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One

Rivelon and Stalin's Dead



Rivelon Farm

South Carolina is a state of many divisions, geographical and otherwise. The three major geographical areas are the Upcountry (or Upstate), the Sandhills (or Midlands), and the Lowcountry. The Sandhills region stretches in a narrow strip down the center of the state and includes the capital, Columbia. The land here drops rather suddenly. This dropoff, called the “fall line,” marks the edge of an ancient continental shelf. Most of South Carolina used to be under water, which is why the soil is so sandy across much of the state. In the Sandhills and Lowcountry, you can still find fossils of sea animals.

The Sandhills divide South Carolina geographically and culturally. Moving northwest from this region, you’ll find yourself in the Upcountry—surrounded by rolling hills of red clay as you approach the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains around Clemson and Greenville. If you travel southeast from the Sandhills, toward the Atlantic, you’ll enter the Lowcountry—flat plains, densely tangled swamps, and farmland. Customs and speech patterns differ drastically between the Lowcountry and the Upcountry. The Upcountry was settled from the north and west by Scotch-Irish and German pioneers moving down through the Appalachians. The Lowcountry, on the other hand, was settled by British, French, and Germans who traveled up the rivers from Charleston. The Native Americans they encountered have had a significant impact on South Carolinians since colonial days. And of course all regions of South Carolina—but especially the Lowcountry—

are deeply influenced by the dialects, customs, and cultures of the African slaves who were brought over to work the land. Colonial settlement patterns created a lasting cultural and linguistic divide. Even today, the inhabitants of South Carolina's Lowcountry probably have more in common with the coastal plains areas of Virginia than with the Blue Ridge region of our own state.

My family is rooted in Orangeburg, a Lowcountry town located about seventy miles inland from Charleston. My parents, grandparents, and most of my great-grandparents grew up there. Orangeburg is the largest municipality between Columbia and Charleston and, when I was growing up, was home to about 13,000 people. People from my hometown have a patois that is unique. In fact, those of us who were raised in the city of Orangeburg speak a different version of that patois than folks who live in outlying areas of the same county. Hearing my own accent in radio interviews and on TV, I was horrified to discover that I sound like Rosalyn Carter—but with a stutter. People who are unfamiliar with this state have asked me at various times if I were from Boston, Charleston, Louisiana—even England!

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, upcountry farmers were leaving their depleted and washed-out farms to work in the new textile mills that were spawning small towns every few miles in the red clay hills. Meanwhile, folks in the Lowcountry were just getting down to the business of clearing forests to farm. The sandy loam soil there made the area quite productive agriculturally, and the flat terrain made farming easier. Upcountry residents became accustomed to the sight of what they called “mill hills”: rows and rows of small, identical houses clustered on the slopes of a hill topped by a large, noisy, brick mill. But I grew up with fields that seemed to stretch forever—and skies bigger than the land. Stately houses, comfortably nestled among leafy trees, rose from the middle of those fields, while tiny sharecroppers' shacks dotted the fields' edges, tin-roofed and unpainted.

When I say that towns in the Lowcountry are “few and far between,” I am not kidding. Even today, there are long, straight stretches of highway between Orangeburg and the coast where you do not see a single light at night—not even a mercury-vapor lamp on a telephone pole guarding a lonely farmhouse. On overcast nights, these empty stretches are the darkest dark you can imagine. It feels like a living thing, that darkness. You watch for comforting tunnels of overhanging trees and Spanish moss. Car headlights illuminate them and ground you.

Clear nights present a different problem. The Milky Way is clearly visible, and you almost have trouble picking out individual stars and constellations for the deep-space illumination competing with their brilliance. At those times, the vast dome of the Lowcountry sky is transformed, and the universe reveals itself. But you have to be careful. Star-gazing while driving can be dangerous. The stars mesmerize you. Again, the headlights of your car ground you: it feels like they're the only thing keeping you from falling into the sky.

