

# LIT

A MEMOIR

MARY KARR

HARPER PERENNIAL

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BOISE, IDAHO

HARPER PERENNIAL

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A hardcover edition of this book was published in 2009 by HarperCollins Publishers.

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FIRST HARPER PERENNIAL EDITION PUBLISHED 2010.

Designed by *William Runo*

The Library of Congress has catalogued the hardcover edition as follows:

Karr, Mary.

Lit.: a memoir / Mary Karr.—1st ed.

p. cm.

ISBN: 978-0-06-059698-9 (hardcover)

1. Karr, Mary—Mental health.
2. Poets, American—20th century—Biography.
3. Recovering alcoholics—United States—Biography.
4. Mental illness—United States—Case studies.
5. Alcoholism—United States—Case studies.
6. Karr, Mary—Childhood and youth.
7. Karr, Mary—Family.
8. Problem families—Texas.
9. Texas—Biography.

PS3561.A6927.A683 2009

811.54—dc22

[B]

2009024810

ISBN 978-0-06-059699-6 (pbk.)

10 11 12 13 14 DIX/RFD 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Chuck and Lynne Pascale  
and for Dev:  
Thanks for the light.

10-2011

About a week later, Father Kane tells me he's found a way for me to miss classes and still be baptized with Dev if I want to. I can meet with Toby and talk about the gospels one-on-one. Father Kane will personally fill in any gaps.

Which is how one of my literary heroes winds up my godfather.

## Dysfunctional Family Sweepstakes

*They are passing, posthaste, the gliding years—to use a soul-rending Horatian inflection. The years are passing, my dear, and presently nobody will know what you and I know.*

—Vladimir Nabokov, *Sprack Memory*

For over two years, Mother hounds me to let her read pages I'm scribbling about the worst patch of our family history, but I'm still x-ing out, deleting, starting over. She swears public opinion frets her not one whit. In fact, she and Lecia both signed off on a summary of the story before I set out.

If I gave a big rat's ass what anybody thought about me, Mother says, I'd have been baking cookies and going to PTA. Which I didn't do.

But I know reading it could hurt them, since writing it often wrings me out like a string mop. Some afternoons after I close my notebook—I'm working longhand—I just conk out on the floor of my study like a cross-country trucker. I see a shrink who says the naps don't mean I'm repressing stuff. Don't you know, he says, feeling all that stuff again is exhausting? So the prospect of dragging Mother and Lecia through it too feels like abuse.

Mother's sole focus is money. Whatever wounds I parade through the marketplace, she's mostly just skippy I have a car, however far it

is from paid off. In fact, she's sure I've misunderstood the contract somehow.

That's your money though?

That's right, Mother. My money.

What if they don't like the book?

Oh well.

What if it doesn't sell?

What poet would plan for anything different?

The next call she approaches head-on: There's no way you'll have to give the money back?

No ma'am.

No way, no how.

Right.

But do they know you've spent it already?

Once she tries to finagle a peek at the book by threatening to file: saving, What if my heart fails before you finish it?

I'll just have to regret it the rest of my life.

I remind her that as a portrait painter, she never turned the canvas around for view till it was dried, never signed it till she knew what she was endorsing.

The summer it's done, I fly her up to Syracuse. Right off, she drops her purse in the hall and falls on the manuscript like a harpie. No, she doesn't want to come to the park with Dev and me. She waves us on. I'm not going anywhere, she says.

She takes up a lounge chair in the backyard with pages in her lap while I obsessively assemble cold soups and dips and marinades for the grill nearby, trying not to vulch over her. What am I waiting for?

Given that she takes in books the way a junkie shoots dope, I want it to mesmerize her, which—since she's its subject—is pretty much a slam dunk. I'm also hoping she'll confirm in detail what she's agreed in broad stroke is true.

But there's something more ineffable at stake, winding like thin smoke through me, unnamed. It's as if—through the writing—I've

assembled some miniature replica of myself as a girl, and she's now being lowered onto Mother's lap to be verified somehow.

For all the schisms in my upbringing, the most savage scars didn't come from pain. Pain has belief in it. Pain is required. Patti likes to say, suffering is optional. What used to hurt was the vast and wondering doubt that could spread inside me like a desert, the giggling suspicion that none of the hard parts even happened. So the characters that so vividly inhabited me were phantasms, any residual hurt my own warped concoction.

