

## ROUNDING THIRD

BY

Elaine Thomas

*In memory of Meat Loaf, 1947 - 2022*

The batter drove a solid hit deep into right field, pushing runners on first and second forward. Billy headed into third, arms and legs pumping. Mo looked toward home, where all she really saw was Ray.

Billy glanced at her, questioning whether or not to keep going. She signaled him on, knowing he could score the run needed to tie the game, with players left on first and second for a possible win.

Billy was a gentle, red-haired kid, with a shy smile and adorable dimples. Mo had known the boy his entire life. Their families lived in the same neighborhood and attended the same Episcopalian church. She could remember when he was born.

That he'd developed a crush on Mo this summer was obvious; he followed her around the church camp like a puppy. She felt protective toward him. She knew what it was like to imagine you could be old enough for someone when you just weren't. She even gave Billy one of her brother Denny's old baseball gloves and worked overtime with the boy to improve his game. He was a great kid.

Mo realized her mistake as soon as Billy rounded third. Running like a bat out of hell, he still wasn't fast enough to beat the fielder's throw to home. Pinned between catcher and third baseman, he was easily tagged out.

Mo had hoped to make Billy a hero of the game, the final one played on the last day of camp, a game that determined a full year's worth of bragging rights. Instead, she'd set him up. He was the third out in the top of the ninth by a team down one run. Game over. Cheering wildly, the winners rushed toward the plate to celebrate with chest bumps and fist pumps.

Billy maintained his composure as his team lined up and shook the winners' hands. As both teams left the field, she watched him drop his head. She felt a little like crying herself.

From behind the plate, Ray jogged down the third-base line to where Mo stood.

"Tough play."

“I feel bad,” Mo said. “I shouldn’t have waved him on.”

“Aw, come on. Third-base coaches make judgment calls. Not your fault the kid couldn’t make the run in time. Besides, part of our job here is to toughen them up a little.”

“Welcome to the 1980s.” She smiled. “You do know it’s ok nowadays for boys to be sensitive?”

Ray laughed. “Hey, aren’t you leaving for college tomorrow? Got time for dinner tonight?” he asked. “We haven’t really had a chance to talk all summer.”

“Long as you’re paying.” Her tone was playful, but so many questions popped into her head. Like a date? Or just two old friends hanging out? Did he still think of her only as Denny’s baby sister?

“Great. Meet you at Hazel’s around seven-thirty. Right now, I’m going for a run, work up an appetite.” Ray turned and jogged away. He peeled off his umpire’s shirt as he ran. Muscles rippled down both sides of his back. He dropped the shirt on the ground as he passed by home plate.

Mo watched until he was out of sight. As she stood there, she was unaware of Billy observing from a distance.

*Nobody runs like Ray Porter*, she thought. Shoulders back, chest out, smooth strides of his long legs. Like everything about Ray, the way he ran was perfect. Mo had watched him run and loved him, and his perfection, pretty much her whole life.

As kids, her big brother and his best friend taught Mo to play both softball and baseball. Amazingly patient, neither Denny nor Ray seemed to mind the little girl following them around. It must’ve been annoying at times. *Then again*, she thought, *who wouldn’t appreciate such constant adoration?*

Not that admiration was in short supply anywhere in the charmed lives of Raymond Porter, Jr., and Denton Lawson III. Respectively the sons of a Presbyterian minister and an attorney, the boys were hometown heroes in that particular way known only to handsome, high-achieving, athletic boys from prominent families in small southern towns.

Fleet-footed Ray played shortstop, with sure-handed Denny at first. Both made All Conference their junior and senior years. They were the closest of friends, tighter than most brothers. They rarely argued, not even over girls; Denny tended to date blondes, while Ray chose pretty brunettes. They graduated the year before Mo moved over to the high school.

Neither fleet of foot nor sure of hand, she played third base on the girls’ softball team. Thanks to Denny and Ray she did well because she knew the fundamentals better than most.

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“Is that you, Maureen?” her father called out from his home office.

“Yes, Daddy, it’s me. Where’s Mama?”

“Some kind of meeting at the church.”

No surprise, either way. Since the loss of his only son and namesake, her father seemed to stop working only when he slept. Her mother seized every excuse to be out of the house these days.

She really couldn’t blame them. But for a moment, just one moment, Mo let herself remember what things had been like before Denny’s accident, before omnipresent grief hung over the house.

Driving home for Christmas break his freshman year at State, his proud father’s alma mater, the perfect son hit a patch of black ice just as he headed downslope onto a bridge. A bridge that he never made it across. At times Mo felt as if both her parents’ lives had flickered out at that same moment, all light gone from their eyes. Neither had felt fully present to her since.

She quickly pushed these memories away.

“Daddy, I’m going to meet Ray Porter at Hazel’s for dinner. Ok?”

