



Where Curiosity Never Retires

Center for Lifetime Study

Members of Linda Rappaport's class, The "Art and Craft of Writing & Story Telling", work on having a completed memoir story by the end of the semester. Mr. Maloney's abridged version of his memoir was published in the Fall/Winter 2025 - 2026 issue of The Chronicle. This is the unabridged version.

By Michael Maloney

The Light and Her Smile



Michael Maloney reads his memoir at the 'Story Slam'

Photo courtesy of Mary Coiteux

I sit quietly after breakfast staring out the open door. My host asks, "Sahib, why you stare out door at Sagarmatha?" Shrouded in snow and myth, Sagarmatha, more widely known as Mount Everest, exudes a spiritual gravity. The mountain wind adds an alluring whisper as it slips through the narrow canyons. I resist them both. Hungry at the start of the day, my friendly host provides fresh yogurt, flattened rice and honey. I wash my hands in the water from my canteen, still smelling of purifying iodine. I smile as I shoulder my heavy pack. I slept well. All is right in the world; for the moment. Most of what I own in the world is strapped on my back as I step onto the long, narrow trail in the great mountain's shadow.

This morning my view is grand, scanning over deep valleys, past strings of colorful Sherpa prayer flags, aging stupas and Tingsha bells as I head south. There are the bar

headed-geese flying overhead, lazily soaring on currents of morning sun heated air. I imagine I see an elusive snow leopard. I amuse myself in memories. Lisa's joyful smile, like the warming rays of this morning's sun, comes instantly to mind. What a smile! While I'm here building water supply systems in Nepal, she is helping the Mandinka away in West Africa. Lisa's skin is dark and smooth. Research into her lineage suggests she may have descended from west African peoples.

Ah, remembering when we met in Peace Corps training at the swamp surrounded Penn Center, South Carolina. This place, St. Helena's Island, has its own mythology and importance as the first local school for freed slaves. Day time reveals the tall white washed building surrounded in beauty by monarch butterflies and fan shaped palmettos. Though at night, silver moonbeams

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cast beard like skeletal shadows on the Spanish moss that hangs on live oak trees. I have to say, a little unnerving.

The local folks called Gullah are descendants of West African slaves. Each day someone mentions a local, unexplained phenomena like the Frogmore light, Root women and other Gullah folklore.

In class, I see clearly in my side vision Lisa watching me. As I look over, she turns away. She turns back and our eyes lock. Looking directly into her eyes is amazing. Our whole world now is just Lisa and me. We have slipped into our own time machine. Looking at our trance like condition, the instructor abruptly waves and says, "Hello! Hello there you two!" Shakes his head. We look away. Our feelings of unbearable attraction remain.

After dinner, as the evening envelops us, the always adventurous Lisa says, "Let's get away. Let's go for a drive." At my aging VW I offer, "Hop into your private limousine Ms. Parros!" "Delighted," she says. I open the door and bow. We laugh easily, joke and kid each other as we cruise the dark byways of the isolated island. I am distracted by her clever wit, radiant smile and

curvaceous form. This magical diversion leads to an unintentional motoring oversight. It is well after dark, in this most dismal swamp. I pull towards the side of the sandy road and smile. "You want to hear something funny?"

Lisa guessing the problem says pointedly, "No, I don't think I do."

I say, "We are out of gas."

Lisa frowns for a second, then offers, "We can still have some fun I think!" Our eyes lock as she leans over kissing me. I kiss her back. Then a longer kiss!

Out of no-where a fast-moving light, making a faint humming noise, approaches quickly from the swamp.

We hold each other tighter! The cool light hovering overhead blinds us. I pull the door shut. Then it's gone.

Lisa whispers, "Mike, my spine is tingling!"

I say, "I know, I can feel it. Mine too!"

Her eyes now wide open, she asks "How do we get back?"

"Let's go," I say pointing towards what seems a faint, white light in

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Lisa whispers, "Mike, my spine is tingling!"



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“Is it just me or does it seem to get darker with each step?”

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the distance.

Lisa swats at a group of very loud mosquitos, scattering them into the night.

“Is it just me or does it seem to get darker with each step?” Somewhat relieved I say, “Look, a little white house!”

“Ah,” Lisa says, moaning slightly as the house comes into view, “light blue trim around the doors and windows.”

Me, “So what?”

Lisa answers, “For the local Gullah, the blue trim paint keeps the demons out.” My head falls to my chest.

I mumble, “Fast moving swamp lights, keeping demons out...Lisa, please, are we to be tortured and devoured in our own horror story? Is this the Shining?” I try to laugh. She frowns.

A lone light illuminates the house. Suddenly a large dog jumps up from the tall weeds, charges toward us barking, shattering the buzzy still of the night. My adrenaline spikes, heart pumping, muscles tense. I instinctively push Lisa back behind me. I lean forward, fists clenched.

Lisa catches her breath, “Ohh.”

The enraged dog, baring its’ wolf-like teeth, sprints toward us. Protect Lisa. How? Growling to myself I offer, “I’ll strangle the beast.” The flow of adrenaline offers an otherworldly feeling of tremendous power. Of invincibility. I am, again, a Marine.

Charging through the deep weeds, with the stark, bone-white light making his image surreal and flickering, the crazed animal closes fast. Closer, twenty feet, ten feet. Then, as I prepare for impact, an unseen chain goes taut and the wild dog stops instantly, yanked violently off its feet and drawn back by the recoil. Lisa turns pale, we are scared, stunned. The big dog lays on the ground, panting heavily. As it rises, a small-framed woman with a weathered face and in a long simple night gown, appears on the porch.

She cries out, “De dog, cum yuh!” and the dog returns to the porch. As the dog retreats, she continues in the local Gullah vernacular, “Wha’ you wan?”

We both involuntarily take a deep breath, and exhale. I am shaking slightly from the influx of the unused adrenaline.

Lisa trembling, half smiles and says,

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"Can you help, we ran outta gas down the road." The old woman, with her deeply lined countenance looks hard at us, turns toward the house, then turns back, where a slight smile evolves and replies, "Uh gwine git me son." Lisa and I move toward the woman. Her teenage son appears. I introduce myself.

Later, with the VW gassed up, the young man and I return. I offer our abundant thanks. Lisa appears deep in thought as we drive back to Penn Center. I ask, "Are you OK?" Lisa's look is distracted and disconcerting to me...

Lisa, looking straight ahead, says, "I had an informative talk with that old lady, Mariama. As best I could."

Me, "About what?"

Lisa, "About root women, the

Frogmore light, which is probably the light we just saw, and some version of zombies. And, be careful as, some visiting folks go missing out here."

I glance at Lisa and say, "And? And? Suddenly pointing, "Look!" she yells.

Whoa! I stumble towards the trail edge on a loose rock and instantly I am back hiking in Nepal, now with a bloody knee...

I get up, frown at the small scrape and press on, knee aching, heart full. Everest seems to always loom in the distance. But a part of me still walks in wonder by moonlight, through marshy byways, below the skeletal reach of Spanish moss, chasing a light and a love, I will never fully explain.



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