I wanted Mother to see the girl I was—the girls Lecia and I were, really—to take us into her body as we've taken her so indelibly into ours. Is that love or need?

As Mother reads, I grind beans to brew her coffee. I cut her sandwich into quarters. I keep wiping her ashtray clean. I dissolve sugar into tea and shave ice into a frosted glass.

Occasionally, she hollers out, I low'd you ever remember all this crazy crap? She laughs a lot. Once she says, This is your daddy to a T. I can smell him.

But her strongest emotion seems to be for an alligator belt of hers I wrote about, which she mists up over, saving, I wonder where that went to? She absorbs the material—maybe as she did being our mother—as if it were a novel she'd already seen the film of, though like any mother, she's inclined to heap on undiluted praise. No more convincing cheerleader ever shook a pom-pom.

She's almost to the end when she claims her eyes are tired.

From downstairs that night, I hear small noises from the bathroom—stifled, intermittent squeaks like a mouse might make. I tap on the door, which opens to her red-rimmed eyes.

You are so busted, I say.

She has on a black T-shirt and yoga pants. You caught me, she says, wiping her nose.

I didn't mean to hurt you, Mother. I say.

She looks surprised: I'm not the least bit hurt, she says.

You're not festive.

Living through it hurt me, she says. Reading about it's a blip on the radar.

Not a lot of mothers would make this so easy.

Can I smoke up in my attic, or are you gonna make me go on the porch?

We creak up the stairs to where she's spread pages across her mother's old wedding quilt, stitched together from men's flannel-suit samples—all manner of gray and chalk stripe with a cherry-red underside.

I hold a blue teardrop flame to her cigarillo while she takes a long draw, then blows smoke up to the rafters. She raises her arms to flatten both hands on the slanted ceiling, saying, This is like an artist's garret up here.

You could come live with us, I say. I could put in a skylight, and you could paint again.

These old bones wouldn't make it through a winter.

We sit in a silence it's hard not to scribble in with chat. Her long ash falls on the quilt, and she rubs it in, saying, It blends.

Is there anything in there you didn't know, that we hadn't talked about?

She says, I never knew you felt that way.

What way?

She shrugs and shakes her head, then asks, Didn't we have some fun?

Sure, later on some. We have fun now. But like you said, living through it . . .

I mean in Colorado. Remember we went to that department store in Denver and I got y'all those little coats with fur on the hood?

My head kecks to one side. I say, I got lost that day.

But we found you. And y'all had your horses, and the house was so fancy. There was shuffleboard at the bar y'all liked to play. You loved the jukebox.

"Ring of Fire," my favorite song. But we were afraid you were gonna go to jail.

Whatever for?

Shooting Hector.

Aw—she waves her hand in a *psittac* motion—you knew I'd never shoot anybody.

Dev comes to the doorway, one knuckle making a screwing motion in his eye socket, saying, Are y'all crying again? Then: Why does everybody from Texas cry and smoke?

The next morning I come down about dawn, and she's on the back porch in the saggy yellow seat of an old director's chair; the final pages flipped over to the back. She's staring at her bare feet.

She glances up to say, I can't believe I was such an asshole.

You suffered the torments of the damned.

But you saw that, didn't you? All that time I thought I was so alone. I wasn't alone at all, not with you and your sister. I must've done something right. You both turned out so magnificently.

We're a lot of fun to be with, I say. The shoulders I put my arms around are small as a schoolgirl's. You did a lot of things right, I add.

When Lecia's turn comes, she meets me in Denver, renting a vast sofa of a car that I wheel through mountain passes while she turns pages. The child-abuse tour, she jokes it is, for my agenda is to double-check my words against the old landscape or school records or anybody we can drag up. But to say she's skimmed over events I couldn't forget is an understatement. She knows what happened enough to verify scenes, but it's all been packed away. She didn't have to go into therapy, she's always claimed, because I told her the insights that my own therapy had routed out. Keeping the volume down made her the brave one, the unflinching one.

