

THE LITTLE GIRL AT THE
BOTTOM OF THE PICTURE

The Little Girl at the Bottom of the Picture

A JOURNEY OF
SELFLESS DISCOVERY

Jeremy White



White Lines Press

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Some names have been changed to protect the privacy of certain individuals.

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Preface

“John Hart is your father” is seared in my wife’s brain when AncestryDNA sucker-punches her at work in Baton Rouge in 2018. Raised by a loving adopted family, Edie had altruistically submitted a sample in hopes of healing an unknown woman’s nearly fifty-year-old wound. *The Little Girl at the Bottom of the Picture: A Journey of Selfless Discovery* immersively reveals how the resulting bombshell propels the two of us into this beautifully epic, transformational adventure that resolves a trio of daunting mysteries, including one plaguing an enthusiastic horde of gangster-adjacent Ukrainian Americans for two-thirds of a century.

The heart of this powerful story about healing is Edie’s utterly selfless agenda. It’s also what sets it apart, as far as this tenured cynic can tell, from other books involving searches for biological family. Edie successfully dodges all the traps that could have turned our unicorn of a story into a darker version of the insane yet heartwarming tale that it is. With a smattering of bittersweet moments, *The Little Girl* is heavy on happy reunions, including a mind-blowing, poetic parental reunion of sorts, one involving a local bookstore, no less.

It’s also worth noting this story occurs on the eve of 2020. A post-COVID read brings several themes to the fore, including social and racial justice, police brutality, and the value of science. Additionally, insidious homophobia in 1950s Middle America lies at the root of our heartbreaking titular mystery. *The Little Girl* also reminds us of a recent time when air travel was less perilous and we could safely hug strangers. In an age characterized by sickening inhumanity, this work celebrates the best of our humanity. Transcending issues of genealogy, *The Little Girl* appeals to readers seeking empathy in a divided land, and authentic beauty in an increasingly ugly world.

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Susan Mustafa, thank you for your friendship, support, and encouragement. Not every debut author has a *New York Times* best-selling author at their disposal for invaluable feedback. Thank you for being there.

This book wouldn't have happened without the cooperation of many people, some you'll meet on the following pages, including my wife, Edie, whose immense love, support, and patience allowed this project to materialize. Our reluctant hero is an intensely private person who's come to realize her incredible story begs to be added to the human narrative. I'm eternally grateful to my bride for trusting me with putting her and her family on the printed page for the world to fall in love with.

1

Three Suits—All Aces

It was predawn in the middle of February 2018 at our home in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. My wife, Edie, typically a night owl, had quietly gotten up sometime before me. Upon awakening in our darkened bedroom, I instantly knew where she was.

The previous two mornings, we had received life-altering emails from seemingly incredible people we hadn't previously known. The two of us were like little kids excitedly waking up on Christmas morning, anxious to see what awaited in the inbox.

Edie, wrapped in a white, cat-adorned robe, sat at her desk in our office, awash in the glow from the hand-me-down computer. Three images, attached to a new message sent overnight from two time zones away, slowly loaded on the monitor.

The first showed an adorable little girl and a beautiful woman with a warm gaze. Bundled up in winter gear, both wore wool caps and broad smiles. In the background was lots of water, with what looked like mountains on the horizon against an overcast sky.

In the next photo, the same darling little girl was being held by a handsome man with piercing brown eyes on a rocky beach. A craggy, tree-lined bluff projected a bit into the water behind them.

The still-adorable, grinning girl wore a different outfit in the third pic. Sunlight from the left highlighted her blonde locks and lit the face

of an older, white-haired man with her; he also shared a smile. He wore glasses and a couple days of gray stubble.

I silently studied the last photo as my eyes continued to fully awaken. Coffee would have to wait.

After a few seconds, I looked back to see that my winsome wife of over twenty-five years was staring straight ahead at that third picture. I was witnessing the love of my life look upon—for the very first time—her biological father.

It wasn't yet six on a so-far caffeine-free Wednesday. Just like the past two, nearly equally insane mornings, Edie would be at work on time.

It all stemmed from a decision she had made nearly two months before, in the early evening of Christmas 2017, in the living room of my widowed mother-in-law, who goes by a childhood nickname. Ducky and her husband, the late Dr. James Wade O'Neal Jr., did a bang-up job raising their four kids about a half-hour's drive west of the capital city, in their rural, four-bedroom house. Edie reached her fateful decision as we listened to her older brother Patrick speak about recently connecting with a biological cousin who made artisan soap in New Orleans.

