

In 1963, one of the first things my husband from Newport News told me after we were married was that novelist William Styron was his cousin. I stared at him for several moments and then blinked. Not yet a writer myself but having spent a good part of my college education studying them, I felt a bit like I had just hit the jackpot. I don't mean money. I mean what I really cared about: writers.

My mind went into instant calculation. If I went by the Southern standards that I had just married into and used the proverbial "kissin' cousin" definition, that meant Styron, one of my favorite authors, born and raised in Tidewater, was my cousin too!

Not that I imagined I would ever become a bosom buddy of the famous author of such books as *Confessions of Nat Turner*, *Sophie's Choice* and *Tidewater Morning*. He had long ago left Virginia and now lived in a farmhouse in Roxbury, Connecticut, and on Martha's Vineyard in the summer. But perhaps I did entertain the fantasy that this distant relationship to the writer, like some magical silken thread, somehow foretold that I, too, would write. I also knew that, because of his connection to the Buxton family, I would occasionally see him, perhaps even get to know him, and for these tiny crumbs suddenly on my platter, I was ever so grateful.

I soon learned, however, when we moved to the Tidewater area after my husband's stint in the Vietnam War, that not everyone in the area felt as I did about William Styron. The negative feelings apparently stemmed from his first book, *Lie Down in Darkness*, published in 1951, for which he won the Prix de Rome and which depicted some members of the Peninsula's old guard families perhaps not in the very best light. In spite of this, the strange and dark characters of whom Styron had written so brilliantly in his fictional Port Warwick had launched him to national fame.

In one of the book's major characters, I thought I had recognized Elizabeth Buxton Styron, Bill Styron's stepmother, whom he was many years later to call an "evil" woman in a PBS documentary. Although Elizabeth had passed away by then, this remark had upset the family, particularly Dr. Russell Buxton, my husband's father and Elizabeth's brother.

The Buxton family was devoted to medicine. Dr. Joseph T. Buxton of Newport News, a surgeon who built one of the first hospitals in the area in 1906, had seen two of his children, Elizabeth and Russell, continue the family tradition, one as a nurse and eventually as director of the Buxton School of Nursing and the other as a surgeon who ran the hospital after his father passed away in 1940. The Elizabeth Buxton Hospital was sold to the Bernadine Sisters in 1952 and became Mary Immaculate Hospital. It is now Riverside Rehab Institute and has recently celebrated its centennial.

Elizabeth not only headed up the Buxton Nursing School for many years, but she also cared for her younger sister, Helen, who had lost a leg as a child in a streetcar accident in downtown Newport News.



The "Evil" Step-muse

To the late William Styron, Elizabeth Buxton was the "evil" stepmother. Cousin MARY WAKEFIELD BUXTON explores the relationship between the Pulitzer prize-winning author and the quintessential Tidewater matriarch.

PHOTOGRAPH BY KEITH CARTER

When her father became ill, the responsibility for his care also fell on Elizabeth's shoulders. Between her sister and father and her demanding career, there was little time for love and marriage.

That is, until 1940, when Elizabeth met William Styron Sr., a widower who had just lost his first wife to cancer. After Dr. Buxton died in that same year, Elizabeth finally felt free to wed. Thus, at the age of 45 she found herself married, with a 15-year-old stepson, William Styron Jr., who was still grieving the loss of his own mother. Such grim facts did not bode well for the creation of the happiest stepmother-stepson relationship.

Although Bill Styron had already left Virginia by 1965, when we arrived in the Tidewater area for my husband to attend William and Mary, Aunt Elizabeth was very much alive. It was my privilege to know both Elizabeth and Bill, who would occasionally visit his father and stepmother with his charming wife, Rose. It was in those years that I first began to put together the complicated puzzle of their difficult relationship. I began to understand how Bill's early antagonisms may very well have been an important trigger for a profound writer.

Elizabeth was not "evil," of course. She merely reflected her upper-middle-class station in life. She was a product of her time and place in a region that had been poisoned by the effects left over from slavery, effects that damaged both white and black populations.

Her major crime, then, was not just that she did not share the same values as her stepson, a budding social liberal, but something far worse: She made the mistake of trying to inflict her sense of morality on her stepson. Elizabeth was ill-prepared to take on a teen-age boy. It must have been a terrible shock to have been given such responsibility so late in life, especially for such a precocious, non-conforming, sensitive and highly creative soul as Bill.

Aunt Elizabeth was the epitome of the Southern grand dame, the sort of woman that every Virginia family produced in those days, strongly judgmental and severe in her constant watch over family behavior. She remembered everyone's birthday and anniversary and sent a suitable card on each occasion. She also saw to it that everyone followed the family rules.

Elizabeth was also handsome, bright and well educated, at Hollins. She carried her family's sense of noblesse oblige throughout her life like a cross. Few women did as much as Elizabeth did in terms of career and family. But there was never much laughter. If Elizabeth had been born a male, she would have become a doctor like her father and brother, rather than a nurse. My husband, Joseph T. "Chip" Buxton III, said that his Aunt Elizabeth once asked her father if she could go to medical school along with brother Russell, only to be told that doctoring in Virginia was for males only. This must have been a major source of unhappiness to such a bright and capable woman.