As a child, I truly believed that the sky was a huge dome that sat upon the flat earth. I could not grasp the notion that Earth is round. The skies were so big, so encompassing, that they seemed to be more important than the land. I thought that traveling into “outer space” would necessitate puncturing that dome somehow—and what was the point of that? What was the dome made of? Glass? What if it broke? The grownups around me, unaware of the depth of my misconception, struggled to answer my many questions on the subject: “How do you get *out* of the sky to get to the moon?” I would ask. “Are the stars inside or outside of the sky?” Such questions made no sense to them, of course. They tried to explain, but it wasn't until I was in the third or fourth grade that the concepts of a round Earth and an infinite universe finally drilled their way into my understanding.

When I first moved to the Upcountry town of Clemson, where I have lived now since 1968, I suffered from severe claustrophobia—even outdoors. Everywhere I looked, trees and hills—and more trees and hills—hid the sky from me. I'd never realized how exciting it had been to watch



My father and his family on the steps at Hilltop in Orangeburg, circa 1923 or '24. Numbers indicate (1) James Raworth Salley, Jr. (my uncle Rotie); (2) Susan Stokes Salley (my great-grandmother); (3) James Raworth Salley (my grandfather); (4) George Lawrence Salley (my great-grandfather); (5) Kate Zeigler Salley (my grandmother); and (6) William Zeigler Salley (my father).

approaching storms; here in the Upcountry, storms sneak up on you. The many small towns here are so close together that their lights hide whatever night sky peeks through trees or around hills.

The longest black-water river in the U.S.—the Edisto—flows through Orangeburg on its way to the coast, where it empties into the Atlantic at Edisto Island. The river moves through swamps, and huge tree limbs hung with Spanish moss reach out over the water. My parents knew from experience that those limbs were often hung with lazy snakes as well, which would sometimes fall, surprising hapless boaters traveling the dark waters of the Edisto. Highway 301 crosses a bridge over the Edisto River on its way to Florida. Before I-95 came along and spoiled things, businesses lining 301 enjoyed a lively trade from the steady stream of Yankees (anybody not from South Carolina) coming and going. Jack Nolan's motel and restaurant was always busy. In the restaurant area, people paid a dollar for a real cotton boll in a plastic bag. The smell of French fries hung in the air.

Living here in Clemson, I miss my beloved Spanish moss and live oaks—neither of which will thrive here (although one sprig of Spanish moss, which my husband tossed up on an elm branch near our deck after a trip to Orangeburg, has managed to survive for about two years.) Even today, though, the smell of French fries cooking at bull-bat time on a summer evening always reminds me of my childhood.

From the time I was about two until I entered the second grade, we lived in one of those large, tree-shaded houses, where Daddy managed a dairy farm for his cousin, George Salley. From the house, situated at the end of a dirt lane about a quarter of a mile from the highway, we couldn't really hear the traffic on 301, but we could smell Jack Nolan's French fries.

We lived in the old farmhouse my great-grandfather, George Lawrence Salley, had built just outside of Orangeburg. The house was called "Rivelon." My uncle Rotie (James Raworth Salley, Jr., Daddy's older brother) told me he used to ride with my great-grandfather in a horse-and-buggy over the then-treacherous roads that led to Rivelon to help him inspect the farm. That old house had a history of sorts involving soldiers from the War between the States, but family lore has garbled it.

Maybe part of the problem is that Rivelon was just one of several houses built by my family—and it changed names at least once. According to Rotie, “Rivelon” might have been what his cousin *George* called the house, but its *original* name was “Hollydale”—which is what my great-grandfather had always called it. After a number of years at Hollydale/Rivelon, my great-grandparents had built a house in town, at the corner of Ellis and Summers Avenues, and moved there. They called *this* house “Hilltop.” (I don’t know what the deal was about naming houses back then.) Then my *grandfather* built *another* house (just called “The Salley House”) around the corner from Hilltop, on the same block. That’s where Daddy and Rotie grew up.