The O'Neals adopted Patrick and Edie, each at birth. My wife and her blond brother are not biologically connected. Nevertheless, they share an incredible bond. After giving birth to Wade and Kellie early in their marriage, Ducky struggled with a series of miscarriages for years. She and Doc adopted Patrick in 1964. Six years later, they were blessed with curly-haired Edie, whom Wade still calls "Red."

With over a dozen years separating Edie from her two elder siblings, she bonded with Patrick well before learning that she was adopted. That newly discovered fact as a preteen only proved to strengthen their connection, especially when people would point out the "obvious" family resemblance between the two. The pair of secret-keepers typically just nodded along, often together, in social settings. Ironically enough, the two nonbiological O'Neals are, by far, the most Irish-looking of the bunch.

My in-laws' youngest came into their lives via private placement through Ducky's OB-GYN, Dr. Tony Leggio. They gave their baby girl the same name as Doc O'Neal's older sister, better known as Aunt Neenie. "Edris Ann" is on Edie's birth certificate, dated November 30, 1970. I married the fourth Edris in the family's history.

I first saw the fetching high school valedictorian in Louisiana State University's West Laville Hall, where I served as a resident assistant. I was newly back on campus to resume my mechanical engineering studies after taking a year off to join the Naval Reserve. Edie, a future Marine Corps officer candidate, came tromping through the lobby in combat boots, camouflage cutoffs, and a red USMC T-shirt highlighting her voluminous auburn mane, leaving a fiery trail in her wake. With the most adorably badass sense of purpose I'd ever seen, Edie halted just long enough to staple a flyer to the bulletin board with surprising authority, before resuming her captivating march out the front door with more bills in her freckled hands.

A handful of us guys, who were chatting near the front desk before she entered from the main hall, were left speechless.

"Well," I recall finally saying, "that was interesting."

Some twenty-seven years later—despite a persistent, almost debilitating reticence to speak about her awesome self—Edie would tell an exuberant woman in Indiana about her upbringing in a small South Louisiana town with one flashing traffic light. Maringouin, French for "mosquito," is an agricultural community near the Atchafalaya Basin.

"I was really blessed," she told this Indiana woman in their guffaw-filled initial phone call, months after that Christmas at Ducky's. Kellie, her older sister, who grew up to become a caring nurse and mother of five, took care of Edie like she was "her little baby doll." Big Sis and Wade both maintain Red got away with "bloody murder" in comparison, Edie explained.

"I work at Pennington Biomedical Research Center. It's part of the LSU campus," Edie told the Indianan. "We do a lot of clinical trials, research. My boss does a lot of work with the military." Edie, a zoology grad, ensures that millions of dollars' worth of research, primarily

aimed at improving the health and nutrition of our deployed troops, goes smoothly.

My wife was raised by a respected family with a strong work ethic. Wade is president of a bank. Kellie's husband, Mike, is a lawyer, as is Patrick.

Meanwhile, their brother-in-law with a local satire site—the smar-tass from down the bayou who married Doc and Ducky's youngest—told jokes on the internet. As a junior college football officiating crew-mate would remind me whenever he saw me with Edie: I had outkicked my coverage.

“I was never any good at dating,” Edie would eventually write a newly discovered relative, explaining how I completely lucked out. “I either obsessed over someone who wasn't available or interested—not that I ever did anything but gawk from afar, because I didn't have a clue—or got unwanted attention.” My bride since 1992 went on to say, “I went out with Jeremy because I had no interest, and he was finally going to be the guy I went out with and have nothing come of it.”

A year before the fateful Christmas at Ducky's, Edie and I spent the final week of 2016 with Patrick and his engaging wife, Yvette, at their home in Fort Worth, Texas. He informed his little sister that he planned to submit a sample to AncestryDNA in hopes of learning about his biological family.

We went back the following Memorial Day weekend for a U2 concert. My wife did not ask about DNA results because Patrick did not bring up the topic.

Edie is persistently concerned about upsetting others, to the point that she'll put off communicating with them, using the time instead to agonizingly determine the perfect way to reach out. Their feelings come before hers. This can prove somewhat problematic when attempting to make potentially feather-ruffling decisions. Inaction is her default position in these situations.

