

Mostly Happy



a novel

PAM BUSTIN

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Here it is.

Hope you like it.

Pam Bustin, Saskatoon, 2007

For Mansel and Mr. G

Life's a tightrope, baby. Don't look down.

— Gustave Peterson

Prologue: Running

I left the suitcase with Goose and I went to the desert.
All I took with me was my guilt.

The suitcase: A Samsonite Saturn. Red.
The contents:

A paper napkin with a lipstick kiss	A dog tag
Two wedding announcements	A turquoise earring
Four rocks	A torn Camp Mihkwaw T-shirt
Two hospital bracelets	An old purple bottle
A broken bobble-head dog's head	A bullet
A blue marble	A collapsible tophat
Six books, one hand written	Three concert ticket stubs
A stick a stone a feather and a bone wrapped in red felt	A few theatre programs
A plastic troll	A ring in a black bag filled with salt
A chipped jade Buddha	Some letters
A church pamphlet	A small leather pouch
A purple scarf	A postcard from Paris
A Shazam comic	A piece of wedding cake
Photos: a girl with an eye patch, a guy with a fish and two babies	A red rubber ball
A matchbook	A stone goose
A ripped piece of cardboard from a Ouija Board	A birth announcement
	A funeral announcement
	A child's plaster handprint

Forty-six days later, I called Prissy from Cheyenne Wyoming.

One

nostalgia *n* homesickness; the desire to return to some earlier time in one's life, or a fond remembrance of that time, usually tinged with sadness at its having passed.
[Gr *nostos* a return, and *algos* pain]

— *The Chambers Dictionary* (Standard)

PRISSY'S KISS

Prissy Fallwell smoked Player's Plain, played crib for money, and drank Wild Turkey when she was between men. She worked as a waitress up at the Husky in a uniform that was just a little too tight across the hips. Prissy twirled among the truckers with steak and eggs, tuna melts, and all the coffee they could drink. She called everybody Honey. She laughed at their jokes, smiled over pictures of their kids and touched them softly when their hearts got broke. Prissy had the sad eyes of an angel.

I sat at the counter and watched Prissy work. I was *refining my voice-over*. I squinted my eyes and turned the world to black and white. Prissy was the smart-talking heroine and I was the precocious kid who saved the day. I stuck to long shots — like

Prissy showing a boy how make a spoon stick to his nose. Close-up, Prissy looked tired.

It was a good movie. We were happy.

We'd just moved in to a new place out by the Husky and I'd gone to register at school all by myself that morning. Prissy kissed a napkin for me, folded it up and tucked it into my jean jacket pocket with the letter from my last school. "There. Now I'm with you." It wasn't her fault she couldn't come with me. I had to be brave. She straightened my collar. "Sorry, Kid"

I held my hand over the pocket that held the napkin. "Don't worry. I'm OK."

She hugged me, and I knew she was giving Carl, her boss, a look over my shoulder. He snorted. "Too busy, Edith. Sorry." Carl called my mom Edith, even though her nametag said Prissy. Edith was her old name. Edith Marietta Fallwell. She liked Prissy better. It was her nickname. Her whole family had nicknames, but Prissy was the only one who liked her nickname better than her real name. She changed it officially when she was twenty-two. She changed my name then too. Not my first name — my last.

Prissy swung by to drop off some dirty dishes. She came and gave me a hug. "How'd it go, Kid?"

"Good. I found the office easy and told the principal you would call him tomorrow. I gave him the letter from Cawanas and he put me in a grade three/four split."

"That's 'cause you're a smarty." She mussed up my hair. "Snack?"

"Grill cheese please!"

"Any homework?"

"A math sheet." I always had a math sheet. I was the spelling-bee champion in every school I went to, but numbers messed

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me up. Subtraction was the hardest. I always ended up with one too many because I counted the one I ended on. Five minus three was three — Five — Four — Three — where I ended up. The teachers told me to use my fingers.

Prissy brought me my grill cheese and a coke. She swept the hair out of my eyes and kissed me on the forehead. “I love you, kid. A bizillion times a million.”

“I love you too, Mom.”

“You happy?”

“Y’betcha.” I never let Prissy wipe her kisses off. I never threw out her napkin kiss, either. I put it in my collection. I kept all my treasures in a shoebox, so I knew where they were and they never got left behind when we moved. I had to be choosy though. Prissy said she didn’t wanna live with no damned pack-rat.

Me and Prissy travelled light.

WEDDING ANNOUNCEMENT: PRISSY AND RITTER

I started my collection when I was about three years old. The first thing I put in the box was Prissy and Ritter’s wedding announcement. I wasn’t born yet, when they got married, but I’d heard the story a million times.

