

Notes From the Author of Sea Changes

From the Foreword to the First Edition

When I began the story that became *Sea Changes* I didn't know it was going to be about grief. In hindsight, that seems appropriate. Grief is a stealth phenomenon that affects you when you don't expect it to, and especially when you are sure it won't. I also had no idea when I began the story that a major turning point would be Hurricane Katrina and the death of my mother. These notes are an attempt to explain how that came about.

Sea Changes began as a *blog*, which is a nickname for Web log, a journal that you write online. There are probably millions of them on the Internet. Many blogs contain well-constructed essays about important world events; others offer a few witty paragraphs about what the blogger ate for breakfast that morning or whether the blogger's baby finally had a bowel movement.

I got the idea to write a blog that would be a fictional story told in serialized form, which was once a popular way to tell long stories. Readers of the past would eagerly await each new issue of the periodical of the day to read what happened next in their favorite story. I had visions of people eagerly awaiting each new episode of my blog. But it was a long shot; I knew I was competing with bowel movements.

My blog idea came while commuting on the ferry between Bainbridge Island and Seattle, at precisely 5:10 in the morning on May 18, 2005, as I was sitting in my car on the ferry, powering up my laptop and wondering what to write about. I'm embarrassed to admit that I was driving my car onto the ferry. It's a very uncool thing to do. Cool people walk on or ride their bicycles. My excuse was that I had a long way to travel to my job south of Seattle. Months earlier I had tried walking to the boat and then taking the bus, but that added too much time to an already long day. Then I tried renting a small apartment in Seattle and staying there during the week, but that got old for my wife and children after a few months. (Yes, it got old for me, too.) On May 18, I started driving the car. But after a while, the rush-hour ferry lines grew tiresome and annoying and bad for my stress meter. That was when I got my midlife crisis motorcycle, a shiny black-and-red Triumph that is specifically designed for middle-aged men buying midlife crisis motorcycles. Now *that* is a good way to commute on the ferry. But the best way of all is to work on the island and not commute. (Hint: tell your friends to buy this book so I can enjoy that lifestyle as long as possible.) However, during that period of time when I drove my car onto the 5:20 ferry four mornings each week, I wrote the blog called *Peggy Finds A Friend*. That blog became this novel.

One of my favorite writing exercises is the one where you write from the perspective of a person totally unlike yourself: different race, different age, different gender, different economic circumstances, and so on. I love that exercise because I find it refreshing to try to see the world from an unfamiliar point of view. It also requires a lot of soul-searching. You may find that new point of view to be unsettling in some way. For example, if you are a male human and you try to honestly imagine how a female human views your behavior it may be, ahem, humbling to say the least. Especially when the scene that pops into your head is one you had been trying to forget.

Therefore, when I began the blog, I immediately thought of it as a writing exercise. The character of Peggy Heggy came to me and I started writing about her. She was fifty-eight, a widow, had lived her whole adult

life in Seattle and only recently had moved to Bainbridge Island to start fresh a year after her husband's death. Although I had a clear vision of what Peggy looked like, I tried to avoid a detailed description in the story. I had a feeling that readers would form their own vision of Peggy, and I didn't want to interfere. This turned out to be a good hunch because, over time, readers told me what they thought Peggy looked like. Their visions were different from each other and different from mine. Important writing lesson: *Less Is More*.

Peggy, of course, had to meet somebody; not just anybody, but a special somebody. As I got into the first few episodes of the story, I introduced other characters. All of them were loosely based on people I observed on the 5:20 ferry. One was Raoul Stein. He, too, was widowed and lived on Bainbridge Island. He became the other half of this midlife romantic relationship that forms the main story line. One of the great things about fiction writing is that once you get some characters interacting with each other, things start to happen that you don't expect. In a relationship story, you need obstacles. There are always two kinds of obstacles: the superficial kind such as race, family or economic status, and the internal kind such as low self-esteem or other feelings of inadequacy. Grief can be one of these internal barriers. Grief is powerful and mysterious. Carrying grief is like carrying an invisible suitcase on a trip: You can't see it, but it has weight, and it might cost you extra, and it won't fit in the overhead compartment. You might not even view grief as a burden. It might be a memory, or many memories, even good memories. Technically, grief is a phase of loss and is supposed to be followed by acceptance.

The insight into this came from my mother. She was one of the "subscribers" to my blog and read it on a regular basis. I was visiting her one day last summer and she surprised me by saying, "I think I know who your story is about." Before I could explain that it was a work of fiction and not about anybody, she added, "And I have an idea how it should end." She never got to tell me her idea and I never found out if my ending would have been correct from her point of view. She died while I was writing the story.