In the mountains while Lecia reads, we revisit the town that held the summer cabin neither of us can find. We stand alongside the falling-down ring where our horses ran a gymkhana. We find the house where Mother left us with the stable owner's family when she ran off to marry

the bartender. There's the phone booth alongside a trout pond where we once called Daddy sobbing because we'd forgotten Father's Day.

Each time we recognize a spot, it's like some book's clear overlay page falls across the old landscape, the green scene rising up articulately around us—a 3-D pop-up. We get littler at those times, standing closer like we used to as kids, and the hoots and hollers we've been making to stay brave—those dwindle down. We dwindle down, two women almost gone into girls again.

In the car, Lecia slides on her sunglasses, saying, I almost thought I'd dreamed this place up. But you've gotten down every dot and rittle.

She cheers the manuscript with all the big-sister praise she brought to my first step off the high board, and that pat on the head matters more than any review I'll get. I'd only really wanted her and Mother not to be pissed off.

Midafternoon, I steer the car across the Rockies to the town where Mother's bar was and where we went to school. That place left the most shadowy specters in Lecia, since it's no doubt where she gave up being little once and for all. The day she called Daddy collect and announced to him that he had to buy us plane tickets to get us out of there, some light in her clicked off. Doing that meant bailing out on the mother she'd spent her whole young life courting and placating. We flew from there wondering if we'd see Mother again—alive or dead. There was no visitation plan, no schedule of phone calls set up. Just my ten years' sister with the round-eyed, glassy gaze of an opium addict, as she set the big black phone in its cradle before telling me we had to pack.

We get closer to the town, and Lecia starts rifling her purse for hand unguents and lip gloss and chewing gum. She wants a Coke. She wants to stop and check in with her office by pay phone. I'd expected all this. The motel we hooked—a Norman Bates-type Econo-lodge—has the only vacancy this last minute. At the check-in counter, the pinwheel mints have melted into their wrappers, their inner whirls

gone smudgy pink. The TV doesn't get cable, and the bathroom sink has a tiny cup of the type dentists give you for antiseptic. In the dusty windowsills lie papery gray moths.

Sliding off her shades, Lecia peels back the flowered spread and stares down at a rough blanket the color of mustard. I was going to take a nap, she says, but there must be all species of bed louse here.

So when I head off to find our grade school, she shoulders her massive purses like a duffel bag, saying, Let's march.

We're not heading into battle.

War'd be easier for me, she says, and she follows me into the blinding sunshine.

It's strange. She's always been our navigator. You could lower her into a jungle with nary a compass, and she could machete her way out. Yet here, I have an uncanny sense where things lie. There's no map in my head either, just my torso leaning one direction or another. I follow a path straight as a spear to the pale brick schoolhouse, which now houses town offices. The heavy door closes behind us, and we're sealed in with the odor of floor wax.

As we look up the short stairway leading to a wall of coat hooks, it so exactly matches my recall that I feel a shock. *It happened.* Lecia seems enervated all of a sudden. She wants to go back to the motel, see if we can find something halfway decent to eat.

I knew this would be hard for you, I say.

She stares at me with cool brown eyes, saying, Then why the fuck did you bring me here?

Back on the main drag, tourists are gleefully buying fool's gold and Indian arrowheads and turquoise earrings. The house we lived in burnt to the ground, we find out. A neighbor lady doesn't recall us, but she names the principal who lived across the road. Maneuvering back to the hotel, I walk us smack against the bar Mother once owned—a gift shop now. Or I claim it's the same bar. Lecia says it isn't. Hell no.

(I remember one day at the bar: A horse had thrown Lecia, and she showed up with a broken collarbone, the sharp edge poking the

thin flesh. Her blond hair was tugged back in a smooth ponytail, and her round eyes were dry of tears. Mother told her. *Go stand under the wall dryer till it feels better. Does anybody have an aspirin?* Nobody did, so I stood alongside her, the hand dryer blowing its hot wind on her clavicle.)

On Lecia's big black sunglasses, the bar's doorway floats as if projected across a blindfold. She says, This isn't it. Let's go. She's rooted before the door as if a force field holds her back.

I point to the pink stucco hotel where we first stayed before Mother bought the house. We walked there with snow on our hooded fur coats.