Prissy Fallwell was sixteen years old when she married Ritter Eberts. He was twenty-two, loved sardines, Colt cigars, and Johnny Cash. Ritter had the overcooked left arm of a full-time cabbie and drank — too much.

When Prissy said, “I’m pregnant.” Ritter said, “Guess we’d better get hitched then.”

Ritter found out before the wedding that his other girlfriend, Rita Schmidt, was pregnant too. “Too late, sweetheart,” he said. “I’m already on the hook.”

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Prissy told me that I was *conceived* in the back seat of an off-duty cab and born six months after the wedding. The Beatles' "Ticket to Ride" was number one on the charts and Elvis was at thirty-seven with "Crying in the Chapel".

Ritter's the one that named me Bean. He said that's what I looked like when he first saw me — a little red Kidney bean. He also figured with a name like Bean, Prissy's family couldn't give me some crazy nickname.

Prissy gave me my middle name — E.

She said, "Elvis".

Ritter said, "Aron?" — which is Elvis Presley's middle name and at least sounds like a girl name.

Prissy said, "E." And so it was.

Me and Prissy stayed with Ritter for just about six years.

Me and Ritter knew how to have a good time. We watched Red Skelton, in our pjs, while Prissy was at bingo. We'd eat spaghetti with butter and salt and laugh our heads off. Ritter'd have a few ryes and I'd practice my impressions of Clem Kadiddlehopper. When we heard Prissy's key in the lock, I'd beat it down the hallway, jump into bed, cover up my head, and pretend to be asleep.

We never got away with it.

"Hey, Honey," Ritter'd say. "You win?"

Prissy'd toss her bingo bag on the coffee table with the dirty plates and Rye. "You kept her up again."

Ritter would sigh.

"How am I supposed to get her up in the morning if you keep her up all night?"

"It ain't all night, and what the hell does she have to get up for?"

"She gets cranky."

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“So let her sleep.”

“She doesn’t fucking sleep, that’s the problem.”

That was true. I didn’t sleep much. I listened. To make sure the fights didn’t get too crazy. Prissy and Ritter fought all the time. The after bingo fights were never very serious. They were just *spats*. I covered my head up and hummed to myself. I didn’t have to hear every word. I just *monitored the tone*.

I had to pay more attention when they were both drinking. I sat underneath the kitchen table and read. I could read by the time I was three. I couldn’t write until I was six, and even then I couldn’t figure out p’s, b’s, d’s and g’s. Took me years to get q. I heard a lot under the kitchen table: stuff about Rita Schmidt, about how we didn’t have enough money to cover rent, the ongoing battle over who was better singer — Elvis or Johnny Cash. Prissy and Ritter always forgot I was there, which was perfect. I was out of sight, but close. If I heard them getting too sad or mad, I’d jump up and make them laugh with a skip/trip, “ring-a-ding-ding” — Red Skelton style.

I like making people laugh, especially if it distracts them from hurting each other. Ritter called me his little *comedabean*. Prissy called me a *laugh riot* when my jokes made her laugh. When they didn’t, she just called me a smart ass.

HOSPITAL BRACELET: RITTER EBERTS

Staying close usually worked. Unless it didn’t.

Like when Ritter hurt himself.

It was my fault. I wasn’t listening.

I was under the table with my Dr. Seuss books, trying to draw a Sneetch. It was hard. I had to concentrate.

Prissy and Ritter were playing crib and drinking Five-Star. Ritter got up and walked over to the counter. I watched his feet.

His left big toe was all black from where he'd dropped a wrench on it a few days earlier. Prissy said that toenail was going to fall right off. I checked it every night, before bed, to make sure it was still hanging on good.

He reached up. I thought he was going for the box of chips on the counter. Old Dutch Salt and Vinegar. My favourite. He wasn't. He picked up the big butcher knife and stuck it in his stomach. Twice.

Prissy started screaming.

Ritter plopped on the floor. Two red flowers on his belly. He saw me under the table. "Hey, Bean, where y'bin?"

The knife was sticking right out of him.

I took a breath. I swallowed sour. I banged my head getting out from under the table. I shoved a chair over to the phone, and called the ambulance. I didn't cry. It was very calm inside my head. Calm and quiet.

But Prissy was screaming.

I couldn't hear what the ambulance lady was saying. I covered the phone and I told Prissy to shut the hell up. She did. The lady told me not to touch the knife but to *apply pressure* to the other hole he made. I used a clean tea towel. I sat between Ritter's legs and pushed on his belly, hard as I could. I sang to distract him. I sang his favourite Johnny Cash songs.

Ritter passed out, but I kept singing.

I didn't hear the ambulance.

Two men came in. They stopped when they saw me and Ritter. "Jesus," one of them said. I thought it was on account of all the blood. There was an awful lot of blood. The man kneeled beside me. He smelled like Old Spice aftershave and cinnamon gum. He asked me how old I was.