Nevertheless, this is probably the most ideal trait anyone could have for what would become a yearlong-plus exercise in discretion, patience, and empathy, three suits in which my wife is all aces. My hand, despite

getting stronger along the way, is still no match for hers, especially in the patience department. There's no way in hell I would've put up with me for this long.

Seven months after the concert with Patrick and Yvette, they joined us and Ducky in her living room, after everyone else had gone home following a day filled with family, food, and gifts. Patrick used the occasion to tell us about his Ancestry findings. His cool, soap-making cousin Emily in the Crescent City represented his closest match thus far. My mother-in-law's genuine excitement about the news only amplified when Edie soon said she'd also submit a sample.

Ducky, only slightly less spry than when she played high school basketball during the Truman administration, had always been eager to help her adopted children find out where they came from. However, Doc O'Neal, who passed away in 2010, didn't feel the same way.

"It was Dad's decision not to learn anything about my birth parents," Edie would later inform more newly discovered kin, "aside from possibly being told they were LSU students."

When her "Edie Bean" said she was ready to embark on the search, Ducky bolted for the closet that housed the adoption records. The box contained only letters about attorney fees and who handled the adoption. Nevertheless, Ducky would eventually prove willing to shake down whomever she had to—including Dr. Leggio's widow, as well as the OB-GYN who took over his practice—in order to help her baby find her birth mother.

"My mom can be a bulldog," Edie would inform the Indiana woman on the phone. "If she gets on a task," Edie laughed, "she'll harass people until they relent."

My wife instinctively, and politely, vetoed Ducky's help. This would be Edie's journey to embark upon and—more importantly—lead, a fact that she'd have to remind me of a few times.

"Mom is a Pandora's box of an entirely different magnitude," she would tell a dear friend, "with discretion out the window."

Edie is the last person on Earth who would ever bust into someone's life unannounced like the Kool-Aid Man. She was not at all driven

by a need to know about her bio family. Rather, her motivation was utterly selfless.

On December 26, 2017, the day after that evening at Ducky's, Edie and I would celebrate twenty-five years of marriage. In that quarter century, we never discussed her biological family. She told me during our engagement that she had no desire to know about them. The closest we ever came to discussing it was when she shared with me a brief composition titled "If You Were My Mom"—a few sweet words she would tell her birth mother should the opportunity ever arise.

Edie was totally happy not knowing about her bio folks, especially since it carried a risk of pain to someone else.

"I was blessed with a loving family and wanted for nothing," she'd eventually write. "I did not want to risk the possibility of opening an old wound that someone may have tried to leave in their past and move beyond. However, as I got older, I began to wonder more often if maybe I was preventing a wound from fully healing by keeping to myself, rather than making myself available to be discovered by someone who might have a lingering question as to whether they had made the right decision."

As Patrick continued sharing his exciting discoveries in Ducky's living room that Christmas evening, Edie began to ponder her age, and that of her birth mother, assuming she was still alive. If it wasn't already too late, Edie was ready to take action to alleviate a stranger's presumed burden.

My wife likes to say she was just putting herself out there, in AncestryDNA's database, in case someone was looking to connect, looking to finally close—after almost fifty years—an undoubtedly heartbreaking chapter in their life. Edie's humility prevents her from conceding that sending off a vial filled with her saliva was an altruistic act.

I've spoken with enough people to know that not all searches of this type have a happy ending. Most folks who've told me about their families' experiences with online DNA database services, like Ancestry and 23andMe, said they involved unpleasant surprises. If and when someone connects with a long-lost biological family, they run a significant

chance of either causing, or becoming embroiled in, a bunch of strangers' drama. Think about it: Who puts their child up for adoption because everything in their life is going great?

And once you're out there, you're out there. The internet is forever. Spit in a vial, and you've released a skeleton key to open countless cans of worms, a key you can get back as much as you can unblow a whistle.

She'll never say it, so I will. My intensely private wife willingly put herself at risk for untold emotional pain and mental anguish, all for someone she didn't know, who might not have even been among the living.

That decision poetically led to the greatest, most surreal, transformational experience of our lives. An experience in which my life partner stumbled into solving a gut-wrenching, sixty-five-year-old family mystery.

A family with proud connections to some of the most notorious criminals in this nation's history.

A family in which many of its numerous members rightfully see my bride as a bona fide miracle.

2

Or Closer

Edie received her AncestryDNA kit on the third day of 2018. I had to show my civilized wife how to spit, at least with enough volume to fill the sample tube to the prescribed level. She dropped it in the mail the next day.

