

THE CHILI PAPERS

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(Chapter Excerpt)



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The Chili Papers

I am a part of all that I have met.

—*John Milton*

1

Where the Green Grass Grows

Early one April morning, my mother spray-painted the lawn. She chose green—the exact name on the can was ‘grass blade green’. If she ever decided to fake her own death, I’m fairly certain she’d use ketchup for blood instead of mustard or mayonnaise.

Later that morning, I found a note tucked beneath the windshield wipers of my Chevy Caprice:

*POR FAVOR, COULD YOU TELL YOUR MOTHER TO STOP
POLLUTING THE AIR?*

It was from Mr. and Mrs. Garcia, the couple next-door who routinely left yellow Post-Its on our outdoor recycling container with clever phrases like ‘Yes you CAN!’ or ‘Use me’ with two dots for eyes in the middle of the smiling U. While I had grown accustomed to my mother’s increasingly erratic behavior, I was not sure how to interpret this latest rebuke.

After school, I asked her about the note.

“They’re just mad about the lawn,” she answered.

“What about it?” I asked. “The lawn was dead, last time I checked.”

My mother glanced quickly towards the window and smiled. “Not any more.”

I crossed the room to see for myself. Our formerly auburn-

colored lawn had been transformed into a lush paradise. My mother gave a satisfied sigh. "It's really something, huh?"

I went outside to investigate. The lawn was indeed a thick, flourishing, verdant green, but when I stooped to touch it, I was surprised by its rough texture. It felt like seaweed.

Something was not right. But the grass *was* green, a shiny emerald green, a picture-perfect green. It looked nice—suspiciously nice.

Later, when I was in the garage lifting weights, I discovered the empty spray cans. I picked one up and rolled it around in my hand, imagining my mother hunched down in the front yard like a nervous teenager about to tag his girlfriend's name beneath a bridge. Unlike the teenager, she refuses to worry about the emergence of Mr. Garcia—"Who gets up this early?" she mutters—easing out the can from under her nightgown and spraying a green mist across the grass as if softly layering her favorite perfume on her wrist.

The next day, pausing between bites of macaroni and hot dogs (the Simmons family staple), I confronted her about the lawn. "I found these in the garage." I held up an empty can of spray paint.

"And?"

"I was wondering if you—"

"Sure did." My mother took another bite of her salad.

"Gross!" said Angel, my younger sister. She poured a glob of ketchup into her macaroni and stirred it in.

My mother speared a cherry tomato with her fork. Although I was looking right at her, I couldn't stop glancing at the spray-painted lawn. "It looks good," I said.

"If we're going to sell this house before the bank forecloses, then we need to fix the place up," she said. "Anyway, I'd hate to see all that landscaping you did for me go to waste."

She was right. "Tropical ambience" is a must in Southwest Florida. Like the views in New York City, the zip codes in LA, or the million-dollar ranches in Texas, homes in Coral Gardens are nothing without a nicely-landscaped lawn.

The previous summer—at the insistence of our realtor, Big Judy—I'd begun landscaping our front yard. I started with an

early morning raid in a nearby subdivision. Pleased with the blooming Birds of Paradise I'd pilfered from the clubhouse, I soon moved up to Sago palms, digging them up in the middle of the night and planting them by morning. Nothing was safe.

Before long, I was stashing Hibiscus trees into my open trunk, wrapping rose clippings into exquisite, tissue-papered boxes, and tying rows of hearty croutons across my back. I looked like an illegal immigrant.

But it was worth it. By the end of the summer, our yard had become a neighborhood curiosity, and I, a horticultural legend. Yet there was nothing I could do about the grass, and despite the new landscaping, we received no offers.

We had a month before the bank was due to foreclose. My mother blamed the grass. Painting the lawn was the most rational decision she had made in years. My seven-year-old sister, on the other hand, never came around to our aesthetic point of view.

"Won't that kill the lawn?" Angel asked from behind the ketchup bottle.

I hadn't considered that. I worried the toxic fumes might suffocate my new rose garden. Not the Nicole Floribundas, I prayed. And what about my Lavender Lassies?

My mother speared another tomato and poured more dressing on her salad. "We'll be long gone by then. Let whoever buys this dump worry about it."

Angel laughed. My mother picked up the note from the Garcias, studied it for a moment, and shrugged. "Don't worry about them. They won't have to worry about us for much longer."

Three days later, a German family bought the house. I don't know if the glimmering green lawn contributed to the deal; I'd prefer to think the buyers were more impressed by my sprawling bougainvillea along the front porch.

