Nobody Cried When He Died

By: Anna Marie Switzer

William rapped his knuckles against the peeling wooden door once, then twice. He stepped back, the heel of his dress shoes sinking into the damp porch wood. He glanced at his watch. 8:03 a.m. William rolled his eyes. Already, this interview had been a waste of time. He had gotten to Maggie's house ten minutes early, of course, and now he had been standing on her porch for at least seven minutes. On the bright side, if the door didn't open, there was a chance he could catch the boat before it left for Cape Lookout. That way, he wouldn't have to miss a full day of research.

William fiddled with the pager in his pocket, then raised his hand to knock one more time. Just before his knuckles collided with the wood, the door swung open. William jumped back, wobbling on the edge of the porch for a moment before tumbling back into the grass. His palms hit the dirt first, and he braced his body for the rest of the impact. He knew what it felt like to fall. With his eyes closed, it wasn't hard to imagine that he was back in the schoolyard, surrounded by the cruel sniggers and hot breath of the neighborhood boys.

A different sort of laughter pulled him out of his memory. It was gravelly, each chuckle like the rake of a hoe through a garden's soil.

"Be careful – there's some dirt you gotta watch out for there," a woman said.

She shuffled from the doorstep to the edge of the porch, her walker rolling over the snags in the wood. She reached out a hand to help William, but he waved her off, standing up on his own in a last attempt to maintain his dignity. As he brushed off the dirt on his pants, the woman continued laughing. William resisted the urge to get back in his car and speed out of the gravel

driveway – there was little more that he liked less than being laughed at. Still, he knew leaving was not an option, not if he wanted to graduate and finish his research this year. His thesis advisor, Dr. Sliga, had made it abundantly clear that if he didn't conduct the oral histories that Dr. Wyndham wanted, then he'd have to complete another year of school. That would mean twelve more months in North Carolina, twelve more months listening to his former classmates' achievements at Stanford and MIT.

No, William could not leave, so he sucked his teeth and tried to shake off the woman's laughter.

"Hi, I'm William." He said, sticking out his hand.

"Hello, William," the woman said. He cringed at the way she said his name, with two syllables instead of three – *will-yum* – just like everyone else in the South. "I'm Maggie, but I'm assuming you already knew that."

"Yes," he said. "Thank you for agreeing to do this oral history interview with me."

"Well, when Lizzie calls, I try to answer," Maggie said, then motioned inside. "I reckon we could talk the living room, unless you dingbatters have a fancier way of doing it."

She stared up at him, her eyes searing through her coke-bottle glasses. Maggie was short, even compared to William, who hadn't been able to ride the Coney Island Cyclone until he was seventeen. Still, under her gaze, he felt a bit afraid, as if he might have been safer back in the dirt.

"The living room is fine," he started to say, but Maggie had already rotated her walker and started shuffling inside.

William closed his eyes and took a deep breath. This interview was going to take every morsel of patience he had left, just like Caroline, the local secretary at the Morehead City labs,

had predicted. When she brought over the fax paper with the names for his oral history assignment from Dr. Wyndham, she had started giggling.

"I'm sorry – it's just that I can't imagine you and Ole' Miss Maggie in the same room," she had said, covering her mouth as she smiled. "I'm worried you might get mommicked."

William wasn't surprised to hear that this "Old Miss Maggie" was going to be a challenging person to interview. Likely, this was punishment from Dr. Wyndham for his dissent against the university's partnership with the community. William was supposed to be on the coast to do serious research, to complete his PhD and publish his findings, but instead, he was stuck recording frivolous provincial gossip for a professor who wasn't even in his department. Oral histories were jobs for Dr. Wyndham and other social "scientists," not people like him who could actually *do* something with their work. He imagined what his undergraduate roommates would think: William, on this crotchety local woman's porch, while Mark schmoozed with Nobel-Prize winners and Lance operated state-of-the-art equipment.

Still, none of that mattered now. He didn't have time to get angry; he just needed to finish this interview and return back to his research. If this oral history went anything like the three he had done last week, Maggie would ramble on about some hurricane, get the dates of bridge openings wrong, and explain the origins of three different churches for about an hour before he cut her off and left. Frivolous nonsense, like he said to Wyndham.

As he followed Maggie down the hallway of her house, William observed the walls. Like the rest of the house, which was a little more than a shack after decades of storms on Harkers Island, the walls were nothing special. Planks of wood ran vertically from the floor, and picture frames hung haphazardly down the hall. There were all sorts of pictures – recent, colored ones of little girls with their front teeth missing, and older, sepia-toned photos of people and horses.

At the end of the hallway, there was a single painting. From first glance, it looked like a portrait of a wave, but as William walked closer, he could see it wasn't a wave at all. It was a machine, with gears churning at the crest, pulleys and chains tight across the tube. He paused, and as if possessed, reached out a finger to trace the oil on the canvas. The different shades of blues, the hints of rust, the movement captured in just one painting.

"You alright back there?" Maggie called out.

William cleared his throat and turned his attention to Maggie, who was slowly making her way to the ragged crimson recliner in the living room at the end of the hallway.

"Right behind you. Do you need any help?"

Maggie scoffed. "I'm fine. You're just like my grandnieces – they always treat me like I'm going to break. Y'all from off don't understand how tough you gotta be to live out here. No hallway is going to take me out, that's for damn sure."

William said nothing, just made his way to the couch opposite to the recliner. It was a ratty green couch that sagged in the center, with a concerningly dark stain on the left arm. As he sat, he brushed off crumbs, wincing. Maggie might be capable of walking down the hallway, but it seemed like she lacked the ability to vacuum. William began to unpack carefully, placing his recorder, notebook, and sheet of questions on the glass coffee table in front of him.

