



2021

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Luanne Castle

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Recommended Citation

Castle, Luanne (2021) "A Long Time from Burdick Street," *The North Meridian Review*. Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.

DOI: 10.7825/2769-5115.1044

Retrieved from: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/thenorthmeridianreview/vol2/iss1/8>

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A Long Time from Burdick Street

Luanne Castle

Five years ago, I stood near the push-to-walk button and glanced kitty-corner across the wide main street to where the luggage store had once stood. Rather than scrutinizing the current façade--straight lines and too-new reddish brick—I envisioned the narrow window filled with a display of attachés and briefcases. The PNC bank logo had replaced the striped sign with the bull’s horn logo that had been a part of our family history and identity, but I imagined the old back-lit marquee still there.

Back in my hometown of Kalamazoo, Michigan, for my father’s funeral, I saw the downtown that had once meant so much to him through my own lens. What had been scruffy, but vibrant and quirky, now seemed genteel but melancholy. I found it hard to shake the fog of grief.

Turning around, I looked down at what remained of the Kalamazoo Mall. Once famous as the first outdoor pedestrian mall in the country, Burdick Street was now reopened to traffic, the fountain and little playground long-since demolished. “For Lease” signs obscured the emptiness behind many windows. As if stores weren’t necessary to the downtown economy, leafy trees in early fall color shielded the signage. A narrow street and decorative brick sidewalks had replaced the concrete mall. This morning, the storefronts that once had seemed like magical portals to different worlds were quickly passed by anonymous cars, notwithstanding the city’s attempts to spruce up the center of town.

A pillar erected at the corner of Burdick and West Michigan Avenue displayed a plaque commemorating the mall and telling its history. I leaned against it as a wave of dizziness swept over

me. Memories assaulted me. The angel hair white and red velvet of Santa and Mrs. Claus in the department store window; the gift stores selling tapestries, incense, and dangly earrings from India; the July sidewalk sales I worked as my father yelled to passersby with a megaphone; the Peter Max silk scarf I discovered in a stack of cheap fabrics at J.C. Penney; the patty melts and olive burgers I devoured at the diner. All those family-owned businesses gone. Our family-owned luggage store long gone.

After lunch, I traveled farther south on Burdick Street, to the community where my mother and her father before her had grown up. At Balch Street, Grandpa had owned a Sunoco station. Before Grandpa was born, his father had immigrated from the Netherlands and opened a fish market and, eventually, a soda shop on the same site that the station later stood. The retail businesses my family owned didn't begin in the United States. My ancestors owned a paint and colonial goods store in the Netherlands. Before that, they were bakers, shoemakers, and tailors—all trades that foreshadowed retail businesses selling bread, shoes, and clothing.

I found the area desolate where the soda shop and then my grandfather's Sunoco Station had been located. The corner where I had spent time with my grandfather was now a case management operation for the disabled. The only building left standing was the unique brick house across the street. I tried to justify away the pain I felt at the loss of the family businesses. After all, change is necessary to life.

###

Grandpa was down in the pit, operating on the belly of a customer's car. I sat right under the display of road maps, listening to the talk of the men who hung out at the station and eyeing the machine that popped out fancy green glass bottles of Coke when someone put in a quarter. As usual, I had no quarter.

“What do you think about that Kennedy, huh?” one said.

“It was Eisenhower who started this with Cuba.”

I stared out through the glass-paned front door and saw the reverse lettering of *Sunoco Oil*, followed by *A-Z Lubrication*, and then, *Adrian Zuidweg, Proprietor*. The notion of Grandpa’s name starting with the first and last letters of the alphabet fascinated me.

Later, Grandpa took me out behind and showed me the tomato plants he grew back there. “Look at them tomaters,” he said, bending down and holding up a small green tomato just starting to blush. “Kalamazoo muck.” He ran his fingers through the moist black soil. “For celery and flowers.”

“How come you’re growing tomatoes then?” I looked at Grandpa’s mismatched eyes set in his craggy face. I tried to remember which was the blind eye—the blue or the green one.

Grandpa pointed to some zinnias on the other side of the door, then showed me the difference between a weed and a tomato plant.

