

WHAT LUCK, THIS LIFE

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READING
GUIDE

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR + EXCERPT + DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

In February of 2005, two years after the Columbia shuttle disaster, I saw an Associated Press story in my local newspaper about a New Orleans conference of forensic scientists. Sharon Brown, a police document examiner from Israel, had delivered a talk about the unique assignment she'd undertaken. Eighteen pages from the diary of Israeli astronaut Ilan Ramon had been found on a forest floor in East Texas. The pieces of metal-bound notebook, which had survived two months in the elements, were battered and stuck together, some even wadded. Sharon Brown's job was to separate the pages and see if there was anything for his widow to read. She was still working on them.

I was intrigued. Why hadn't I heard about the

discovery of this diary? What else was recovered that most of us hadn't heard about? I was in the middle of another project, but this one started taking over. I couldn't get it out of my head. A year later, I was on a plane to East Texas.

As a nation, our attention span is short – or at least the editors at news outlets believe it is. The Columbia tore apart seventeen months after 9-11, about six weeks before the United States invaded Iraq. I think of the shuttle disaster as the national tragedy that fell between two horrific pillars. Seven astronauts died on Feb. 1 and by March 20 we were at war. The new disaster trumped the old one. The national media had to turn its attention to war preparations, which is perhaps why my online search revealed remarkable reports from Texas newspapers that had never reached the national psyche. Thousands of people had descended on Texas to search for debris. East Texans searched for weeks. What they found was often startling and sometimes deeply disturbing. NASA was understandably squeamish about the fact that the remains of astronauts were scattered on the ground. But as a nation, we also didn't hear many details of the extensive ground search, the heroic efforts of thousands of people and the huge disruption of life in parts of East Texas. It was a fascinating, under-reported story.

I planned my first trip to Texas so I'd be there for the third anniversary of the disaster. I attended a memorial service in Hemphill, a town near the spot where the nose cap had landed. People told me extraordinary stories

that day and later, on my subsequent trips around East Texas, more stories followed. I soon realized that the event was so bizarre there was little I could make up that would rival the strangeness of what actually had happened. The disaster was an intense experience for East Texans and my interviews reflected this, even three years after the fact. The material I gathered was overwhelming. Many months passed before I could get enough distance from the facts to begin creating the fiction. Yet the stories I collected never left me, and I'm grateful for the haunting.

EXCERPT

from "THE ROAD TO HOUSTON"

I was born and raised in Kiser, a dinky, third-fiddle town near the Sabine River, a rank and slither-filled water that keeps Texas apart from Louisiana. Kiser had a town square with a courthouse on it, a drugstore, a hardware store, two banks that fought over the town's six wealthy families, a furniture store owned by one of those families and two empty storefronts that the ladies used for bake sales and quilt shows. In the winter of 2003, when Kiser was still my home, my ex-wife Holly had just opened a yoga studio on Main Street. People in town were either proud or leery of her place, depending on their choice of church, and their reaction was one thing Holly and I could still laugh about. We'd been separated six months and we buried the rancor as often as we could for the sake of our son, whose

path in life was hard enough. Frankie was eleven, a gifted child who heard voices from the trees and could multiply seven times eight by the time he was six. Where he got all that is anybody's guess. He didn't get it from me.

One Sunday that winter—Groundhog Day to be exact, with no shadow in sight for the critter—I was hiding out in my dreary apartment, avoiding the ruckus that had arrived in Kiser the day before when the shuttle came apart. The town had flown into action—gawking, searching, trying to help—but my altruistic get-up-and-go was tempered by a rawness in my throat and the hangover of a NyQuil slumber. And there was this: I had a big lot of things on my mind. Change had sidled up to me, and more was coming.

With a belly full of orange juice and dubious hope for a clearing head, I reached for the bench chisel next to my chair. A handsome piece of oak lay waiting for me on the floor. In the months since my separation I'd shaped enough heron, deer and hunting dogs to cover the filing cabinet that doubled as a nightstand in the reduced decor of my new life. I'd collected a laundry basket of worthy specimens—my job was foreman for a tree service—but my ideas, not to mention my abilities, fell short of the grace of this striated oak. Fungus and decay had drawn a pink arc through the middle and outlined the arc in purple. There's only one right time to work with a spalted piece like that. Too soon and it's not yet interesting, too late and it's weak and rotten. Someday the piece would speak. A vibration

from its next life would reach the conscious me and tell my fingers how to begin.

A phone call from Holly snapped me out of my stupor. She was living with Frankie at her parents' place, a thirty-acre ranchette north of town. Holly didn't call often. I could tell she was bothered; the pitch of her voice was high. "You won't believe this," she said. "What Frankie found." He'd gone out early looking for shuttle fragments. Guiding his pony through heavy brush, he looked up and saw an orange space suit wedged in the crook of a tall tree. There was an astronaut's torso inside it.