Ready to begin, William glanced over to Maggie. She was still struggling to lower herself into the recliner. From his initial impression forged while sitting in the dirt, he had assumed she was around 70 – her voice was strong, her laughter forceful. Now, though, he realized she was older, at least 80 or maybe 90. Her joints creaked, audible from his spot a couple feet away, and her movement was slow, as if she carried each one of her years on her shoulders. Maggie wore a pale linen shirt, long-sleeved even though the temperature outside was well over 90 degrees and

so humid that your words stuck in the air. William longed for his undergraduate days spent in Cambridge, when summer meant soft rays of sun and a wispy breeze. Of course, that was before he was forced to cross the Mason-Dixon line and come to this godforsaken island.

Finally, Maggie managed to sit down, but the movement caused her to erupt into a loud coughing fit. William checked his watch. Another five minutes, just to make it down the hallway.

He shuffled his papers, and when the coughing began to subside, began to speak.

"So, Mrs. Gillikin—"

"Mrs. Gillikin was my mother," she interrupted. "Call me Maggie."

"As you wish." William took a deep breath and started his spiel. "So, as I mentioned, my name is William, and I'm a PhD candidate at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In addition to my personal research, I'm working with Dr. Wyndham and the Southern Oral History Program to catalog the voices of Carolinians on the coast. A community member recommended that we interview you, and you agreed. Does this sound right?"

"Dr. Wyndham, you said?" Maggie chuckled. "I don't think I'll get over hearing it. Lizzie got a fancy degree and a big-city husband and thought that'd hide the fact that she's from here. Like she ain't a community member herself."

"I wasn't aware she was from the coast," William said. Maggie and Caroline spoke with a cross between a twang and European tilt – the "High Tider" dialect, it was called – while Dr. Wyndham's voice was completely neutral, devoid of any region at all.

"Yessir. Down East, blood and bone. She used to crawl around the shore in her diapers, trying to dig for clams. Ask her how to shuck an oyster, and you'll see."

William tried to picture Dr. Wyndham as a young and mud-splattered child, but all he could see was her pinched mouth and curled shoulders pointing out corrections in his data.

“Well, your knowledge of her might give you a better idea of the scope of our project,” William said, eager to begin recording. “I’m going to start this interview with a few questions, and you can answer with as little or as much information that you would like to share. Once we’re finished, I’ll transcribe our conversation and submit it to the archives. It’s a simple process.”

Maggie watched him as he spoke. Through her thick glasses, the image of her eyes was garbled, as if examining a seashell through the ocean’s water. Still, William had the sense that she could see him very well, much better than he would have liked. He shifted in his seat.

“You’re a scientist, ain’t you?” Maggie asked.

William nodded, surprised. In his previous oral history interviews, his subjects paid little attention to him. They mainly eyed his recorder suspiciously and rambled on about the government taking over the lighthouse.

“Yes, I’m studying to be a biochemist.”

“Then why are you doing these history talks?” Maggie scoffed. “It’s bad enough you and your crowd have to be messing around in our waters, lecturing us like you’ve discovered things we don’t already know. Now you want our stories too?”

At the beginning of the summer, Dr. Wyndham forced William’s cohort to read her manual on collecting oral histories, complete with a section on hostile locals. At the time, he had found it pointless, but now he was glad he had read it. William began reciting what he remembered.

“While we might be here to collect data on the environment, we want to make sure that we’re engaging in the community,” he regurgitated. “We want what’s best for the land *and* the people.”

Maggie raised a sparsely-haired eyebrow. “You sure about that?”

“Yes,” he said, fidgeting with the recorder. They really needed to start this interview. “It’s an important part of the scientific process.”

“Bullshit,” Maggie said, so forcefully that William flinched and dropped the recorder. “I’ve been around this Earth long enough to know when someone’s lying. If we’re going to have an honest interview, I need you to tell the truth, not recite Lizzie’s words.”

William leaned back, startled at first, then angry. Why did this woman think that she could talk to him like this, speak to him with condescension dripping off every word? He was a grown adult – with a degree from Harvard, mind you – not a child to be lectured.

For a moment, Maggie and William stared at each other, like two knights ready to duel. William, glowering through his thin-rimmed glasses, bushy eyebrows burrowed, and Maggie, matching his glare, unblinking, looking almost amused.

“Well?” Maggie asked. “If you can’t speak for yourself, you might as well leave.”

It was only then that William processed Maggie’s words beyond her tone. She wasn’t just calling bullshit on him; she was calling bullshit on Dr. Wyndham and the whole oral history program. Was it possible that Maggie actually wanted him to say what he thought? William weighed the options. Worst case scenario, she kicked him out, and he got to get back to his work.

He took a deep breath, then spoke. “To be honest, I think this is a waste of my time.”

As he uttered the single sentence, William felt the tension in his shoulders ease, the muscles of his back relaxing for the first time since he stepped foot on Maggie’s porch, since he entered North Carolina, since he received all those rejection letters back in undergrad, even. It was addicting, this freedom. He kept speaking.

“Oral histories are pseudoscience, and I can’t see how they would possibly impact my research. This whole ‘project’ is worthless, and how someone can make a career out of it is beyond me. If Dr. Wyndham, or Lizzie, or whoever she is, wants to get the stories so badly, she should come and do it herself.”