“Of course, honey. Please give him our regards. Just don’t forget what a big day tomorrow is. We want to leave early to get you to campus on time.”

“Yes, sir.”

For his eighteenth birthday, their parents gave Denny a brand-new SUV. They chose the vehicle in part for safety; the tragedy lay in a top-heavy design that made it difficult to control once it skidded off-balance. After what happened, her parents refused to buy, even to allow, Mo her own car. They insisted they would drive her to begin her freshman year at St. Stephen, less than an hour from home, even though she was only weeks away from eighteen.

She ran up the stairs to her room. Nothing she saw in her closet seemed right for tonight. Everything looked like a little kid’s clothes. She was in no mood to be thought of as a kid.

Around age seven or eight, Mo had decided Ray Porter was “the one.” In the ensuing decade, her devotion never wavered, despite Ray’s apparent indifference to that aspect of their relationship. And despite the best efforts of boys her own age. She dated, even went steady a couple of times, but she never let things go beyond a certain point. None of them held any long-lasting appeal. None of them were Ray. Compared to him, guys her age seemed immature. It became even easier to dismiss them once she was the girl whose brother failed to make it home. They all acted as if she were somehow breakable because Denny died.

Tomorrow would begin a new phase in her life, she knew, but tonight Mo hoped to confirm once and for all, one way or the other, her long-held expectations of who she could be. She gave up on the closet's contents and opened one of her already packed suitcases. She pulled out her slinkiest green top, a rich jade color she knew set off both her eyes and her tanned skin. She paired it with her favorite pair of snug jeans.

"Bye, Daddy," she yelled back over her shoulder as the screen door slapped shut behind her.

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Owned and operated by a local family, Hazel's had been an institution in town for too many years to count, since long before the arrival of any competing fast-food chains. Red leather and chrome reflected the relaxed decor and attitude of a bygone era but refreshed and updated. Prices remained reasonable, patrons remained loyal, and more importantly, the food, and the mouthwatering aromas it generated, remained exceptional. The restaurant drew families as well as young people and tended to be packed at all meals.

Ray got there before Mo and snagged an empty booth near the back.

He looked forward to catching up with Mo and hearing more about her college plans. She suddenly seemed so grown-up. The little girl who had followed Denny and him around was always a cute kid, but she had become a young woman who seemed more of a peer these days. A very pretty peer, he acknowledged, but his intense reactions to her were confusing. He wanted to be near her because he wanted to feel close to Denny. At the same time, when he looked at her, he felt the pain of Denny's loss.

Ray had always known Mo had a crush on him. He knew it the same way he knew most females found him attractive. But she was Denny's kid sister, which put her in an altogether different category. She would never be just a girl. He wouldn't do anything that might inadvertently hurt her. He had purposely kept distance between them all summer but felt safe enough inviting her to join him for dinner the night before she left for college.

When Mo entered the restaurant, she looked to her left and spotted Ray. Had she looked to the right she would have seen Billy seated there, eating dinner with his parents.

She slid into the booth across from Ray. As she did, he stood; it struck her as both gentlemanly and an oddly old-fashioned gesture.

"Wow, look at you, little girl," he said, eyebrows raised.

Fresh-scrubbed, wearing a blue button-down shirt that matched the shade of his eyes, Ray looked great. He looked so good that she decided to ignore the “little girl” comment and just take the compliment.

He handed her a menu, as if either of them needed one at Hazel’s, and asked, “What do you want to eat?”

They talked as they ate, the standard burgers and fries, with Ray eager to hear her expectations of college and willing to share any wisdom gathered during his three years at Tech. They talked about his plans after graduation. Her thoughts on potential majors. How much bigger the world was than their small hometown. They didn’t mention Denny, not even once.

“It’s already dark,” Ray said, after paying their bill. “Come on, I’ll drive you home.”

“Ok.” She hesitated, then added, “but I don’t want to go home yet. Can we just drive around for a while? You know, look the place over one last time before I leave tomorrow?”

He glanced at her, then shrugged. “Sure. Jump in,” he said, holding open the passenger-side door of his red Z28 convertible.

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They rode through town twice, up then back down the main drag. That took only a few minutes, so Ray drove by her daddy’s law firm and circled past First Presbyterian, where his own daddy was minister. He pulled into the parking lot at the high school, a squat one-story, flat-roofed building.

“Proud member of the class of 1978,” he said.

“Proud 1981 graduate,” she responded.

They both laughed.

They had pretty much done the entire tour of town, so Ray headed out toward the river. He pulled into a secluded spot, with the car facing out over the water. The moon’s light shimmered on the surface. He had parked there many times but assumed Mo wouldn’t be familiar with the spot. He switched off the engine, then flipped the key forward just enough to keep the radio on.

