

The Luck of Stanley Warner



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was born in Atlanta and spent her childhood years on Florida's "forgotten coast," an experience which she credits for providing much of her inspiration to write. A graduate of Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, She now resides in Nashville.

It was cold the night that Stanley Warner walked into the Slidell, Louisiana, Waffle House with a video camera hanging from his right hand. Made in the late eighties, the camera was large and heavy. Stan and his brother had bought it together, to document family get-togethers when they both would bring their children to see the grandparents in Pascagoula, Mississippi.

Stanley's children were from the eighties too, but they were not in Slidell with Stan that night. Three young girls, they were at home in Georgia with their mother, Maria. Tybee Island was a place that Maria loved, which is why she moved her children there from Atlanta after the divorce. Stanley lived there too, sometimes, and when he did, he built houses. There was a lot of work in construction on Tybee those days, and it was something that Stanley was good at doing. In addition to welfare, it was how he fed his daughters, because Maria had never been so great at holding a job.

Sometimes Stanley liked the romantic seclusion of living on the island, but unlike Maria, it wasn't a place that he loved. So a lot of times, he took off to towns like Slidell, where he could be a man again, instead of building houses all day just to feed three children and an ex-wife. It wasn't that he didn't love them—even Maria, sometimes—it's just that he was the kind of guy who always needed to feel the ground moving beneath his feet.

Stan was thankful for the heat inside of the Waffle House that night, as he set his camera on the counter and asked Dinah, the waitress, for a cup of coffee—black. Dinah didn't realize that the camera was rolling. It was something Stanley liked to do sometimes, a way to capture bits of real life to bring with him back home.

It was the day after Christmas of 1991, and the sports section of the Times-Picayune was talking odds of an upcoming football game: the Saints had made it to the play-offs. The camera's lens was focused on a cooler filled with pecan and chocolate pies, but its microphone caught Dinah chatting with some customer about the game. It was news since the Saints had never made an appearance at the Super Bowl and

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rarely made it to the playoffs, but if she was honest, Dinah would say that she didn't much care whether or not they were going to win.

The twenty-three-year-old was getting on toward the end of her shift and thinking about what to pack for her husband's lunch in the morning. She hadn't had time to do it before she'd left for work that night, because they'd been fighting about how much money she'd spent on Christmas presents for the kids. Now she was feeling bad about some of the things she'd said, and she wanted to make it up to her husband by packing something special for his lunch.

The man with the paper was Nathan Fischer, and he'd spent much of the night at McCabe's, a local bar. He was still a little drunk, and he thought that Dinah was pretty, so that's why he was talking to her about the game.

"I'm thinking, I don't know, they done pretty good this season, so they might just pull this one off," he conjectured while Dinah shrugged, faking a smile and filling Nathan's coffee for the fourth time that hour.

Stanley had been sort-of paying attention to the exchange, in between sketches he was making in the notebook he always carried. He could tell that Dinah didn't have much to say about it and decided to give the girl an out from the conversation.

"Well, you know, luck can only get you so far," he said, turning in Nathan's direction. Then he switched off the camera, because this was the same kind of real-life he could find back on the island. He'd always have a drunk to wrangle, no matter where he'd go.

Abigail was bored. It was winter break of her first year at college, and she was stuck at her grandparents' house with nothing to do. Already, she had gone downstairs in an attempt to raid the liquor cabinet, but since her granddad had quit drinking years prior, all she found was cobwebs and half a bottle of peach schnapps. She wasn't sure whether alcohol could go bad—or maybe just get stronger?—so she'd pulled the bottle to her lips and given it a taste. It didn't taste spoiled, but the sugary crust around the rim of the bottle had stopped her from testing it any further.

If she were back at school that night, she'd be out partying with all the friends she'd made. She didn't love Massachusetts, where school was, but she loved being so far away from home. To her, being stuck was one of the worst ways a person could feel, but that's exactly how she felt right then, as she was camping out on a velour sectional in her grandparent's living room after everyone else had gone to bed.

Out of desperation, Abigail started digging through a drawer underneath the television to see what relics she might find. The drawer was filled with video tapes, labeled with various holidays and occasions from when she and her sisters had been kids. Back then, the old video camera was about as fun as it could get. She had loved it when her dad or one of her uncles would film. Everyone would watch the tapes again and again, laughing at the funny things they all had said and done.

Most all of the tapes, she had seen a million times. Halloween 1989. Christmas 1990. It was amazing that fifteen years had passed since a lot of them were filmed, although in a way, it seemed like even longer.

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There was one tape in the drawer that didn't have a label. Abigail was sure that it was one she had seen before, that the label must have fallen off sometime over the years. Still, she couldn't resist the curiosity of finding out which one. Besides, she figured, she could put a new label on it, and that would give her something to do for a couple of minutes before she got bored again.

Abigail settled back onto the couch and pressed play on the remote control. The screen flicked to an image that appeared to be the inside of a diner, but the camera wasn't moving. Someone must have forgotten to turn it off, she thought. That happened often, and they'd end up with thirty minute intervals of a potted plant or sofa cushions, which for some reason, no one ever bothered with recording over.

She heard her dad's voice then, asking for a cup of coffee, and it gave her a start. He'd been dead for almost four years, so his voice wasn't something she heard so often anymore. She waited, suddenly feeling a long-forgotten hunger for his words, and she was irritated to sit through some other guy's sports chatter instead. Of course this would also turn out to be a boring disappointment.

"Well, you know, luck can only get you so far," she finally heard her father say, before the screen flicked to the ugly scribbled lines of unrecorded tape.

She popped the tape out of the player and put it back in the drawer, not bothering to give it a label after all.

The silence in the house now was something more than she could stand, so she slipped outside to walk down to the pool. It was too cold to swim, and the pool looked like it hadn't been cleaned in years besides. The water was covered with pine needles and a greenish goo. Instead, Abigail took a seat on a porch swing. Since she had been back at her grandparents' house, the swing would always seem to beckon her late at night, as much as it also threatened to collapse with every creaky sway.

She lit a cigarette and looked through its smoke to the stars, which made knowing winks as if to say that somewhere out there they had all the answers to the questions now bounding through her mind.

Abigail knew that her father had seen exactly how far luck would get a man, and she wondered what might have happened if he'd tried his hand at another pursuit—like love or patience or diligence—instead. But that wouldn't have been her father. Stanley Warner had been the kind of guy who always needed to feel the ground moving beneath his feet. It was a feeling Abigail knew well.