It was silent for a moment, just the click of the ceiling fan and William’s soft panting as he caught his breath. He hadn’t said this to anyone – not his friends from college, who he was too embarrassed to speak to, and not the members of his cohort, who practically worshipped Dr. Wyndham. Yet, after the initial rush of catharsis faded, William began to worry. What if Maggie relayed what he said back to Wyndham? Would he be reported? Suspended? Transferred to another university even though his research was almost done?

Before he could apologize, there was a sound. It was deep, bellowing, tumbling, like rocks falling down a hill in a landslide. Maggie was laughing, laughing so hard that her recliner shook back and forth, threatening to shoot back with each guffaw. Reluctantly, William let out a quick titter. Suddenly, William and Maggie were laughing together, cackling as if they were high school friends remembering a favorite rumor. William couldn’t remember the last time he had laughed, and certainly not a time where he had laughed like this.

Eventually, Maggie’s noises faded into coughing, and William had enough sense to be nervous again. He still wasn’t exactly sure what was so funny.

“Boy, you just about had me laugh all the sickness out of my lungs,” Maggie said, grinning. Both of her canines were twinged gray. “Feels like no one’s been honest with me since the elementary school opened, and that’s been damn near thirty years. Never thought I’d agree with a dingbatter, but since it looks like we’re both stuck here doing something we don’t want to do, we might as well get on with it. Tell me, what sort of questions did you want to ask?”

William blinked. It felt like he had whiplash – angry one minute, laughing the other. Maggie seemed unphased, still watching him through her thick glasses. William cleared his throat, then picked the recorder up off the floor.

"Well, um, I guess I'll start recording and begin my introduction," he said. With one final glance at Maggie, he took a deep breath, then pressed play on the recorder. "This is William Myers from the University of North Carolina of Chapel Hill in partnership with the Southern Oral History Program. Today, I'm here with Maggie Gillikin. Maggie, thank you for being here. Can you start us off with your name and birthday?"

Much to William's surprise, Maggie said nothing. Instead, she stared at the recorder on the glass coffee table. It was a small instrument, not much bigger than his palm, with two metal prongs protruding from the top. A red light blinked from the bottom of the device's small screen, where a thin line tracked the intensity of the audio. Caroline had said it looked like a gadget out of Ghostbusters, but really it was only a rudimentary tool issued by the Folklore Department

"Maggie? Does that sound alright?"

"Lizzie didn't mention no machines. Where'd you say this recording was going?" Maggie said, her eyes still glued to the recorder's blinking red light.

"Just the Southern Oral History Program's archives," he said. "People like Dr. Wyndham might read the transcripts, but we're just trying to get voices on record before climate change does too much damage."

"Climate change?" Maggie said, bristling.

William cursed in his head. He probably should have read Dr. Wyndham's pamphlet more closely – one of the main instructions was to never explicitly mention climate change. He'd forgotten that basic environmental education wasn't taught down here.

"Sorry, I meant sea level rise."

"Hmmp! You dingbatters and your sea level rise," said Maggie. "The sea is always rising and falling – that's what the ocean does. We'll still be here."

"Sure," William said. He checked his watch – already a quarter past 8, and he hadn't asked a single question. "Just act like we're talking – you know, having a normal conversation. Pretend the recorder isn't even here."

To prove his point, William slid the recorder under the coffee table, hoping the sound would keep recording. In her recliner, Maggie looked frail, swallowed by the cushions. It made William uncomfortable. He much preferred her when she was loud.

"Let's start over. Can you tell me your name and where you were born?"

"Alright. My name is Margaret Jean Gillikin, but most folks call me Maggie. I've lived on Harkers Island my whole life, but I was born over there at Diamond City."

William's face must have betrayed his confusion, because Maggie laughed.

"You mean to tell me that you've been studying around here and never heard of Diamond City? Some researcher you are, huh."

"It's never come up," William said, swallowing his retort. At least the woman was actually talking.

"Well, Diamond City is an old community over at Shackleford Banks. That's where Momma was born, and then her momma, and a bunch more mommas dating back to the first British colonists. They lived on Shackleford until the Storm of 1899, and then they moved closer to land. My family came here, to Harkers Island, by floating our house across Core Sound. Momma used to tell us stories about the day they moved. Said she took the skiff with the bedroom, but she could see the kitchen right over there, bobbing around in the waves. That's

how they all moved their houses. Some crowds moved like Momma to Harkers Island, but others went down there to Salter Path or Promised Land in Morehead City.

"Back then, when Momma and Daddy were growing up, there were lots of communities like Diamond City on Shackleford. Wade Shore, Mullet Pond, you know. But by the time I was 'bout to come around, they weren't communities no more, just groups of fish camps. But that was still home, you know what I mean? It was still home. And when Momma was so big with me that she was about to pop, that's where she wanted to be. Wanted to feel the sand in her toes, she said, to teach the baby in her belly where we came from.

"Well, Daddy didn't think it was a good idea, of course. We didn't have no doctor over on the Banks, and even the doctor on Harkers Island wasn't too good – don't tell the record I said that, because the doctor was Louise's uncle. But Daddy didn't want to take Momma to Shackleford Still, she wouldn't let up, and Daddy always listened to Momma. So finally, they took the skiff over to Diamond City. Wouldn't you know, that's where I decided to be born. Nowhere else better, I guess. On October 9th, 1919, I came into the world kicking and screaming, right onto the sand." Maggie chuckled. "They say I'm the last baby to be born over there. Say it made me special."

"Was your mother okay?" William asked, concerned. He wasn't much of a beach person anyway – too much sand in too many places – and giving birth on the shore seemed unimaginable.