I was shocked at my mother's remark because all at once I could see the similarities between Peggy and my mother, who was a widow for the last five years of her life. During those five years I don't think she went a single day without thinking of my father. In fact I believe she missed him and continued to live with him in spirit every moment she was awake. I didn't consciously intend for the character of Peggy to represent my mother. But, once I saw the parallels, I realized that Peggy's internal barriers, the things that kept her from having a satisfactory relationship with Raoul, must have something to do with grief. I had a theme to go with my story.

Now, there's a very important point I want to make here: I would never suggest that my mother's way of handling her loss was somehow wrong or incorrect. I'm sure there are psychologists who could have said, clinically, whether my mother accepted or did not accept my father's death. I don't see what difference it would have made; she was ultimately going to make her own choices. What is interesting to me as a writer how widowed people handle their respective losses. What I see is that different people make different choices. I witnessed that first hand among my mother's friends and siblings. I don't want to characterize those choices as right or wrong. What is important is that I saw my character, Peggy, on a path that would lead to a similar kind of choice and I felt it would be dramatically interesting.

The circumstances surrounding my mother's death and how it coincided with the arrival of Hurricane Katrina are still mind-boggling. Everybody has a story to tell about Katrina. Some families are still experiencing their Katrina saga in real time. As I write these words, I have just returned from New Orleans, where I joined my family members in a memorial service for my mother eight months after the storm. Appropriately,

we stood in the church, her church, on a bare concrete floor and sat in folding chairs. They were still recovering from flood damage.

My mother's family has been in New Orleans since 1720. The first arrival was a goldsmith who traveled from France to New Orleans and set up a jewelry business in the French Quarter. Many of his descendants are still in the city or surrounding area. Over time they learned to accept hurricanes as a fact of life, like heat and humidity. Most people in my mother's generation wouldn't dream of evacuating for a hurricane. You lit a candle to the Blessed Virgin Mary and said the rosary and prayed that your roof stayed on your house. And it usually did. That was how we spent Hurricane Betsy in 1965, huddled in the living room, my mother praying by candlelight while I peeked through the window at the giant pecan trees whipping furiously in the wind, bending over until I was certain they would snap.

Katrina crashed ashore August 29, 2005. My mother had a stroke and died four days before that. Later, some of us joked that she evacuated early. The day after she died my siblings and I sat with the funeral director and planned a funeral service for Monday, August 29. We knew Katrina was in the Gulf but we didn't pay much attention to it. After all, it was hurricane season and Katrina was just another name in the annual parade of hurricane names. Of course, we ended up evacuating. Someone called the funeral home to ask if we should take my mother's body with us. They politely said no. My mother rode out the storm at the Jefferson Parish morgue. It was the easiest hurricane of her life. We still think it's bizarre that Katrina hit town on the day of her funeral. A month later we buried her next to our father at a cemetery in Covington. We shudder to think of how she would have reacted to the events in New Orleans since then. Her own condo got about four feet of water and she lost some furniture and lots of memorabilia. But the devastation throughout the city is the bigger loss. It's staggering. Whole neighborhoods remained underwater for weeks and are completely ruined. Many of our family members lost property, but we all agree that the biggest loss is the city itself. Eight months after the storm there are many signs that recovery is still elusive. Trailers everywhere, blue tarps on roof tops, help-wanted signs in every storefront because there are not enough workers, dead trees, heavy dark lines showing the frighteningly high water marks on buildings, houses that appear to be livable but are unoccupied because people haven't returned, reduced hours at restaurants, temporary menus. The Uptown section is eerily quiet. Jefferson Parish is pure gridlock.

The events surrounding Katrina, before and after, make up two chapters of this book. That is because, as I wrote the blog, I began to insert my fictional characters in whatever I happened to be doing. Whether it was going to Pike Place Market in Seattle, or cooking shrimp stew, or going to a baseball game in Washington, D.C., or hiking in Maine, my characters were there with me. Entirely fictional, but doing real things in real time. When I went to New Orleans in August, they went with me. When I went back in October to help with recovery, they were there. My characters also spend a lot of time talking about current issues, like homeland security and global warming and how communities don't invest enough in infrastructure. Some of these topics end up driving wedges between characters who otherwise care about each other.

But through all that there was a thread that I couldn't let go of. It was Peggy trying to get on with her life, but unable to let go of her previous life with her late husband. It was grief at work. In the end, she resolves it, at least temporarily. Did she make the right choice? Please let me know after you read it. Thank you.

- Bill Branley, April 11, 2006, Bainbridge Island, Washington