Rivelon was a very old house by the time I came to live there; yet, even now, I can walk through its tall rooms in my imagination. French doors separated some rooms, worn rugs covered the wavy wood floors throughout the house, and gigantic claw-footed bathtubs crouched on bathroom tiles. Light curtains hung in lofty open windows through which, from early spring to late fall, sweet early morning smells awakened the room where my younger sister Marty and I shared a bed, and cats slept in rectangles of sunshine on the floor.

I can tell from old photos that the house was pretty run-down, but it didn’t seem that way to me. Out back, we played with chickens and dogs in the lowcountry sand. And there were fig trees to climb—which wasn’t always such a good thing. When I was four, I got stuck in the great big fig tree outside the kitchen window. Mama was seven months pregnant with my second sister, Margaret, at the time. She had to heft herself into that tree to get me down. She’s still mad at me about it.



Yaya as a WAVE.



Marty and me on the back steps at Rivelon.

Standing on the front porch with Daddy one day, looking out over the vast grass-splotched front yard with its huge live oaks—and over to the left, a grove of pecan trees—I felt suddenly lucky. “Daddy,” I said, “are we rich?” He just laughed like I had said something funny.

Both of my mother’s parents and her then-unmarried sister Mary lived with us there at Rivelon. We called my grandfather “Daddy Spahr” and my grandmother “MaMa Spahr”; my aunt Mary was “Yaya”—my name for her, from before I had learned to say “Mary.” (Yaya is pronounced “Yangh-yangh”—through your nose at the end of each “Ya.”) All the adults, including Yaya, thought my name for her was “cute,” and they perpetuated my error by using the name themselves. Yaya continued to insist that we children—including cousins—call her “Yaya” long after we were grown with children of our own. Yaya had served in the WAVES during WWII and was a bank executive until her retirement. It was very embarrassing for us, as teenagers, to call the bank and ask to speak to “Yaya,” but everyone seemed to know who we meant.



Marty (L) and me with Daddy Spahr.

Yaya was into country music. She liked “I Cried at Your Wedding,” “Tennessee Waltz,” and lots of others. After supper, we would sit around the record player and play Yaya’s records. My sister Marty and I would sing. Yaya’s favorite was Hank Williams’s “Cold, Cold Heart.” After we grew up and until the day she died, Yaya would cry whenever my sisters and I sang that song—but she always requested it.

Mama’s mother, MaMa Spahr, was bedridden at Rivelon, requiring round-the-clock care due to a stroke she’d suffered soon after I was born. She could barely speak, but we children visited her in her room often. She didn’t seem to know who we were, but did seem happy to see us. Mama said that her mother told her once, “Myrtis, I can see that nice Mr. Salley out there in the yard. You ought to set your cap for him.”

Mama said she laughed and replied, “Mama, I did—and we have three children to prove it!”

Daddy Spahr was something of a curmudgeon, but I guess he had a right to be: he’d lost his business—a successful jewelry store and watch repair shop—in the Depression. He’d lost his house, too, which was one reason why everybody in Mama’s family who needed a roof moved in with us after my grandmother had her stroke.

Daddy Spahr was always pretty patient with me, though. I used to follow him around. I know I was a pest, skulking around behind him, waiting for him to read me a comic book. Often, he’d give in and read to me. I was into *Dagwood* and *Blondie* comic books, the jokes in *The Reader’s Digest*, and the Sunday funnies, which really were works of art back then. Newspapers printed comics in a much larger format than they do today. This spaciousness made possible dynamic—and drama—



MaMa Spahr with my cousin Jim and me.



Daddy Spahr (L) with a person I don’t know, outside his jewelry store.

tic—drawings and stories. I loved the pictures, even though I couldn't read.

Daddy Spahr also told wonderful funny stories and sang songs about "Old Dan Tucker" and "The Animal Fair." Once, I found him lathering up for a shave in the bathroom. I stood in the doorway and said, "Hey, Daddy Spahr." He replied, "Hello yourself. If you want a piece of cornbread, look on the shelf." I thought that was hilarious. (I have always been easily amused.) Sometimes the adults and I would listen to newsman John Cameron Swayze's radio broadcast together. Daddy Spahr said John Cameron Swayze always sounded like he was crying.