"'Course she was! If anything, she was glad that I came when I did. The next day, a hurricane 'bout took out the Island. That's when they knew I had powers."

"What kind of powers?" William asked, despite himself.

“Hurricane powers. I can tell a storm is coming a couple days before. Sometimes it’s an ache in my elbow, sometimes it’s a crick in my pinky finger. Once, I even saw a deer on the Island, and what do you know? There was a storm three days later.”

William furrowed his eyebrows, struggling to conceal his doubt.

“Oh, I know you don’t believe me.” Maggie said “Don’t matter much to me, anyhow. I remember one time, I woke up screaming for three days straight. By then, Momma knew something was up – knew I had magic of some sort – and she told Daddy to start preparing for a storm. Well, Daddy didn’t trust in luck at all, but you better believe that he listened to Momma. And good thing too, because when the storm came, it was strong enough to blow our windows half way down to Raleigh, I’ll tell you that. Storm of ‘33, mhm. Made Barden Inlet out there on Core Banks.”

“I see,” William said, still unconvinced. Powers, or “magic” like Maggie called it, could always be explained. Most likely, these random signs were just coincidences, Maggie’s family’s way of dealing with the unpredictable nature of storms.

“So, what about you, William?” Maggie said. “Where are you from? Got any powers of your own?”

“Me?” said William, staring dumbly at Maggie.

“Yes, you. I’m not talking to the couch, am I?”

“Oh, right. It’s just, I’m not supposed to talk much during the interview.”

“Well, you said treat this like a conversation, and we wouldn’t be conversating if I didn’t ask you any questions back.”

William breathed out of his nose sharply. “I suppose. But Dr. Wyndham can be specific about how we—”

“Lizzie ain’t gonna tell me how to talk.” Maggie interrupted. “I’ll give you what she sent you here for. I can tell you every barnacle hanging from every skiff out there on Shell Point. I can tell you every church that buried every body in the graveyard back near the bridge. I can tell you everything you want to know. But I ain’t going to talk if you’re not gonna talk with me.”

“Fine,” William said, gritting his teeth. “I’ll ask two questions, and you get to ask one back. But if Dr. Wyndham gets angry, I’m sending her right to you.”

Maggie laughed, the sound like pebbles tossed into a pail. “You really are the science type, aren’t you? Putting numbers into conversation like that. But that works for me, and it’ll work for Lizzie, too.”

William sighed, rustling his papers to find his next question. “So, what was your experience like growing up on Harkers Island?”

“Now William, I thought we just made an agreement.” Maggie tutted, waving her finger at him as if he was an errant schoolboy.

“We did.” William said indignantly. “I get two questions, you get one. This is my second one. We’re not counting follow-up questions, obviously.”

Maggie laughed again. It seemed like the meaner William was, the more that she liked him. It was bewildering, but liberating.

“Can’t argue on that one. I’ll go ahead, then. Growing up on the Island was tough, but it was the best place in the world. You know, people on Harkers Island, and the rest of Down East, never had much money. We never did. Still don’t, matter of fact. But I don’t think that bothered anyone too much, because there was always something to eat, you know, out there in the Core Sound. And there were always people to be with, at church or the fish camps or on the shores. And you could do anything you wanted – swim, fish, take out the skiff – and all you had to do

was just run outside. It's not like that anymore. With all them new developments on the Island, and those government regulations in the fishing industry, it's not like that. And it's a damn shame.

"But we're still here. You know, I remember when I started working at Cherry Point, the naval base over there in Havelock that they built for World War II. When I started at Cherry Point – right around '42, I think it was – one of those girls asked me what I thought about the Great Depression. I said, 'Great Depression? Is that a machine or something?' and she looked at me like I had three heads. People on Harkers Island didn't know about stuff like that, stuff that was happening in the rest of the nation. It was always the Great Depression for us. Nothing in the stock market or anything else in those big cities was going to change that."

Maggie paused and coughed, letting out spurts of heavy hacks that rattled the recliner. "That good enough for me to ask a question?"

William nodded, taking a sip from his water bottle. "Shoot."

"So, Mr. William," Maggie said. "I wanna know: if you hate it down here so much, why did you come to study?"

William coughed up the water he just swallowed. He should have been expecting a question like this – the conversation with Maggie had been unconventional to say the least – but still, it caught him by surprise.

"Excuse me?" He asked, wiping water droplets from the side of his mouth.

"Don't be so sensitive, William. Anybody with eyes and half a brain could see that you don't care for us. And I reckon a smart boy like you could find a million different places to go. So why are you here? Why Down East?"

William's eyes darted to the recorder under the table, the red light blurred through the glass. Dr. Wyndham would certainly read through all of his transcripts, but he didn't particularly feel like being berated by Maggie again for not telling the truth. He might as well be honest – it wasn't like Dr. Wyndham wanted him to be here any more than he did.

"Very well," William started, racking his brain for an appropriate response. "I wouldn't say I hate it here." Maggie opened her mouth to speak, but William raised a finger to quiet her. If he didn't know better, he would have thought this made the curves of her mouth turn up in approval.

"I mean, North Carolina is beautiful, and UNC has remarkable resources for a state school. But I won't pretend that I want to be here, that I didn't wish I was studying elsewhere. First of all, it's too hot. How anybody functions in this hellish humidity is beyond me. Not to mention, the only drink to cool off with is sweet tea, and everyone down here makes it so sweet that it feels like you're drowning in molasses. And then there's the university's requirements. Doctoral research is difficult anywhere, of course, but all of this community engagement – bullshit, if you don't mind me saying – makes everything much harder than it needs to be.