He reached past Mo to push the button to open the glove compartment. His hand accidentally brushed across her thigh. He fumbled around in the glove compartment and pulled out a joint and lighter. He fired up the joint, took a toke, and passed it to Mo. Within minutes they were both not just stoned, but totally shitfaced.

Mo couldn’t believe the quality of sound coming through the car’s speakers. Even in open air, with the convertible top down, music surrounded her. She

relaxed, feeling more comfortable than she could remember at any time during the past couple of years. Ray felt safe, like home.

She sat with her knees pulled up into the seat, her back leaning against the door. She couldn't take her eyes off Ray's hands. They were beautiful, strong hands with long, sensitive fingers, thumbs with squared bottoms that stood out from his palms.

Ray lolled in the far corner of his seat, head laid back atop the door. He gazed up at the stars.

"Do you think Denny's somewhere up there looking down at us?" he asked in a slow, stoned voice.

Mo gave no answer. She couldn't stop staring at his hands.

Ray slowly rolled his head forward enough to look directly at her.

"I'm sorry," he said. "You know I miss him, too, don't you?"

She nodded, then reached over and took his hand, examining it closely for a moment. She looked up at him and they began to kiss.

Things escalated quickly. They were both partially undressed, when Ray heard the raucous opening notes of "Paradise by the Dashboard Light." *Bat Out of Hell* had played constantly throughout the spring of his and Denny's senior year of high school and into that summer. He knew every word of every song on the album. He tried to ignore the lyrics, but Meat Loaf's big voice belting out "We were barely seventeen and we were barely dressed" suddenly struck him as hilarious. That song, with those words, "Do you love me? Will you love me forever?" That crazy interlude with the baseball announcer describing a squeeze play between third and home.

He pulled away from Mo, retreated back against the door on his side of the car, and sat there and laughed. As stoned as he was, he couldn't stop laughing.

Maybe Denny had been watching. Maybe his own conscience, which had never bothered him before with a girl, finally caught up to him. He had been raised right; it was bound to happen sooner or later. Of all the songs to hear at that moment. Mo *was* seventeen. He felt sure she was a virgin. He was not about to take a chance on destroying the life that lay ahead of her. Or his own life.

He tried to get it together enough to apologize. He wanted to explain that it was the song and his own actions that had reduced him to a giggling mess.

"Mo, I'm sorry..."

He looked at her and took it all in, her disheveled appearance, the tears running down her cheeks, flowing from mascara-smudged eyes with huge pupils.

He pulled on his shirt. He turned the ignition key.

"Mo, I'm taking you home."

They were both silent the entire way. Still stoned, Ray stared at the road ahead, concentrating on driving. From the corner of his eye, he saw Mo button and straighten her clothes. Then, with arms crossed and head down, she withdrew into herself.

When they got to Mo's, the house was dark. *Good*, he thought, *please let her parents be asleep*. He pulled into the driveway. As soon as the car stopped, she flung the door open. Ray reached over and grabbed her wrist.

"Wait," he said. "I can't stand thinking I've upset you, Mo. You know how much you matter to me."

She pulled her hand free, slid out of the car, and walked toward the house. He got out to follow her but stopped at the front-porch steps.

"I'm an idiot," he said. "Mo, I really am sorry."

As she opened the front door, she turned back to look at him.

"No big deal," she lied.

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Ray woke early the next morning, furious with himself for being so careless. He wished he could undo the night before. He hated himself for hurting Mo, but it also scared him how much he liked the girl. She was someone he could see himself marrying in five or ten years. They would settle in their hometown, the place they both desperately wanted, yet the place they both feared the most.

Mo, too, woke with the sun. She avoided thinking at all about the evening before. She felt antsy to get on the road, eager to leave behind all thoughts of home, to begin a new chapter filled with new possibilities. She dressed hurriedly and carried two of her packed suitcases down the stairs to start loading her father's sedan.

She set the bags down to open the back door. She saw something brown on the steps, thought at first it might be a dead animal. Denny's old glove lay there. How angry Billy must have been, how hurt and insignificant he must feel. She'd let him down with her lousy third-base coach's call, then failed to speak with him afterward. She should have apologized. She had been careless with Billy's feelings, too wrapped up in her own infatuation with Ray to tell the boy goodbye. She hoped she could make it up to him as soon as she got a chance.

Mo realized how stuck she had been since Denny's death. Like a desperate runner rounding third, unable to advance, yet unable to go back.

Home would never be the same. She knew that now. She would start a new life today. Leaving, starting college, promised new places, new ways to be. She would figure out where she belonged in the future.

She picked up her bags, stepped over the glove, and moved ahead.

### Author Biography

Elaine Thomas lives and writes in Wilmington, NC. Her work has been published in numerous magazines and journals, including *The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*, *moonShine Review*, *Idle Ink*, and *Pembroke Magazine*.