Back and forth we quibble. Still she refuses to go in. She'll wait on the curb while I check with the shop owner. Yes, it used to be a bar, the lady says from her rice-powdered face with crinkles around her smiling eyes. Her capped teeth are big as chiclets.

I step inside, thinking. How much smaller the large places are once we're grown up, when we have car keys and credit cards. This was a harmless little gin mill once.

The clerk confirms the layout in my head, that the bathroom is over there, and I push into the small gumball-blue room. There's the spot where a wall dryer once hung. The raw hardware of its back plate faces across from a modern paper-towel holder.

In some ways, I'd relived the history of that place in the pages, and while I'm not dead to the psychic damage done here—there's a twinge of sadness for us all—the place can't overwhelm me anymore.

On my way out, I glance up at a hammered tin ceiling. Soon as I see it, the pattern fits in a similarly jigsawed space in my memory. I could've drawn it by heart—the filigreed squares and sprouted vines. I reel back, and for an eyeblink's time, the small structure looms as large as it once did when our young mother sat sipping vodka by the window. I can see her slim in her gray pencil skirt and white crepe blouse, legs crossed, one pump near-dangling from a toe. The old grief

has been mostly drained off in me for a long time now, and I'm awestruck by her grace. You're so damn pretty, I'd tell her if she'd turn around.

I step back out into the sunshine, saying to Lecia, Check out the tin ceiling.

She holds out her hand like a blind girl, and I take it. C'mon, I say, and though it's rare for her to follow, she lets me tug her in. On this expedition only, I'm point woman. One hesitant step she takes, as if afraid to get too close to a cliff edge, then another, till she's a few feet inside. She cants her wondering face up at the ceiling, then gasps, a hand covering her mouth. It's not a small breath but the lung-deep, sucked-in huff you'd take, say, finding a rat running the baseboards of your kitchen.

Outside in the sunlight, I keep holding her hand. Though her eyes are devoid of feeling, fat tears stream down, and she curses me for dragging her to this godforsaken place—me with my fucking therapy and passion for the old crap. I didn't know it'd be this hard, I tell her. Inside, I'm pissed at myself for buying her don't-give-a-damn act when I knew better. I tell her it's good we can face this place together, good that she got us out of here when she did.

Within the hour, I'm shepherding that vast chaise longue of a vehicle back toward the far side of the mountains, where she's secured a thousand-dollar-per-night hotel room for us because there are no other rooms at any inns, and the sun can't set on her in that town.

She grabs my hand in the car, palm to palm and tight, like we're fixing to bound off the pool's edge together.

Yes, she finally admits in the car, that was the place.

I recount to her how Mother told me she was surprised we didn't have fun in the mountains. Lecia shakes her head.

The next day at the airport, she kisses my hair and holds my hand and says she loves the book and what a bang-up job I did, but she's not in her eyes anymore. When I look at her, I see her at age eleven. Months

from now, once she gets the bound galley, she'll read it and marvel that the opening works better with the scene of Mother at the fire, which is the exact same chapter she'd read in Colorado. The publisher set type from it, but she hadn't remembered a damn thing from that first draft. Was I sure that was written in the version she saw? I was.



## It Makes a Body Wonder

*I am only a man: I need visible signs . . .*  
—Czeslaw Milosz, "Come, Holy Spirit"

Toby faces my mental block about not believing stuff from the Bible by pointing out that with my current spiritual construct, only stuff that happens to me firsthand counts as divine intervention. With total faith, I cling to the notion that God sent me—little Mary Karr, sinner deluxe—checks in the mail and healed my severely depressed head, got me car loans and a grant. I use the G-word now—God. I feel Him holding me when I'm scared—the invisible hands I mocked years before. But this same power couldn't turn water into wine or—here's the biggie—raise the dead, could it?

It's kind of like, Toby says to me at his glossy dining room table one afternoon, not believing in Bob Dylan because you've only heard the CDs and never saw him in concert. (Again: *What is your source of information?*)

Based on my experience, I say, I am the center of the universe.

Lord help us, Toby says, pulling the corner of his mustache.

The magic stuff is what runs me off, I say. Sometimes I think of Jesus as some carnival trickster. Maybe the whole Resurrection was a scam. Like some televangelists saying, *Send me a dollar and put your hand on the TV screen and I'll heal you.*