"But as much as I might not like it, it's not like there's many other options," William said, his eyes tracing the trim of the couch. "I don't have a rich uncle at Stanford – my dad is a carpenter, for God's sake – and academia is corrupt. Full of nepotism and all this other shit that nobody tells you. And I – I just had to take what I could, even if it meant sweet tea and 100 degree days," finished William, lamely.

He could feel Maggie watching him, but couldn't meet her eye. Instead, his gaze drifted over to the wave-machine art on the wall. Who had painted it? What did they mean?

“I see,” Maggie said. Her voice was soft, no longer gravelly, more like the babble of a creek, or the flow of the tide. “Well, William, you’re not the first person to resent Down East because you haven’t come to terms with yourself.” Maggie smiled wistfully. The motion seemed to hurt, even the crinkle of her eyes leaving her wincing. “It’s your turn, now.”

William cleared his throat, which was oddly scratchy. He flipped through his research journal, searching for the list of required questions. “Alright, what are some of the big changes that you noticed on Harkers Island throughout your life?”

“Yup, that’s a good one.” Maggie nodded. “There was the war, of course, and Cherry Point that came with it. You see, Daddy was a fisherman, and so were my brothers. I wanted to be one, too – figured my ocean powers would be useful and all – but they wouldn’t let me onto the water. Real traditional, Daddy was.

“And fishing is hard work. You get out there at 3, 4 in the morning. You spend hours pulling on nets and yanking up the chains and you know, stuff like that. It’s hard work, out there on the water, in the sun. You gotta know what you’re doing. They might not be fancy scientists like you, but I’ll tell you – Daddy was the smartest person I ever met. He always said ‘you’ve got to catch the fish while the fish still there.’ You can’t always go by the numbers because the fish don’t care about numbers. You’ve got to figure out the right angles for the nets, you know, the right conditions for the waters.

“But anyway. Those are long days when you’re fishing. Get up before dawn, and you don’t get back ‘til supper. And by then, you’re so tired you can’t close your eyes. It’s all you can do to open your mouth and get some food in you.

“I remember Momma, Momma would never let us eat until Daddy and the boys got back. It’d be just me and her and Carolynn waiting around until they finished up. My stomach would

be growling, and Momma would be wringing that dish towel of hers, twisting and untwisting it, like if she could pull it tight enough, it would mean the boys would come home safe. ‘Course, I knew that dish towel well, ‘cause every time I’d try to sneak some crumbs off the cornbread, she’d whip me with it. I never liked waiting much. And when the boys came back, well, they would stink something nasty. William, you ever been on a fishing boat?”

William shook his head. “Just a shark survey boat, once.”

Maggie chuckled. “Well, imagine the worst smell you’ve ever smelled, then double it. That’s what those boys came back with. And they ate first, always ate first. Only the boys at the table. There’d be Daddy, with his big plate, then Clyde and Heber and Jimmy and so on. Me, Momma, and Carolynn would have to wait until they finished the meal before we took a single bite.

“But then the war came. Well, that was something national that we *did* hear about. And that was only because the Germans started bringing subs right up to our shores. I mean, right up to ‘em. The federal government put cannons on the Cape and everything, sending the US Army men over to protect us. That’s who Carolynn married, actually, one of those boys over there at Cape Lookout.

“At the time, I was courting too. Johnny Davis, a boy from Sea Level. He came from a good clan, and we got along real nice. We were going steady, talking about getting married and all of that, when he got drafted. It was a tough time, you know. Daddy had a gimp leg from a fishing accident, so he didn’t get drafted, but they sent away Heber along with Johnny. Fishing was a dangerous job – always has been, always will be – but the ocean, the ocean looks out for you. It gives and it takes, but it always looks out for you. War doesn’t do that. The army doesn’t do that. So we were real scared.”

Maggie paused, her heavy breathing reminding William where he was. In previous interviews, he took notes, wanting to make the transcription process easier. Today, he had jotted down nothing at all, his notebook blank. It reminded him of the weekends when his mom had to work, the days when she'd drop him off at the library and he'd spend hours listening to the librarian's stories.

More harsh hacking brought William back to the present. Maggie held her chest with one hand, while the other fumbled around on the side table to her. It seemed as if she was looking for something, and William wasn't sure if he should offer to help. He knew Maggie was tough, but the coughs were concerning.

"Uh, Maggie, can I get you anything? Maybe a glass of water?" William asked.

"Just looking for my inhaler. Never can find that dang thing. But I'm fine. Let's keep going," she said, then dissolved into another wheezing fit.

"Why don't we take a break?" William said uncertainly. "I'm going to use the restroom."

Before Maggie could protest, William stood up, sweeping the room for any sign of an inhaler. After quickly using the bathroom, he wandered into the kitchen. While pretending to wash his hands, his eyes scanned the countertops. Finally, he found the inhaler, a red tube next to the stove.

He was about to walk back to the living room when a piece of paper caught his eye. A newspaper article, stuck to the refrigerator with a seashell magnet. "CARTERET COUNTY LOCAL WINS NATIONAL AWARD," the scrap read. Below the title, it was Dr. Wyndham, beaming, her whole face consumed with a smile. William had never seen the professor look so hopeful, so kind. It was jarring.

"You get lost in there?" Maggie called out in between coughs.