For under her steely, no-nonsense manner, there was a certain sense of embitterment, as if she were well aware that she had done more than her share to carry on the family mission of providing the best possible health care and nursing education to the Peninsula. Yet she had not received the full glory that she would have if she had been born a man.

She was good to me and I loved her. She was loyal to the family and saw to it that we inherited some china, silver, jewelry and family antiques. In spite of her stern demeanor and the constant criticism she offered me as wife to her nephew, Chip, she always meant well. I named my daughter after her.

The first words out of her mouth whenever she saw me were, "Lose five pounds and cut your hair." I must have heard this admonition dozens of times. I always laughed good-naturedly whenever I heard her remark, often declared at her front door even before she had greeted me, and I had to admit the truth in her words. But I also wished adamantly

that she would not say them.

That one small judgment that I suffered many times under Elizabeth must have been magnified 10,000 times for Bill.

The family's modus operandi was absolute dedication to the hospital. The concepts of sacrifice to the profession of medicine and a drive for utter perfection that were required to support such an endeavor were cemented in the family's genetic makeup. Sacrifice was a term Elizabeth understood with unusual esprit de corps. She once pointed to the Buxton family crest, which included a great bird plucking its own breast with blood flowing forth to its fledglings in the nest. "The Buxtons' sacrifice for our young," she said to me



with a certain look of zeal in her eyes. I well remember reacting with a shudder. Coming from a merrier, industrial background where family members laughed about life and did not know the word sacrifice, I did not like the sound of it.

To say that Elizabeth felt her new stepson should conform to the family profession of medicine or law, or at least some other traditional and respectable profession, is putting it mildly. To Elizabeth, becoming a writer was far down on the list of presentable careers, along with perhaps actor or artist. Thus, Elizabeth's entrance into young Bill's life created the perfect storm.

The great irony is that Bill told me he and Elizabeth did fairly well when she and his father were dating. She drove a big Cadillac, a car she had inherited at the death of her father,

and such a car impressed young Bill when she drove to visit him at Christchurch School in Middlesex County, where he was a student. "She let me drive her car," Bill told me with a voice that still held boyish enthusiasm all those years later, for that was about as good as it can get for a teenager.

But later, after the marriage, and after "Billy" had shown the typical teenage behavior of staying out late at night, drinking beer and not devoting enough time to studies, back home in Newport News during vacations and never ended, even after Bill became an established novelist.

"Billy thinks he's a writer," she said perhaps hundreds of times to her friends and family. I can see her

rator in *Sophie's Choice*, and living in New York, I came down with a fairly wretched case of hepatitis. In those days, right after World War II, it was a very serious and unfamiliar disease, and I am quite sure that I came as close to dying as I ever have. While recuperating, I received a letter from Elizabeth. The gist of her letter was this: While she was happy that I had recovered, she hoped from her heart that I realized that I had brought the illness on myself, that the loose and debauched life I had been living—drinking, irregular habits, etc.—I had no one to blame but myself for my close call with oblivion.

"I was still very weak when I read her words. Barely able to get out of bed, and they made—to say the least—a bleak impression on my

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rolling her icy blue eyes and hear the shudder in her voice.

But his father, William Styron Sr., told me the proudest day in his life was watching the news one evening in their home on Chesapeake Avenue, just a few steps away from the hospital, and hearing Walter Cronkite announce that William Styron, born and raised in Newport News, Virginia, had won the Pulitzer Prize in literature, for *Sophie's Choice*.

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She died of cancer in 1969.

Shortly after Bill's interview in which he called Elizabeth "evil" on national television, I wrote him a letter and asked him why he continued to hold such animosity toward his stepmother. "After all," I wrote, "she is long gone and the truth is, most stepchildren aren't crazy about their stepparents. But, in time, and as one matures, one can usually accept the fact that such arrangements are almost always difficult on both ends and learn to appreciate and, in some cases, even love the stepparent."

His immediate response by mail, in a letter dated February 16, 1983, contained the following:

"When I was 22, the age of the nar-

spirit. In short, I can say some 35 years later that it was the most hateful and poisonous letter a boy of 22 ever received from a vindictive stepmother and it made me feel like hell."

"She almost destroyed me," Bill told me in a telephone conversation many years later.

That was Bill's and my last exchange regarding his relationship to his stepmother. Elizabeth is now a subject that he doesn't wish to write of or discuss. I can't blame him.

A favorite memory I have of Bill is from a visit to his and his wife Rose's lovely waterfront summer home on Martha's Vineyard. Having lunch with him on his porch, I found myself suddenly recounting the exasperation I occasionally felt as a writer. One of my books, *To Love a Virginian*, had deeply offended members of the family and I felt terrible about it. I had received some angry letters.

Bill listened intently to my sad tale, his very handsome brow furrowed. "It seems to me that I received one of those letters once or twice myself," he confessed. We laughed, perhaps at the very startling realization that even with passing generations, human nature remains the same. Then he stopped laughing and looked at me. "You have every right to write about life the way you see it, Mary."

Over the years, I have come to realize that his words are what all writers need to hear from time to time, and must always heed.

Buxton wrote this piece early in 2006. Styron died November 1, 2006.