"Did you go and see?" I pressed. "Do you know for sure?"

"It's in those trees next to Parkers' place. God, Wes. It's awful."

"A body still intact?"

"Fell out of the sky. Just like that."

"Jesus. Where's Frankie now?" A picture came to mind I didn't much like: Frankie under a tree, looking up.

"Mom's fixing him lunch. If he can eat it. I couldn't. He wanted to go back. I caught him with Dad's binoculars."

"Jesus," I said again. "Hide them."

"Grady says for you to drive over with the bucket truck."

My brother was chief of the volunteer fire department; I understood what he was asking. Someone had to go up in that tree and bring down what was stuck. "Twenty minutes," I said. The company rig was just down the road.

“Wes?”

I knew this tone, a slight drawing out of my short name. Holly was going to change the subject. It was a pattern in our lives, her wanting to talk, and me wanting to duck.

“Grady’s your brother and he loves you,” she said. “You need to tell him what’s going on.”

“Right now,” I said, “I need to go.”

I put an apple in my pocket and grabbed an old pair of gloves I could throw out tomorrow. The dead made me squeamish, something Grady well knew. I’m not like him, steady and rock-solid. He’s the most honest man I’ve ever known. We were in the same state, marriage-wise, but when Eileen fell out of love with him, she just told him. There was no hemming and hawing, no philandering, no telling him she couldn’t love him the way she should, this last being what I told Holly. Grady left Eileen, walked away from corporate life in Tulsa, moved back to Kiser and bought a business for himself. He didn’t want his old life anymore and he knew it. In Kiser they loved him for that, rejecting the big city. He joined the fire squad and they made him chief right away, though the honeymoon wouldn’t last. He’s too conscientious for a town like Kiser.

I hadn’t spoken to my brother in two weeks, since we’d gotten into it while cooking ribs on Mom’s birthday. He thought Holly and I should reconcile.

“I didn’t second guess you about your marriage,” I’d told him. “Don’t second guess me.”

“We didn’t have kids,” Grady said.

“You think I’m happy about that? But for Frankie to

see Holly and me like that, barely speaking, tension you could cut like wire, it was worse.”

Mom used to say that Grady was born into adulthood, very sure of what he knew. Growing up, everything about him was so measured, so wise, so ordered, it made me want to scream. Maybe it got to Eileen, too.

“Frankie would have been all right,” he said.

“Frankie?” I said. “He hears things that aren’t there, has friends that don’t exist. He’s a sensitive kid. Divorce or not, I don’t know if Frankie will be all right.”

“Then help him. Encourage him to come out of his shell. Get him in the 4-H. That’s a good group of kids.”

I shoved the tongs I was holding right up to Grady’s face. “Stay out of it. Just stay the hell out of it.”

I knew then he had no idea, though just that week I’d laid out the truth to Holly, and she’d sworn to keep quiet until I was ready. I had loved her— still did—and I’d certainly been attracted to her. When we married she was pregnant, so I nudged doubt to my toes and took my place at her side. I’d hoped *husband* was who I was. But I was wearing a pair of boots made for other feet and the longer I wore them, the more they hurt. Holly didn’t know what was wrong. It was more than just the bedroom stuff, though that grew dismal enough. I lost interest in us. I went to work every day and came home to something I didn’t want. Here is the most cliched thing in the world, but it fits: I came home to a lie. There was no one thing that tipped us over in the end. I didn’t hunker down in a duck blind with some guy who was more than a friend, or

slink off to the bar in Shreveport that caters to the same-sex crowd. There were attractions, sure, but I never acted.

Holly was grateful to have a place to pin our troubles, relieved to know it wasn't her, that she was innocent.