My grandfather’s daily routine never varied. Early morning, he drove downtown to Michigan News Agency for a paper, then read it over blueberry pancakes Grandma served him. When he had finished the paper, he walked past two houses to his corner service station. That’s what we called it—not a gas station because the emphasis was on the service. The boys and one elderly man who worked for Grandpa filled tanks and polished windshields. I didn’t want any part of that work, and the gas and oil smell permeating even the coarse paper towels in the tiny restroom made me want to wash my hands when I got home. “What’s there to do? I’m bored.” I rolled my head with practiced drama.

Grandpa pulled off his Sunoco cap and smoothed it back down on his thinning gray hair, nodding across Balch Street to the distinctive brick house on the corner. “My grandfather built that house. I grew up there. See the light stripe through that dark brick? That’s his signature. He built the Ladies Library Association uptan, too.”

The house was a little taller than the wood-sided homes on the block, so it impressed me to know Grandpa had grown up there. “Where did your parents live?”

“Inside the house. We all lived together. Before Dad died, he turned the fish market into a candy and ice cream shop. He bought a genuine marble countertop during the Depression.” I didn’t find out until years later that Grandpa’s father died soon after purchasing the countertop. Then in rapid succession, my grandfather’s grandfather and mother died, leaving him alone at age twenty-one. The family business sustained my grandfather and allowed him to marry my grandmother and begin a family.

That night, over crispy liver and onions, I announced that I would never work with stinky cars. “Too bad Grandpa didn’t keep the ice cream store!”

My mother put down her fork. “You could have taken it over when you grew up. Been an entrepreneur.”

I gave her the fisheye. “I’m going to be a writer!”

###

Dad had an unfortunate argument with his boss and came home yelling. A week later, he signed a lease for a one-room office in a corrugated metal building on Lake Street on the east side of Kalamazoo. It had a parking space big enough for a garbage truck.

“Hun, I’m starting it on a shoestring,” Dad said one night when his thoughts were off outside our living room, and I was the only person in the room. I looked up from my *Dolls of the World* coloring book, crayon poised in mid-air, and scrutinized his face. In my mind, I imagined him with an open shoebox containing a few coins, some baseball trading cards, and one shoelace.

“Janet, what’s a good name for the business?” He called to Mom in the kitchen.

A few days later, he came home with a used garbage truck he’d bought from the city. After giving me the tour of it, he let me sit on the sidewalk and give him advice while he painted *Industrial Waste Disposal Company* on its side in the big, bold letters my second-grade teacher encouraged. “Make the / straighter, Daddy. Like a soldier.”

Within weeks, we settled into our new routine. Until he could hire a man to help, Dad did all the physical work of the business. I liked to ride with him in the cab of the front-loader garbage truck, thrilling when its two automated forks jabbed at the dumpsters like monstrous earwig pincers.

Without Dad's paycheck coming in, our finances needed to be handled with the attention to detail that only my mother could provide. Mom staked out her spot at a desk shoved into a corner of the basement. Like Mary in *Babes in Toyland*, she moaned once a week over a stack of bills from that seat of grief.

I sat on the floor near Mom's desk, under the fluorescent lamp, and wrote little stories on scrap paper. Sometime in the hazy future, I planned to be just like Jo March, with a pet rat, a school of children, and a desk where I could write books.

My father had the heart of a small business owner but not always the head for it. He hadn't grown up in a family business the way Grandpa had, or Mom—or me. Rather than staying put and doing his best, Dad was always looking for a new business deal, and in those early days, more often than not, they weren't very successful. When he bought the “20 acres,” we drove for hours to take a look at the sleepy woods out in the middle of nowhere. Then my parents talked about the “50 acres” and, later, the “back 12.” He would trade one for another or for a small, failing business, and too often, he didn't come out ahead. Even so, he wouldn't quit. When I wanted to give up ballet because the big girls intimidated me or tried to leave a game because I was losing, he always said, “Don't be a quitter. Quitters never get ahead.”