One fall day that smelled faintly of wood fires, my father decided to take me hunting with him. He took his double-barreled shotgun, one of our bird dogs, and me. We tramped out across a field of crop stubble, talking about the birds we would shoot and how the dog, who usually slept on the front porch, would "point" them out. We would pluck the birds and clean them and cook them, Daddy said. I wasn't all that excited about the prospect of cleaning birds, having seen it done. But I was happy to be with Daddy.

A covey of quail suddenly took flight, and Daddy raised his gun and shot. I screamed bloody murder, and the dog bolted for the house.

Later, I heard Daddy telling Mama about it. He shook his head, sadly, talking about me and that dog. "They're both gun-shy," he mourned.

Sometime around then, I did something that still prompts Mama to ask plaintively, "Why did you break the legs off my china horses?" I committed that crime at least fifty years ago. You'd think she'd be over it by now. But those china horses were a cherished wedding gift that she foolishly kept within my reach in the corner cabinet. Thinking back on the incident, I'm pretty sure it had something to do with the fact that she was about to present me with another superfluous sibling. Marty, nineteen months my junior, was insult enough; Margaret, my youngest sister, was just *really* unnecessary. My indignation apparently took the form of destructiveness. I think I originally meant to pop off only one horse's leg, but it made such a satisfying "snap!" that I popped off another—and another, and another—until the whole herd was legless. The only experience I can compare it to is popping bubble wrap, which I will do for hours unless somebody takes the stuff away from me.

I eventually grew to tolerate—and even to like—Margaret. The first word she said was "Ready!" during a game of hide-and-seek. Margaret and Marty were hiding and I was "it." Hiding my eyes, I waited for the ready signal. When I heard it, I went to search for them—and there they were, in plain view! The baby was smiling and Marty was furious. "We weren't ready!" she protested.

"But you *said*—"

"That wasn't me!" she sputtered. "It was *Margaret!*"

I was thrilled. "Margaret said 'Ready?'" I marveled at how smart the baby was.

Marty wasn't as impressed. She fumed about it for days.

Once she started talking, Margaret never stopped. To this day, it's hard to slide a word in edgewise.

Just as Margaret was learning to talk, I was learning to read. There was always some adult around to read to us at Rivelon—fairy tales, newspapers, novels—or just whatever they them-



I actually remember when this was taken. Mama and Yaya were urging me to "Smile!" But I meant to show my disgust with the new baby. Sorry, Marg. . . .

selves were reading. I loved sitting on someone's lap and being read to. Inevitably, words began revealing their secrets, starting with comics and the jokes in *The Reader's Digest*. Whenever I came to a word I didn't know, there was always some adult to ask.

But my entrance into the public school system was an embarrassment, a disaster—and a harbinger of things to come. I pitched one of my famous tantrums. Screaming, crying, and kicking my little feet, I clung to Mama. My teacher was Miss Mary Lou Dibble, whose sister, Miss Ruth Dibble, taught first grade across the hall. Mama and Miss Dibble pointed out to me that my very disgusted cousin, Jim Spahr, was also in Miss Mary Lou's class. Only then did my tears subside enough for Mama to sneak away.

Later in this book, you are bound to encounter the term “hissy fit,” as it applies to me and to the way I behave when thwarted. You may wonder at that time, what is the difference between a hissy fit and a tantrum? “Tantrums” are usually—but not always—confined to childhood. They are actually out-of-control hissy fits that make observers long for a pot of cold water to throw on the perpetrator. My mother once actually did throw a pot of cold water on my then-four-year-old sister Marty, who was pitching an extended tantrum on the kitchen floor at Rivelon. It worked. Marty sputtered to a stop and calmed down enough to cry normally. (“But you have to be careful who you throw water on,” Mama laughed. Marty's a lawyer now—the one with Mama's power of attorney.)