Precisely one month after receiving her kit, Ancestry sent Edie an email notification. Her results were available.

She initially ignored the message, for two reasons. The first was low expectations set by the modest pace of Patrick's discoveries. One year into his search, the closest match he found was in the second-cousin range, according to Ancestry's estimation.

The second reason she lacked a sense of urgency to investigate was timing; the Saturday notification arrived amid the madness of Carnival season. Edie and I were responsible for a forty-foot-long Mardi Gras float hauling the second-oldest continuously rolling krewe in Baton Rouge's largest annual parade. Known for risqué, irreverent humor, Spanish Town Mardi Gras is a throwback to Carnival's satirical roots. STMG would roll for the thirty-eighth time in exactly one week, and we still had giant foam penis heads to fashion.

In addition to working on parade stuff, Edie spent that first weekend of February taking care of weekly business back home in Maringouin.

For the past six years, she crossed the Mississippi River, usually on Sundays, to tend to an aging motherly figure in her life.

“The closest experience I had to a set of grandparents,” Edie would eventually explain, “are a couple I refer to as my ‘other parents.’ They owned the house my family rented when they first moved into the town where I grew up.”

Earle and Hugh Wagley also owned and ran the Maringouin Western Auto for years. Known affectionately as “Eel and Poppa,” they never had kids of their own. The Wagleys befriended their new tenants. In return, the O’Neals shared their youngest with them. Edie became Eel and Poppa’s baby, too.

The two families had adjacent fishing camps on Grand Isle. Both sets of parents took turns driving the cutest redhead three and a half hours to Louisiana’s only inhabited barrier island, where she swam, fished, and collected other cherished childhood memories.

Poppa passed away in 2012. That’s when Wade began helping his baby sister serve as Earle’s caretaker. It’s all part of their longstanding promise to the beloved woman—considered my wife’s second mom—that she’d finish her years in her own home.

“We have sitters stay with her around the clock,” Edie would later write, “and I visit each week to manage her affairs and make sure she is as comfortable as possible.”

At sunup Monday, February 5, Edie shared something from Ancestry with Patrick and Yvette on our four-person Facebook Messenger thread.

“We haven’t done J’s kit yet, but my results came in,” Edie reported with a screenshot of her “ethnicity estimate.” Great Britain was tops with thirty-five percent. Next was a surprising twenty-eight percent Eastern European. Ireland/Scotland/Wales came in at fifteen percent, while Scandinavia got six.

“Very cool,” Patrick replied with a nod to her potential Soviet Bloc roots. “You’re a commie.”

“She do like her vodka,” I chimed in with a Russian flag emoji.

“Fascinating!” Yvette replied. “What’s next?” our hip Latina sister-in-law asked. “Did you get the app?”

“Didn’t know about the app,” Edie answered as she installed Ancestry’s software on her phone, “but downloading it now.” The email notification, she added, “didn’t indicate anything better than 700-plus possible fourth cousins, so I probably won’t do any digging til after Mardi Gras.”

Tuesday morning, with a full week of Carnival season to go, Edie “just happened” to check out the newest app on her iPhone during a break.

I was back in our home office sending her a just-completed float graphic. “Lame ol Dongs” was laid out in the *Game of Thrones* font, complete with a flaccid penis extending from the first L. Edie promptly loved my work with a trio of big red hearts. I began typing a reply when she grabbed my attention.

“Ho.lee.shit,” Edie posted in our chat thread. A screenshot from her phone soon followed. “So that just happened,” she quickly added.

The image she shared was topped by the white initials “JH” against an olive block. Below that was a man’s name, in black and white. A little lower was the line “Predicted Relationship: Parent/Child.” At the bottom, another read in a contrasting color, “Confidence: Extremely High.”

Also extremely high? Our shared confidence that my wife’s never given birth.

“John Hart is your father” is seared in Edie’s memory.

“Wow,” was the best I could initially muster. “Any idea who/where he’s at?”

“Not yet,” Edie answered.

“Damn.”

I was suddenly laconic.

John Hart had joined AncestryDNA the previous year, Edie soon discovered.

“Perfect timing,” I noted, just as she sent the Ancestry screenshot to the O’Neals in Fort Worth.

"This is why I should stay offline at work," Edie led off in the four-person thread.

"Oh. Shit," Patrick quickly replied.

"Yea, verily," his little sister confirmed.

"I can't focus!" Yvette exclaimed. "Patrick is driving."