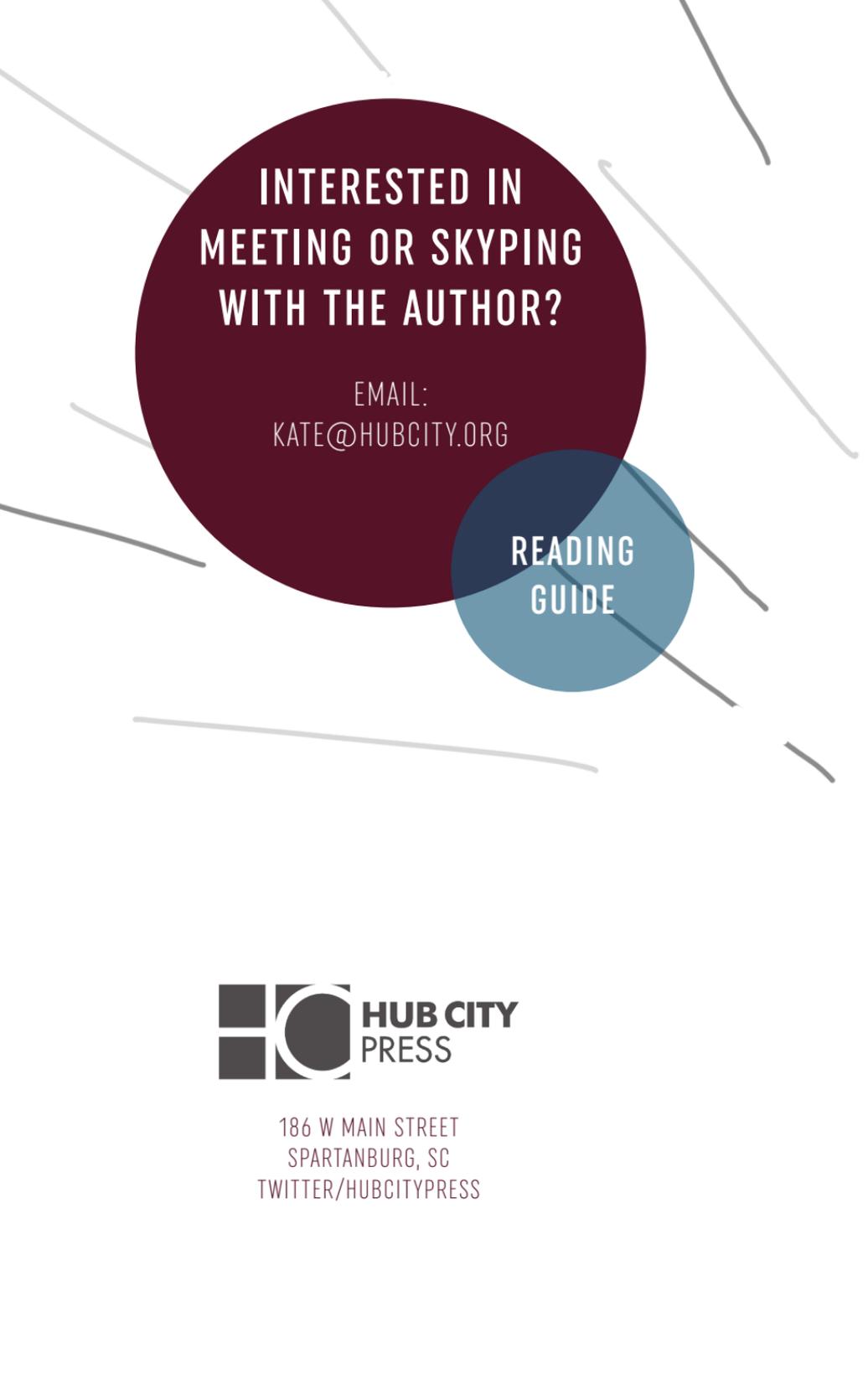
That she was hoodwinked.

"It wasn't my fault," she'd said.

"No," I said. "Not that."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the theme of belonging in the book. How does belonging – or not – shape the lives of the characters?
2. Is Kiser a place you would want to live? Why or why not?
3. Are there characters who feel trapped in Kiser? If so, which ones? What outlets for escape are available to them?
4. What do you think ultimately happens to Carter and Roy after the incident at Bostic's store? Do you think they stay together?
5. How are the father-son relationships in the novel alike and different?
6. Discuss the women at Chadwick Manor. What kind of relationship does Pauline have with Eve and why? What is her relationship with Rose? Is Pauline a likable character?
7. How did Frankie change from the time he found the astronaut's torso in the tree to the Thanksgiving dinner, after his mother has remarried? What do you think has been the source of his troubles?
8. Frankie's stepfather, Pastor Will Fletcher, suggests that Frankie leave Kiser and move to Houston with his father. Was this a good move for Frankie?
9. Grover Sharkey tells the story of his former neighbor, James, and James's search for debris. How does his telling of James's story shed light on his own life? Do you think Grover and his wife, Bobbi, were happily married?
10. Is Newland Sparks a sympathetic character? Why or why not?
11. What do you think happens between Gabe and his son, Raymond, after the incident with Raymond's girlfriend? What will the rest of Gabe's life be like?
12. How does luck play a role in the lives of the characters? Which do you think are the most fortunate characters and why?
13. *What Luck, This Life* opens with a quote from a story by Italo Calvino. Why do you think the author included this quote?



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WITH THE AUTHOR?**

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**READING
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