“Hissy fits” are the more controlled tantrums that adults use to get their way. Please note that I did not confine the definition to women. Have you ever seen a baseball manager argue with an umpire or a football coach rip off his headphones and stomp on them? Ever seen Bobby Knight coach a basketball game?

Hissy fits.

We were supposed to learn reading and writing in Miss Dibble's class. But the trouble was, I already knew something about reading, and they gave us these really boring books that you weren't supposed to read ahead in—but my curiosity always got the better of me. (I had to see if they got more interesting; they did not.)

I got in trouble for reading ahead and, among other things, for daydreaming. Teachers sent me to stand in the hall. (“The hall” would become a weird sidelight of my public school education. I think it's called “time-out” now.)

My worst disappointment that first year was the revelation that our reading books would *stay* boring. It was just a string of dumb stories about one family: Mother, Father, Dick, Jane, and Sally. In one of the more “advanced” first grade lessons, “Mother” and “Father” guessed which colors Dick, Jane, and Sally had used to paint their boats—by the color of the paint splotches on their clothes! It made me long for *The Reader's Digest*.

(I tried calling Mama and Daddy “Mother” and “Father” for a while until they told me to knock it off.)

Writing was tougher. I had already learned to write my name at home, when I was about four. I wrote it on everything: in the dirt, in Mama's cook-



Me and Marty and Yaya's Dodge.

books, on the walls—and even, sadly, scratched it with a nail into the side of Yaya’s brand new 1951 Dodge. Yaya was a sport. She just laughed and told me I had done a good job—and not to do it again. My parents made sure I understood the “don’t do it again” part.

So, I thought I already knew how to write—but apparently, I’d learned the wrong way. I had not practiced making perfect letters on special paper using solid and dotted lines as guides. When you make a capital “B,” the bottom loop has to stick slightly further out than the top loop. Straight letters are supposed to be really straight, and all the curves must be uniform. My penmanship was a disappointment to, apparently, everyone—myself included. I never did earn higher than a “C” in handwriting for the many years they graded us on it.

My favorite part of the school day was when Miss Dibble handed out Manila paper and crayons so we could draw. We weren’t supposed to break the crayons or waste the paper, so the pressure to create the perfect drawing every time was pretty intense. Once my classmates discovered that I had a knack for drawing, they would line up at my desk to ask me to draw a “man” there, or a “house” here, or “Indians and cowboys,” or whatever their notions were.

My cousin Jim was the one they went to for drawings of tanks and helicopters. The boys liked to draw the actual fire and explosions themselves, complete with sound effects. Some days, I drew so many pieces of art for everyone else that I didn’t have time to do my own. Though I often wished Miss Dibble would make everybody do his own work, I was flattered by the attention.

By the third grade, I was getting rather more negative attention from teachers than positive. It seemed to me that I was spending an inordinate amount of time standing in the hall.

One effort to curry favor with my teacher that year appeared only to alienate her further. It was a bleak March day; my teacher and I were standing together at the row of vast windows lining our classroom wall. Feeling a sense of camaraderie, and hoping to engage her in some topic that she, as an adult, would find interesting, I looked up at her and said, “I sure am glad Stalin’s dead, aren’t you?”

The cold stare she turned on me is something that I won’t forget. It held a mixture of astonishment, annoyance, and dismay. Not at all what I’d been going for. She turned back to the window. “Yes,” she said.

End of conversation.

I can’t remember a time when politics was not a topic of discussion in my home. Daddy Spahr frequently held forth on his views. My father did the same.

Interestingly enough, given the social norms governing gender roles of that era, Mama and Yaya held forth as frequently and with as much self-assurance as the men. Maybe this had to do with the fact that Yaya had served in the WAVES and Mama had served as the first woman teller at the First National Bank in Orangeburg, where she and Daddy both worked before the war.