A few months later, I discovered that the offer had been far below the asking price. "Take the damn thing," I imagined my mother saying to no one in particular. While she was forced to juggle numerous debts after the divorce, my father

was exonerated from all liabilities in return for signing over his claim to the house. Her resentment was palpable. I decided that the soon-to-be-dead grass would give her some satisfaction in lieu of compensation, and that would be the end of the matter.

I was wrong.

My mother worked as the principal receptionist at Coral Gardens City Hall. There, behind a hexagonal, Plexiglas window, she answered hundreds of telephone inquiries via her state-of-the-art headset, and directed visitors toward the appropriate offices down the hall: garage sale permits to the left; property tax inquiries to the right; bathrooms straight ahead. It was impossible to do anything in the city without first noticing my mother, either because of her physical presence in the middle of the lobby or her other physical presence—more like an essence—in which her olive skin and unassuming charm emitted an almost hypnotic effect so that visitors (usually but not always men) would take one look at her and forget why they had come.

No such luck, however, with the German couple that purchased our house.

I was sitting in one of the orange plastic chairs next to my mother's receptionist area, waiting for her to give me an application as a summer lifeguard, when I noticed an odd-looking couple approach her desk.

"They paint the grass," began the woman—middle aged, with flat hair and ivory skin. "We here three month and the grass die already." Her husband stood behind her, peering over his wife's shoulder. He wore white socks and flip-flops.

"Three months?" gasped my mother. I shared her surprise—I'd never have expected it to last that long. I put down my book and studied her, wondering if she felt guilty.

"That's just terrible," she said.

The German woman lowered her eyes. From my chair, I noticed a slight upturn of her chapped lips. She ran two fingers through her hair and reached into her large, leathery purse, retrieving a small card covered in a scrawl of Germanic longhand. She passed it through the window to my mom.

"Papers for our boat," she said. She glanced over at me.

Over the next few minutes, it became clear that the couple had not come to city hall to complain about the lawn, but to request a special permit for their boat, a twenty-four foot catamaran clearly over the city's maritime size restrictions, and nearly three times as big as any boat I'd ever seen in the small canal behind our old house.

My mother bent over and rummaged in a low drawer, eventually reappearing with a piece of paper and a clear plastic sticker. The woman reached into her purse again, this time for her checkbook. She passed the purse to her husband and returned her attention to my mom, who appeared to be fidgeting.

My mother handed over the sticker. "You know what? Don't even worry about it. Just put this sticker on the windshield and you'll be fine."

"How much?" asked the woman.

"Don't worry about it," repeated my mom. She flashed a disarming smile and lightly touched her left earring so it dangled like a cranberry in the afternoon light. "Welcome to Coral Gardens," she continued, widening her smile so I noticed tiny specks of lipstick on her front teeth, a smile so sincere that the red blemish only enhanced her charm. Neither half of the German couple could resist smiling back. I could almost see them thinking: maybe things would work out after all, and besides, how much could a new lawn cost anyway?



Years earlier, on an afternoon when the grass was a much less flammable shade of green, my friend Billy came over to play football.

"We can't play in my yard," he said. "Mom says we'll kill the flowers." I remembered the pathetic-looking patch of sunflowers in his backyard. "Not that we even have any flowers," he continued. "Those are weeds."

My front yard, aside from a few anthills and a cluster of wilting banana trees, was perfect for football, which probably

explains the dead grass. This was years before my landscaping endeavors. Our biggest problem was the mounds of stickers living, as my older sister Susan explained, in symbiosis, with the grass. "If this is symbiosis," I said to her while carefully picking a sticker out of my leg, "then I'd rather be by myself."

After several sticker lacerations, we stopped playing tackle football and settled instead on throwing the ball around the yard. Susan spent an unusually long time with us; mostly she stayed in her room after school. She must have had the hots for Billy, who was—like her—in the seventh grade. I was only in fifth grade, which meant I went to a different school. But that didn't matter once we got back to the neighborhood. Besides, it was my football. I was surprised that Susan could actually catch it.

A few minutes into our new game, my mom came down the street in her rusted 1967 Chevy Nova. The car originally belonged to my grandfather and the back floorboards had gone through; until her recent growth spurt, my sister Angel had been in danger of falling through onto the street.

We moved out of the driveway and waited for my mother to pull in. Halfway into the garage, when the car should have been coming to a complete, uneventful stop, we heard a loud metallic sound, as if a soda can had been stepped on and released.