“Sorry, I just needed to wash my hands. I found your inhaler, by the way,” William said, attempting to be as nonchalant as possible. He placed the inhaler on the side table, well within Maggie’s reach. He took his time returning back to the couch, focusing on rearranging his bag while Maggie inhaled a couple puffs. His thoughts lingered on the photo of Dr. Wyndham. Was that why she cared about oral history so much? Because it talked about where she came from?

“We can start where you left off, maybe,” William said once he was settled and Maggie’s coughing had subsided. “What was the war like for you?”

“Well, at first not much changed. Daddy was still fishing, and me and Carolynn did whatever work we could around the house and on the Island. Johnny would send me letters, real sweet ones, talking ‘bout all the new places he’d seen. I mean, neither one of us had been farther west than Greenville, and certainly not to Europe. Every time a new letter came, me and Carolynn would spend hours reading out loud every word, telling all the little chil’ren running around all about Johnny’s big adventures. Gosh, a new letter would entertain us for a week, and we’d spend another couple days tryin’ to figure out what to say back.”

As Maggie spoke, color returned to her face. William leaned back into the couch, the tension from moments ago beginning to fade.

“But as the weeks passed, the letters came slower. I just about went crazy sitting around, waiting for the mail boat to come and deliver me a letter, waiting for Daddy to get home so I could eat supper, waiting for the war to end so I could go ahead and get married. Like I said, I’ve never been very good at waiting. So, I decided to go get a job. Do something I could write my own letters about.

“Around that time, people on the Island had started working at Cherry Point in Havelock, ‘bout 35 miles inland. Starting a couple years before Pearl Harbor, I think, right around when the

war began overseas. So Uncle Gil and Daisy's Matthew and a couple others that were no good at fishing went and got a job over at Cherry Point. They'd hop in somebody's truck and go work for the big man, coming back with government checks and insurance. We never had insurance Down East – the only insurance we'd ever needed was God – but that sounded pretty okay to me, so I decided that's what I wanted to do too. If I couldn't fish and I couldn't fight, I might as well work on the equipment that was carrying my Johnny.

"So, one day I got in the truck and went on over there. Wrote a note for Momma and made Carolynn promise not to tell. The thing was, I knew I was good at math. Graduated at the top of my class at East Carteret, yessir. Back in those days, nobody from Down East went to college, and certainly no little girl, but I reckon I was smarter than you, even. Those equations, you know, they just made sense. And when I got to Cherry Point, the machines made sense, too. It came from my ocean magic – waves ain't so different from machines. They churn and they swirl and they chug. The ocean's the greatest machine God ever created, except for the human body, of course.

"But anyways. I didn't start out with the machines. I got hired as a painter, a spray painter, for the airplane propellers. They didn't really want the women there, but the war kept on and the men kept leaving, so they didn't have any other option. After a while, when they finally got smart, they put me in charge, had me start working on the engines with this other girl named Cassidy Elizabeth from up there in Maryland. Me and her got to be good friends. She'd tell me all about where she was from, you know, the Chesapeake Bay and all of that. Turns out we weren't really that different. She knew crabs and fish and the water, just like me. Sometimes I'd take her home, show her around Shell Point and Shackleford Banks. I figured that after the war I'd get to visit her in Maryland, maybe spend some time away from the Island, but you know

how those things are. Still, I'll always remember those years during the war. It was only us girls then, me and Cassie and Donna and Billie Jean. The husbands weren't around, so we had to take care of each other. It sounds bad to say, with the war and all, but it was the happiest I had ever been, working at Cherry Point with the girls and the machines.

"And I'll tell you what – that government paycheck ain't a joke. I made more money in a week than Daddy would sometimes make in a month! And the hours weren't bad either. Soon enough, when I started coming home from Cherry Point, Momma would have dinner ready for me. Didn't matter if Daddy or any of the boys were home, I got to eat first. No more sneaking cornbread. I got to eat first. How's that for some change?"

Maggie looked over at William, who was hunched over, listening raptly despite himself.

"Now, don't act so interested, William, or I'm going to think you actually want to be here." Maggie said, mockingly stern. "And don't get too comfortable. I'm thinking up my next question."

William corrected his posture and smoothed over his shirt, embarrassed. He hated how easily Maggie could read his emotions. He still wasn't convinced about her ocean powers, but he wouldn't be surprised if she could read minds. She made him uncomfortable, this woman. It wasn't often that people wanted to know things about him, beyond his research.

"Alright, William. Tell me this: where would you go if you didn't have to be here?"

William breathed a sigh of relief. Finally, a question that wouldn't get him kicked out of his program.

"Well, if I wasn't here, I would probably be at Morehead Labs studying the luciferase in my jellyfish samples," he said.

Maggie rolled her eyes. “It’s been decades, and you scientists are still the same – always so literal. I was talking about *here* – Harkers Island, North Carolina.”

“Oh, of course.” William’s cheeks flushed bright pink. “Well, I suppose I would attend Harvard, my alma mater, or maybe Columbia. There’s more grant money at those institutions, so I would have been able to study overseas, somewhere like Cambodia or Taiwan.”

“Would you be happy?” Maggie asked.

William shrugged. “I’d be more successful, that’s for sure.”

“That’s not what I asked, William.”

“Happy?” He snorted. “Is any doctoral student happy? That’s not on my list of priorities, I’m afraid.”

“Hmmm,” hummed Maggie. She added nothing else, which frustrated William even more than her snide comments. Just when he was starting to like this woman, she would annoy him all over again.

“Well,” he said, a touch colder than he anticipated. “Let’s return to the interview. What was life like after the war ended?”