"Holy crap, Edie," Patrick posted after parking, a few minutes before midday. "You okay? That's a heavy thing to learn."

"Yeah," she assured her concerned brother. "I'm trying to crank out a shit-ton of reports at work today, and I go into a series of meetings in an hour. I'm going to be grateful there aren't any readily visible links on social media, and try to set this revelation aside for a bit."

"Still going to be a challenge," Patrick warned. "Hang in there."

He checked back in a few hours later.

"How you doing?" Patrick asked. "I'm gobsmacked. Can't imagine where you're at."

"Getting ready to leave work," Edie answered. "Had to accomplish something, even if it was for someone who's already started Mardi Gras vacation." My wife was also "considering the distinct possibility that this guy's first clue that I exist might not occur until the next time he checks his account. I have to allow some time for that to happen. I am not freaking out; I hope he doesn't. Maybe he knew," Edie said of her existence. "Maybe he didn't. Maybe it's why he took the test. Maybe it's not."

Patrick suggested that if John Hart believed he had a child out in the world, then perhaps he joined Ancestry to find them. And if he didn't know about Edie's existence, Patrick said, "Boy won't he be surprised." He then advised his baby sister, "Either way, if you haven't heard anything in a while, contact him. It'll send him an email that someone on the site has contacted him. I know that's a bold step. But hey," he added, "when a door opens..."

"I'm just trying to think about how you or Jeremy would feel if you suddenly got an email from your alleged child you've not known for forty-seven years," my wife revealed.

"I know. It's sticky," her brother empathized. "I can say that I would be stunned, shocked, amazed, even afraid, but I would definitely want to know if there was a child of mine out there. Especially as I got older."

"The way I see it," Yvette injected, "he's on Ancestry for a reason as well."

"I agree with Pat and Yvette," I posted just past 6 p.m.

Still flummoxed by that morning's surprise, Edie brought up Ancestry's email notifications. "My settings are to get weekly email notifications of new DNA matches," she said. "I don't think I ever saw the email where it told me I had a parent/child match."

The email notification that Edie saw did in fact say she had 700-plus possible fourth cousins. However, my wife, an award-winning copy editor, had not fully appreciated the subsequent "or closer" qualifier, largely due to the meager expectations informed by Patrick's findings.

I'd also like to point out that, at the very moment she learned the name of the man who fathered her, my love enthusiastically approved of "Lame ol Dongs." I'm still not sure how to interpret that.

So what now? What do you do after that kind of bombshell? Well, in this case, my puzzle-loving Marine dusted herself off, got her bearings, and soon realized that she could use it to her benefit.

Ancestry's common-relative feature allowed her to see which of her other myriad DNA matches were also related to her bio father. When John Hart exploded onto the scene, he effectively separated all the puzzle pieces according to which side they fit in: paternal or maternal. Without that bombshell, they would have been all jumbled together, thus making the task of correctly placing them much harder.

But who was John Hart? Of all the possible men out there with the less-than-unique name, which one was Edie's father? Where did he live? Ancestry offered no additional personal information to go on.

There were, however, a few visible family trees, constructed by others on Ancestry. Two days before the parade, Edie saved three documents—publicly available family trees for John Wilson Hart, Joseph Edward Hart, and Justin Hart—to begin mapping out her paternal family.

That same Thursday, I cut out heads of fourteen men recently implicated for being dicks in the “Me Too” movement. I then attached their faces to the giant pink phalluses that would serve as manipulable oars on our Viking-ship-themed Mardi Gras float, honoring the memory of our krewe’s beloved cofounder, a proud Norseman who’d gone on to Valhalla in early December.

Friday saw tons of last-minute preparations ahead of Saturday’s bacchanal. We caught our first Bacchus parade in New Orleans on Sunday with our good friends the Cavells. From there it was Lundi Gras (Fat Monday), Fat Tuesday, and Ash Wednesday, which was also doubling that year as Valentine’s Day.

In short, Edie had lots of distractions to help keep her mind off her new, still-jarring reality. They also kept her from instinctively jumping into the puzzle without any real sense of how to begin, which is what she did shortly after the Lenten season began.

My determined wife stumbled around on the internet for a few days, only to be further confounded by dead leads. Frustrated, Edie realized that her ad hoc methodology was getting her nowhere.

Sometimes, when faced by the seemingly unsolvable, the best course of action is to do what my bride did: Step away for a while, and come back at it with a fresh set of eyes.

Or, in this case, two.