Their example may help explain a few things about my sisters and me. My sister Marty was the first woman sports editor for a daily newspaper (Orangeburg’s *Times and Democrat*) in the Southeast—and the first woman ever allowed into the press box at Clemson University’s Death



Valley Stadium (much to the consternation of the male sportswriters). In the early 1980s, she became an attorney, and now she works on the South Carolina Legislative Council (a disadvantage to me, as we can no longer discuss many issues in state politics). I, meanwhile, became one of the few female political cartoonists to practice what remains a male-dominated art. And my sister Margaret is a marketing genius, a tough negotiator, and a better businesswoman than either of us. I think my baby brother, Bill, played football in high school and college just to get away from his sisters.

We children learned early that Truman was president and that FDR was God (except, of course, for his wife, Eleanor, who was Satan). We listened to the radio news with the adults and heard their discussions of the issues. They laughed a lot and it all sounded interesting.

Daddy and Mama talked to one another continuously. My parents both worked, so they cherished the time they had together at home—time which varied according to their jobs. They discussed everything—their families, their co-workers, the old days, the future, and whatever was going on in town. They brought home new stories or rehashed old ones. They also talked a great deal about state and national events, including politics.

Because both my parents—and their parents and even their *grandparents*—were Orangeburg natives, they knew practically everyone in town. They even knew everyone's mamas and daddies and where all the skeletons were buried. They shared an almost shorthand language. There was a lot of laughter. My father was a funny man, and Mama thought he was just hilarious.

One thing Daddy liked to do, at any time of the day, was to spread the newspaper out on the dining room table and read aloud from it anything he found funny or alarming. Most things, he found funny—especially if they concerned people Mama and Daddy had grown up with; the alarming stuff usually had to do with Communism and the spread of it.

Daddy would call out to Mama, who was generally up doing stuff like getting supper, feeding my baby brother, finding clean pajamas for us—or she might just sitting be there drinking coffee, if it happened to be a weekend.

“Myrtis, listen to this!” he’d call to her, if she wasn’t in the room. Then he’d read to her, for instance, a piece about the unusually small number of votes a certain well-to-do blowhard in our town had received for town council. Daddy would then embellish this by telling her a story he’d heard about how one of Orangeburg’s more freethinking citizens had seen the unpopular blowhard that day—and had told him, “If I didn’t have any more friends than that, I believe I’d start carrying a *pistol*.”



Marty (in Daddy's lap) and me on our favorite climbing car.

Another time, Daddy recounted the case of a family friend who was called as a witness at a trial in a nearby town. When the opposing attorney questioned this guy, it was to ask him at what time had he seen the events he had described; our family friend had answered with numbers so precise as to raise doubt in the attorney's mind. “And how is it, Mr. —, that you are able to remember the time of these events with such precision?” he challenged.



Orangeburg's town square, in the early '60s, with its requisite Confederate soldier monument. Mama remembers walking alone to the dentist as early as the age of eight. The dentist's office was in that domed turret on the left corner of our main street. She'd sit in the dentist's chair, gazing out of the window and wishing she were that Confederate soldier.

Daddy's friend had answered, "I looked at my watch, because I figured some jackass would ask me."

Daddy had a habit of talking to babies and animals as if they were friends of his. Sometimes, when we'd leave the house, he would warn our dog, Blackie, not to watch TV, because it wasn't good for him. When we got home, Daddy would go straight to the TV and place his hand on the top, as if to make sure Blackie hadn't disobeyed and switched the TV off quickly when he heard us coming in. Another time, when Blackie was really old, I heard Daddy tell the dog, who was lying beside his chair, "Blackie, people say you're living on borrowed time." Then, as if he had hurt Blackie's feelings, he added, "But that's okay. Everybody borrows these days."

My son, James, had a rather large nose when he was born (it fits his face very nicely now, though—he grew into it). James loves the story of the remark I overheard my father make to him as he, the baby James, lolled in his car seat on our dining room table. Returning from fixing a bottle, I saw Daddy talking to the baby. "You're a fine looking boy," remarked my father to his grandson, "even if your nose *is* all over your face."

Commentary and embellishment on the news—and everything else—was a way of life for us as children, and later, as adults. It disappointed—even surprised—me when I discovered that other people didn't share my family's sense of humor and our interest in news and politics.

To us, it was a form of entertainment.