Nevertheless, Dad was forced to sell the trash business. The story I heard my father tell someone was that a man from the Chicago mob came to Dad's office. The guy fingered a knife while he explained to my father why he had to sell to the man's “company.” Dad accepted the lowball offer. Many years later, I realized that the mob was Dad's embellishment, but the story's truth nugget was

that the buyer was slicker and rougher than my father. I suspect my father, who lacked investment funds, couldn't face the fact that his first business didn't have enough capital to stay afloat.

###

I looked up from my tenth-grade algebra book and stretched my neck. From where I perched on the chair at the little desk in the back room of the luggage store, I could see through the opening onto the sales floor. The black-flecked red indoor-outdoor carpeting, left over from the bar that had closed the year before, was frayed at the seam down the middle.

Dad had used the money from the sale of the trash business to buy the company on a land contract from an older couple who were retiring to Florida. At that time, the store had been in a larger, sunlit space with plenty of low display islands for matching sets of pink, midnight blue, or olive green aluminum-framed vinyl luggage. It attracted the wealthiest customers, and they had followed the store when Dad moved it because it was the only luggage and leather goods store in Kalamazoo.

Now I noticed that the sets were no longer full; powder blue Ventura was missing a tote bag and a 24" and there was only one piece of white Samsonite left. The main room in the basement had been stacked floor to ceiling with cardboard-boxed suitcases when Dad moved the store. There had been stacks of six to ten cases, but now the pallets to protect the merchandise from flooding were occasionally visible; for many styles and sizes, there was no backstock at all.

Farther down the narrow space, up front by the display window and front door, were the glass cases. On the west side, leather handbags hung on wall hooks behind the women's Buxton and Princess Gardner billfolds, cigarette cases—both long and short—leather key cases, and cosmetic bags. On the east side, glass cases held wooden trays of men's billfolds stitched out of genuine top grain cowhide, fandango calf, and Moroccan leather. Behind the cases, men's brief bags and attaché cases were stacked sideways like books on shelves, and a wooden library ladder hung from a metal sliding bar to reach the catalog cases on top.

I had to peer around the mountain of bills and correspondence on the desk because it towered above my head. Nancy, the full-time salesperson, walked past me to set a train case with a broken handle on the shelf of “to do” repairs. We hadn’t seen Dad in hours. Mom always said Dad had ants in his pants. Staying put in a store was not in my father’s DNA.

“Nancy, why are all these bills here?” I’d never seen such a glaring example of an untidy mind. Although Dad ruled our lives, Mom took charge of the house. It had taken her until I was ten to train Dad not to drop cigarette ashes into the bathroom sink, but she ran a pretty organized household. The out-of-control nature of the paperwork alarmed and amazed me.

Nancy put on her best rueful expression. “Your Dad hates doing that stuff. He hoped I’d take it over.” Nancy had the same aquiline nose, light brown eyes, and graying hair as my father, but her puppy dog joviality set them apart. “Heck, I admit I’m not any better at that stuff than he is.”

I slid open an envelope with my finger. The form letter inside had a big red stamp across it: PAST DUE. I wasn’t sure what Dad expected me to do. He’d airily gestured to the pile and suggested I might want to do something with it. However, I had been oblivious to Mom paying the bills at home and had absorbed nothing about the process.

“They want their money, that’s what it means. Why don’t you go out on the floor and straighten the billfold trays?” I could see the pity on her face. Nancy figured I would rather be with customers than stuck with the pile of bills, but I preferred to hide behind paperwork, avoiding strangers and sneak-reading a book.

“Be sure the \$16 and ups aren’t mixed into the \$10 tray.” Nancy lit up a Virginia Slim over by the dirty sink at the top of the stairs.

###

My husband turned up the radio volume. “Listen!” I was standing in our suburban luggage store’s deep display window, adjusting fake fall leaves in the Thanksgiving exhibit I was creating. To hear the radio better, I had to jump down and walk toward the center transaction island.

Ira’s body tensed as he strained toward the ceiling speaker. “The stock market is tanking!”

Neither of us had a job outside our long days at the store. We had a baby son and expected the arrival of a baby daughter in a few months. Also, I was a graduate student working on a not-so-lucrative degree in creative writing. Since we had bought the store from my father, we had moved the luggage store to a larger, sunnier location. We had increased the inventory dramatically to give customers the feeling that we had every suitcase, leather accessory, and related item under one roof. I suppose that we were trying to bring the store back to its condition when my father had purchased it twenty years before.