Maggie didn’t answer; she simply watched him. William checked his watch: 9:30 a.m. They’d already surpassed the length of his longest interview, and they hadn’t even answered most of the questions. By the time that he made it back to the lab, half of the work day would be gone. He bounced his leg up and down impatiently until Maggie finally spoke.

“Happiness was never on my list of priorities, either, William. Never needed to be. Life was hard, but it was always good. That wasn’t the same after the war. The men were different. And I was different too.

"A couple days after Johnny came back, we got married. By then, Carolynn had a baby with the Army man; Heber had brought back an Italian wife; so it seemed like it was our time, you know. All those love letters, and finally we're together. So, we got married. For the first couple weeks, Johnny didn't work. Stayed in the house, laid in the bedroom in the dark. It didn't bother me much – I was still at Cherry Point – but people were curious. Down East, everybody works. And here's the local hero, and he won't leave the house, you know what I mean.

"But eventually, Johnny got outta bed and got a job at Cherry Point. We were in different divisions – I was still working on engines; he got a job in quality assurance – but people knew we were together. He didn't like that. Didn't like that I was in charge of other men. Didn't like Cassie either. He got it in his mind that we ought to be starting a family, you know, that I should settle down and take care of the house like Momma. By then, he'd seen all that death. I think he just really wanted to make some life.

"So, I did it. Just about broke my heart to say goodbye to the girls and my Cassie, but I did it. It's what he wanted."

William scoffed under his breath.

Maggie's eyes shot to him, the clearest they'd been all day. "What?"

He shrugged. "You don't strike me as the kind of woman who does what people want."

Maggie laughed, cruelly this time, the sound like a series of stalactites plunging down in a cave. "William, just because you have fancy degrees don't mean you know everything. Your little Yankee ass wouldn't have lasted a second in my place."

William's mouth gaped open, but Maggie wasn't done.

"You listen here: we're going to finish this interview, because I'm a woman of my word. But, don't you ever, *ever* speak to me like that in my house again, do you understand?"

William shriveled in his seat. For as long as they had been speaking, he hadn't seen Maggie angry once. Ornery and mocking, sure, but never angry. He had the sense that if he wasn't careful, Maggie's wrath would swallow him whole.

"Good. Now, where was I?" she said, her tone even-keeled once again. If William hadn't been in the room, if his hands weren't still shaking, it would have been easy to pretend that nothing had happened at all.

"Like I was saying, it was different back then. War was different back then. Johnny didn't talk about it much – when he was sober, at least – but when he did, he used to say that there were times when you didn't know which side you were shooting. That you just had to close your eyes and shoot. And that's not the type of thing you just forget. Not something that you can just get over.

"So, it was better for me to stay home, to do what he wanted. Around that time, Daddy had gotten sick – probably from all those years out on the boat – and Momma was older too. All my siblings were off with their own families, so it was up to me to take care of them. It was up to me. Those years were the best I ever got to know Daddy. Momma, too. When I was younger, they were always working, always on the boat or making something for the house. But in those years, we got to be. We spent a lot of time out on the Banks. I'd take 'em in the skiff, go over to Shackleford and the lighthouse, which is where Daddy's family was from. I remember, we'd sit in the sand, Daddy watching the waves, me sketching some contraption to use around the house, and Momma with her eyes closed, the sand between her toes.

"And it wasn't long before I got pregnant. No surprise, because Johnny tried hard, real hard. That was just about the only thing we did together. By then, he spent most of the time with the Cherry Point folk, other vets turned civilians, gettin' up to God knows what. But that didn't

matter as much anymore, because I had my daughter. First thing I did was take her to Diamond City out on Shackleford, show her where her home was. Figured it would give her some ocean powers of her own. Lord knows we needed them.

"And that's how it was for a lil' while. Me with my girl and the ocean; Johnny with his memories and the booze. Daddy passed in '49, Momma in '51. Don't think they could stand to be away from each other too long. Johnny went in '54, but we'd already lost him in the war. That was about the time when fishing started changing too. The federal government started setting all these regulations – you know, can't fish during this week, or can't use this typpa net – but all the while they're buying from the foreigners. Terrible stuff, just terrible. If Daddy was alive now, I think he'd just about faint. Either that or go back to the grave.

"But anyways. With Johnny gone, I decided it was time to go back to Cherry Point. It'd been over a decade since I'd been there last, and with all the men back home, there was no way I could get my job back. So I worked as a secretary for some of the officers. When I got back on base, Cassie wasn't there either. It's not like we exchanged numbers or nothin' – we were too poor to have rotary phones. I never saw her again.

"And the work was less enjoyable. Files and paperwork instead of gears and levers, but it was alright. I liked working again. I had earned my seat at the table – I wasn't going to wait around for anyone to come home before I ate, you know what I mean. I earned my seat at the table.

"My daughter was the same way, too. She was smart in school, smarter than me, because as soon as she could, she left this place. Made her way up to that school of yours. Graduated with honors and decided to go to school again. And I know you think that school ain't good enough for you, but I'll tell you – watching her graduate was the best thing to ever happen to me.

“I left Cherry Point a couple years ago, back in the ‘80s. I worked as long as they’d let me, but by then my lungs had started acting up, so you know. Not much around here for an old lady like me to do. I try to get over to Shackleford ‘bout once a month. Say hello to Momma, see the horses, spend some time at home. But it’s not the same, not since the Park Service took over in the ‘70s. ‘Course, that’s another story, but I don’t think we have time for all of that. I’ve got to be doing my treatment soon, and I’m sure you’ve got places you’d rather be.