I told him I was almost four and that my arms were tired.

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Me and Prissy rode along in the ambulance. The siren was on. Prissy sat beside Ritter and cried. I just watched him breathing. He had a mask over his face, and it made a hissing sound when he took a breath. I watched his chest move and listened to the hiss. We stayed at the hospital until the doctor said Ritter was OK, then we called Grandpa Tom and he came and took us home.

Prissy was shaky. I put her to bed and brought her a sleeping pill and some water. I crawled in with her until she fell asleep. She looked pale, but pretty; like a fairytale princess.

I couldn't sleep. I walked out onto the porch and looked up at the Lady on the Moon. I started shaking, and I got real cold. I cried. Ritter could've died. I had to pay better attention. I vowed on the Lady's face to take better care of him and Prissy.

They kept Ritter in the *Munroe Wing* for two weeks.

"It's a place for resting," said Prissy.

"It's a place for Nutters," said Grandpa Tom.

GT's DICTIONARY

Grandpa Tom was Prissy's dad. He had two dogs, no teeth and was the best swearer on the prairies. My personal favourites were the ones with a bit of *alliteration*. "Coddling Crapsucker!" Monkey lovin' mooselicker! Jesus H Christ in a Cadillac, on a cracker, a crumpet, a cruise. He lived in a little grey house near the railroad tracks. He had the best yard on the whole block. There was a big old ash tree in the front, and the backyard was full of stuff we'd rescued from the Nuisance Grounds.

Grandpa Tom could fix anything: radios, fridges, even the broken lamps Ritter was always dragging home. Ritter liked lamps. When people couldn't pay for their cab ride, Ritter

marched straight into their house and took a lamp. We found him some great ones at the Nuisance Grounds too.

I loved the Nuisance Grounds. I loved the name. Most people called it “the dump” but Grandpa Tom always said, “The Nuisance Grounds”. I didn’t know what nuisance meant, so I tried to look it up. Grandpa Tom caught me kneeling under the kitchen table with his dictionary and my face all scrunched up. He asked what I was looking up.

“Newsince grounds.”

“Try n-u-i,” he said. “N-u-i-s-a-n-c-e.” I felt stupid. I hated misspelling words, but Grandpa Tom said that’s how you learn. If you misspell a word, it takes you forever to look it up. But once you find it, you never forget the spelling again. He was right. I spent a lot of time looking things up. I like words.

I read the entry out loud. “Nuisance. Noun. 1: anything that annoys bothers or irritates; a cause of trouble or vexation.” I sat back on my heels. “What the hell’s annoying about the Nuisance Grounds?”

“Don’t swear.”

I crawled out from under the table. “I don’t get it.”

“Things that are broken annoy people, so they chuck ‘em out.”

“Why don’t they just fix them?”

He sighed. “Sprout, most people would rather just throw a broken thing away. They don’t want to take the time to figure out how to fix anything.” Grandpa Tom always called me Sprout. I called him Grandpa Tom or GT.

GT was the giver of nicknames. He had three daughters. Prissy was the oldest, then Molly and Auntie Lip. Auntie Lip’s birth certificate said Erica Louise Fallwell. Molly’s real name was Dora.

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I got confused the first time I heard someone call Molly *Dora*. It was GT's friend, Gerard Glatt. Gerard was kind of fancy. He called everyone by their real names. "Dora's the one to do it," he said. "She's familiar with the business from sorting out your taxes. I'd let her handle the insurance as well. Must be nice to be able to trust a daughter with all your accounting worries."

I crawled out from under the table, tugged on GT's sleeve and whispered, "Who the hell's he talking about?"

"Your aunt Molly—and don't swear."

I crawled back under the table. When Gerard left, I asked GT why Dora had two names. That's when I found out that Prissy's real name was Edith and Auntie Lip's name was Erica. I thought a minute, and then felt really stupid again. "Shoog ain't a real name either, is it?" I asked. That's what we all called Dora's husband. "That's just short for Sugar, isn't it? What the hell is *his* real name?"

"His name is Ralph and stop swearing or your mother'll cook my G.D. giblets for me."

"How come everyone's got a nickname?"

"Suits 'em better."

"But why?"

"Your Grandmother named those girls and then she left." That was the first time I'd ever heard about a Grandmother Tom. "Prissy was always fussy about her clothes as a girl, Molly was a whiner and Lip — well, Lip is self-explanatory."

I thought a bit. "I don't get Molly."

"Look up *mollycoddle*," he said and walked away. That was the end of that conversation.

GT's nicknames weren't always nice.

Molly wanted me to call her Dora. Auntie Lip didn't care much either way.

I called Lip *Auntie* and I didn't talk to Dora much.

Thanks for taking the time to meet Bean and the gang.

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