Inventory is money, though, and it meant more bills and a greater need for that bugaboo “cash flow.” Customers needed to keep buying every single day. They couldn’t get scared of the stock market and “hold off.”

A week later, Ira and I went across the street to a restaurant bar. I stirred my Bloody Mary and examined the olives and celery stalk on the plastic sword while Ira talked. I heard “writing on the wall” and “time to get out.” I forced myself to focus on the difficult conversation we needed to have.

“Luggage is changing, you know.” I ate the first olive.

Ira nodded. “The direction it’s moving in is cheapo stuff from China.”

I chewed on the second olive. “You know I want to write, not stand in the store all day. Although I would be happy continuing to run the office and making the displays. If we can’t keep it going, what will you do?” I didn’t want to increase Ira’s disappointment, but I loved not having to work for someone else. If I had to have a survival job for writing, let it be where I could be creative and control my schedule.

Ira tossed the rest of his drink back. “I couldn’t stand seeing my father working for my uncle. He should have been the boss. My grandparents owned a candy store on Sutton Place, you know.”

“Really? My grandfather inherited a candy and soda shop from his father!”

Ira signaled the server to bring us another round. “There used to be a candy store on every other corner. They’re like dinosaurs.” With that comment, we both sat in silence until our drinks arrived.

###

Although I figured that the doorbell meant another package had been dropped on the doorstep, I clicked *save* on the story I was revising. With the recent rash of mail thefts in the Phoenix area, I wanted to retrieve the package right away.

Besides the Walgreens at the corner and grocery shopping, I hadn’t been inside a store for several weeks. Cat food and litter, household supplies, even cosmetics, I ordered through my Amazon Prime account. A day or two later, the package would appear. I was finding it increasingly difficult to find the merchandise I wanted to purchase in local stores. Still, every time I read about a store going out of business, a sickening wave of loss passed through me.

As Americans began to shop more and more online, I still couldn’t see how fully we would turn our backs on retail until 2020, when quarantine and lockdowns kept so many of us from shopping in already-beleaguered local retail stores. Even after my visit back to Kalamazoo, I stuck to my philosophy that change is necessary. My family had sold what people wanted, and those wants did not remain the same. In 1910, people demanded fresh fish. By 1925, they had enough pocket change for sodas and candy. Americans began to travel more in the 1950s and 1960s, so they required luggage. Now that so many retail businesses have shuttered or are floundering from the COVID-19 pandemic, I see a broader viewpoint. The danger to retail companies is no longer in the product. Retail itself is in danger of extinction.

But in 2016, I was still not focused on the gradual decline of retail. The box in front of my door was larger than usual. I couldn't remember what I had ordered, but that wasn't unusual. My front porch had become the setting for a revolving supply of packages. When I sliced the tape with the scissors' blade, I saw the suitcase inside--a lightweight molded carry-on with wheels. I checked the packing slip. My daughter had ordered it for herself. Ira and I owned three sets of luggage, but they were from our store's era—too heavy and clumsy to think of handling without a porter's assistance.

At the time, the irony of my daughter purchasing a suitcase when we used to be the only store in town for high-quality luggage struck me with the force of another loss. I lifted the new suitcase again, thrilled by its seeming weightlessness. At least this would be more convenient than an old-fashioned train case for bottles and jars as we used to sell. I thought about how the carry-on would make up a bit for how uncomfortable air travel has become. For my first flight, I wore my best dress and Mary Janes, and the stewardess who wore a trim suit and smart little hat pinned a set of "gold" wings on my chest. After an hour of snacks, I walked down the ramp-stairs feeling like a pampered princess. When I flew to Kalamazoo after my father's death, carrying my own bags and rushing from one airport gate to another had left me frazzled. Although that first flight was far more enjoyable than the last, ten months into the pandemic has left me craving any kind of travel. I want to spend time in family-owned shops and restaurants in the United States and abroad. I hope they will not be gone when the pandemic is over.