking about and awaiting my order. Shortly afterward, an oversized plate of fried oysters flown in fresh from the gulf and half bottle of California chardonnay arrived. I was in Texas, but I imagined being anywhere in the world.

As they say – it is not what happens to you, but how you respond to what happens that matters the most.

An older couple sat in a booth across the way. They ate slowly and spoke quietly to one another; their mutual respect evident. The man's hat hung on the rack standing nearby and I noticed it was the same size and shape worn by many Texans during earlier decades – mostly by politicians, businessmen, ranchers, sportswriters and football coaches. My grandfather wore such a hat and on more than one occasion told me the tale of how it got its famous name.

According to my grandfather, the story revolved around a young woman that lived in West Texas during the 1930s. Not only was she from one of the wealthiest families in the state, she was a beautiful, athletic, spirited young woman who my grandfather said, “was full of piss and vinegar.” It was this latter trait that troubled her father when the young lady traveled alone, something few women did in those days.

The pair often went round and round about this, but finally agreed on the idea of placing a hatbox on the backseat of her car - in full view - in order to give the impression that she was in the company of a man. It was not a fail-safe solution for the father, but a reasonable compromise nevertheless. And according to my grandfather, the name of the hat resting snugly inside of the square crimson and tan box became the benchmark of hat makers and hat sellers from Fort Worth to St. Louis for years to come. Customers would now ask for the Open Road Stetson by name.

The older gentleman stood when his wife got up from the table and retreated to the ladies room. He was more slightly bent than in his younger days, and although I knew nothing of this man the gesture stood higher than the tallest pine. He took the hat from the rack and held it lightly in his hands until he stepped outside and gently placed it at just the right angle on his head. A few minutes later their car pulled onto the main highway and disappeared.

*18 January*

Often I stop at libraries or independent book shops to see what they are offering. I have always done this, especially in small towns. Most have interesting and unique stories to tell, those of location, architecture, history, patrons and how they came alive in the first place. But on the inside I almost always find evidence of a common spirit – the love of learning, adventure, imagination and a path that leads the curious mind to hidden and unexpected treasures. I like to discover that special place to read, or contemplate the view. For me, a library is a safe place for any season, especially for those of us who have chosen an interior life.

And there is this too – they remind us of the fact that many of life’s fundamental pleasures are in full view, if we stay on the lookout for them. Oh, how rewarding would it be to leave something good behind?

Odd, but when I pull a book from its resting place I make certain the librarian or whoever is in charge of that section sees me placing it back, because like it or not, I care what others think of me. Am I at the mercy of the talent in which I have? And what if it is slightly greater than none?

*Dear Barbara Jean,*

*“Ok smarty, you’ve had your party, but never again,” the aunt said, following his first-ever birthday party and the ruckus that followed.*

*“I promise, I swear, I’ll never turn ten,” said Bumble-Ardy. – Paul*

*19 January*

*Dream 2 (Swinging for the Fences)*

Sometimes I have pictures hanging inside my head that are a fertile mixture of the ordinary, the poetic and the fiercely terrifying. Important to take note of them, I think. The baseball bat used to smash our next-door neighbor’s ash tree belonged to my twin brothers. It was a Vada Pinson model - twenty-eight inches long and weighing thirty ounces.

I do not have an explanation for doing what I did, only that I beat the living daylights of that tree. It frightens me to think what that may mean.

Our town was a baseball town and Winston Park was the hub for kids with balls, gloves, wooden bats and big dreams every summer. It was also where parents yelled (to the embarrassment and dismay of their children) at local umpires, and a foul ball could be redeemed for a snow cone in a rainbow of flavors. Summers there were fleeting, fun and sort of melted away.

The day I smacked that tree I was not thinking of baseball; I was just swinging – the rounded weapon traveling back and forth in a flat, letter-high movement - whack, whack, whack - countless times.

Later, our neighbor doctored the tree with a black liquid in order to save it, but the bark never returned. I was punished for my misdeed, but I'm not sure how – perhaps in the secret courts of people's hearts, or by simply remembering. I still wince about some of the things I have done.

*20 January*

Miracles never cease to surprise me and it is one reason to go on, to keep showing up; suddenly an emotion is captured in a thought, then by words. Words matter to me, especially those of others:

Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun

Under my window, a clean rasping sound  
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:  
My father, digging. I look down

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds  
Bends low, comes up twenty years away  
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills

Where he was digging

Seamus Heaney (*Digging*)

Recently I have felt more and more like a character in an Alice Munro story: “She had noticed something about herself on this trip that people were no longer interested in getting to know her. It was not as if she had created a stir before, but something had been there that she could rely on. She was forty-five and had been divorced for nine years. Her two children had started their own lives, though there were still retreats and confusions. She hadn’t gotten fatter or thinner, her looks had not deteriorated in any alarming way, but nevertheless she had stopped being one sort of woman and had become another, and she had noticed it on this trip.”

To read this passage stings, like an Indian burn.

*21 January*

I read the names of the dead every day – those of soldiers in foreign wars that never seem to end and of those too, engaged in other walks of life. My father’s hometown newspaper (which he subscribed to his entire life despite never returning) placed the obituaries on the second page of the front section and I suspect that is how I began reading about the lives of others; where and when they were born, what schools they attended, the things that mattered in their life, the people they left behind and who showed up to care for them in their time of need.

Nestled among the others, I’ve seen the names of my father, mother and twin brothers on the pages. Many things have been written or said about life and death, and although most escape me, some stick, like clay to a boot. They say: “Want to make God laugh, make plans.” They say: “Life is short, even on its longest day.” I say that today matters most of all.