Susan looked at me with round eyes. "She ran over the shutters."

My mother had dragged the shutters from a neighbor's trash heap three weeks before, and spent hours pounding out dents, scraping off paint, and stenciling fancy designs. We weren't allowed to touch them.

"My shutters!" she screamed from inside the car. "My shutters!"

I glanced at Susan, who appeared to have stopped breathing. Billy tossed the football up and caught it. The same crunching sound echoed as my mother backed out of the garage and stopped in the middle of the driveway.

"Well there goes the game," I said, staring at the car. "She's right in the end zone."

"Don't be a dumbass." Susan looked between Billy and me as if *we* had run over the shutters.

"I better go," Billy said. "Mom told me not to miss dinner tonight." I gave him my most piteous, starved look, trying to extend my stomach like the Ethiopian children on television. *Don't leave me here.* I stared at him, imagining myself in front of a news camera. *Please help.*

Billy caught on. "Hey, you want to come over for dinner?"

"I better ask my mom first."

I never got the chance. My mother got out of the car and ran to the garage. She lost a sandal but didn't seem to notice, falling before the shutters as if both she and they had just been rescued from the sea. She crouched over them, caressing the cracked paint.

Then she began to cry.

Her chest heaved and her black hair dangled over her lifeless child, over the would-be wall coverings.

"Maybe you should just come over." Billy eased himself toward the street. I looked at my mother again. Dinner was the last thing on her mind. I followed Billy down the street until the faint echo of my mother's sobs disappeared.



The rest of the story I heard from Susan, the only one brave enough to remain at the scene. She told me later that night about our mother, alternately crying and yelling in the middle of the garage, hammering out dents with a red-gripped hammer like Quasimodo trapped in his cathedral.

I pictured my mother hammering those dents as if her life depended on it. It seemed so confusing. What was the big deal? They were just shutters.

Years later, I came to understand that feeling, the sense that you've contributed to your own demise. For my mother's sake, I like to remember the story differently. She is not

La Llorona, the Mexican spirit weeping over the death of her children, enveloped with madness, but a real-life woman enraptured by her own rage. She cannot believe she has wasted so much time on a pair of shutters and a worthless husband, only to wind up running over the wrong one.

In my version, my mother does not let the shutters win. "Fuck this," she says between whacks.

Not that I was there.

I guess I should trust my sister's version; it's probably closer to the truth. I know this because just a few months after my mother's hysterics, Susan returned to the exact same spot in the middle of the garage floor, hoisted up the same red-gripped hammer (this time I saw it all), and destroyed her seventh-grade history project with three sharp blows through the castle walls as if playing a carnival game. Clearly, though, she was not having fun. One minute she was painting tiny shrubs, the next, picking out pieces of broken Popsicle-stick from her hair. The castle never had a chance; at least the dented shutters ended up on the walls of our house.

That evening, Susan tried to explain how the drawbridge should have opened. My mother must have felt exactly the same about the shutters, repeating to herself, "This really should have worked," before smashing down the hammer.

My sister and my mother are linked by a physical similarity impossible to deny, though both may try. They are cancer survivors, each in her own way. But the image I hold most clearly is of each of them on the garage floor. I see them clutching the hammer high above their heads, hunched over on both knees, not sure how they got there and looking at one another in bewilderment.

2

Take Two and Call Me in the Morning

After years of matrimonial discord, my mother finally quit trying to solve her marital problems and instead settled on calling my father names. Her favorite, *cocksucker*, was a perplexing choice for a woman who rarely cussed. Even today, she still cringes when I drop the occasional, inadvertent F-bomb—"Damn, these fucking beans are great!"—on one of my rare visits home.

As a child, I didn't know what the word 'cocksucker' meant, but the unaccustomed vulgarity still enchanted me. My mother's tone told me that it wasn't a compliment.

Today, I have the word tattooed on my lower back. It must have been in my father's honor. Back when my mother used to yell the word, however, I was neither branded a cocksucker, nor did I actually suck cock.

That came later.

When I was seven, I choked on two aspirin. I was eating dinner on the plastic patio table at my friend Jennifer's pool party when my head started to hurt.

"It's just the chlorine," Jennifer's dad assured me.

"But it really hurts," I assured him. He laid a couple of enormous-looking aspirin on the table and looked at me as if I were expected to swallow them. I looked back at him. I wondered if he gave his daughter the keys to his car in the same casual manner: "Just don't hit anything while you're trying to look over the steering wheel, okay?"