“So I think that’s just about all I got to say. My whole life story, right on that device over there.” Maggie said, snorting. “Think that’ll be good enough for Lizzie?”

“I’m sure it will be,” William said, oddly disappointed that Maggie wanted to finish the conversation. Was this it? No more stories or questions? He wondered if this was punishment, a time-out of sorts, for his comment earlier. “If you want to, we can keep going. I don’t mind, and I have a couple of questions and—”

Maggie laughed, more like an exhale of air than anything. “Oh, you don’t need to pretend to want to hear more from me. Besides, I’m not as young as I used to be, William.”

“Well then, yeah, we can wrap it up.” William said. He checked his papers, remembering the interview requirements. “Uh, before we finish, I just have a couple of administrative questions for the record, if you don’t mind.”

“Fine with me.” Maggie said.

“When did you start working at Cherry Point?”

“September 17th, 1943.”

“You mentioned a couple family member’s deaths. Do you mind repeating the cause and year for our records?”

“Daddy in 1949, from cancer, and Momma in 1951, from pneumonia, but I’m pretty sure it was a broken heart.”

“And what about Johnny?”

“Hurricane Hazel, 1954.”

William cocked his head. Maggie hadn’t mentioned the hurricane earlier – he had assumed Johnny died of liver failure, or something else related to PTSD. It was strange, this omission, coming from someone blunt and honest.

“Hm, okay,” he said, refocusing his attention on the paper. “Last question: when did you return to Cherry Point?”

“November 15th, 1954.” Maggie cleared her throat, which led to a fit of coughing. She looked paler than she had at the start of the interview, her voice thin and wavering. “We done now?”

“I guess so. Thank you again, Maggie, for participating,” William said.

He leaned down, reaching for the recorder under the coffee table. He pressed stop, and the blinking red light disappeared. William remembered Maggie’s reluctance to be recorded at the beginning of the interview. At the time, he had assumed that it was ignorance towards modern mechanisms, but now he knew that Maggie was familiar with different technology. Why would she have been so resistant? It didn’t quite make sense.

William stood up, gathering his papers while his head buzzed. Maggie’s voice broke him out of his thoughts, causing him to jump.

“You know, William, you still owe me one more question,” she said. “Sit down real quick, then I’ll let you go.”

William did as he was told, sinking back into the couch. Maybe Maggie wasn't as mad as he thought.

"So," the old woman started. "What's got your eyebrows all crinkled up like that?"

William ran a hand over his brows, his fingers following the wrinkles of skin. His face had betrayed his emotions, once again.

"It's just, a hurricane," William said, sputtering. He didn't want to offend Maggie again, but something wasn't adding up. "A hurricane, for Johnny, I mean. I'm surprised."

"Why is that?" Maggie asked, her left eyebrow slightly lifted. William couldn't shake the feeling that she already knew his answer.

"Well, I don't know if I believe in powers or anything, but…"

Maggie pursed her lips, then looked over her shoulder out the window. A thick patch of trees blocked the view of the ocean from the house, but somehow, William knew exactly what she was searching for.

"William, let me tell you this," Maggie said. "When we lost Johnny… Well, let's just say nobody cried when he died. That's right. Nobody cried. Not my daughter, and certainly not me. He wasn't the same Johnny who wrote me all those love letters. And Hazel, she was a big storm. Bigger than '33, even. And it's like I said earlier: the ocean looks out for you. Sometimes it gives, and sometimes it takes. But it looks out for you. And that's all I'm gonna say."

Maggie watched William carefully. For the first time, the woman seemed unsure, her wrinkled hands folding and unfolding. Despite her bravado – her sharp words and her clamorous laugh – she was just a woman.

William stood, then walked over to Maggie. He held out his hand.

"Thank you, Maggie," he said. "It's… it's been a pleasure."

Maggie nodded, then wrapped her hands around his. “Don’t thank me, William. I just told you some stories, that’s all. Besides, you’re not half bad for a dingbatter. And not nearly as bad as you think you are, I’ll tell you.”

Just like that, Maggie was laughing again, like the ocean crashes, surging back with the shore in its clutches, then rushing forward, spitting out all the beach needs.

With a final squeeze, William untangled his hands, then headed to the hallway. His eyes lingered on the painting of the wave. He wondered when Maggie had created it – on the shore of Shackleford with her mother, maybe, or years later, when she returned to Cherry Point. He had one hand on the rickety door when he heard Maggie call out.

“Oh, and William?” Maggie said. “Tell that Dr. Wyndham of yours to come visit her mother.”

“Yes ma’am,” he answered, then he stepped out on the porch.

As he pulled out of Maggie’s driveway, William found himself turning the opposite direction of the Morehead City labs. Instead, he drove straight to Shell Point, at the opposite end of the Island. He parked, then walked over to the shore, finding a place to sit. Still on the earlier side of the morning, the tourists weren’t lined up yet, and he could hear the lapping of the water.

From the Point, he could see all of the places that Maggie had talked about. Cape Lookout, to the left; Shackleford Banks, to the right; Core Sound, directly in front of him. He saw Maggie everywhere he looked: running away from her mother’s towel, crumbs of cornbread around her mouth; knocking foreheads with Carolynn, bent over one of Johnny’s letters; skipping hand-in-hand with Cassie, blissful and warm; shuffling down the shore with her father, arms wrapped around his waist in support; splashing around in the water with Lizzie, proud of her daughter’s newest clam.

But most clear was the image of Maggie on Shackleford: a baby, brought into the world on the sand, screaming and squealing and laughing, the power of the ocean rushing through her veins.