

## The Origin of My Name

I guess the first thing y'all want to know about me is how come I've got this off-the-wall name for a girl. Well, if your mother's as weird as mine was at the time, you'd get the idea fast. She named me after Lord Byron, that love struck poet who lived back in the early 1800's. My mom had read his poetry when she was in college. Although she never told it to me outright, my Mom wished I'd been born a boy all along. I can't say I've disappointed her. For many years, I acted more like a boy and related better to boys than girls and I still prefer men to women. Boys were ten times more interesting to me then than girls.

I didn't even know I had a boy's name 'til I was five. It actually never bothered me that I can remember. I could never think of myself under any other name than Byron. At the time, I never cared that much about being a girl anyhow. I didn't even look like a girl until about twelve. Then, you guessed it. I started growing tits.

Boys have a drawing card that a girl could never touch. Call me a chauvinist pig, if you want. Doesn't bother me. But boys are allowed to do more and they have more fun. I've also learned that they get paid more for doing the same work.

I went to the library one day and looked up my namesake in the World Book Encyclopedia. Lord Byron, as he was called, lived from 1788 'til 1824. There's this picture of him wearing some kind of soldier turbine. He had a dark pencil moustache and was pretty good looking, not that I concerned myself with those things. I just did it to humor Mama.

The caption under Lord Byron's picture described me all right. It said, "Lord Byron represented the romantic hero in his defiant, emotional personality and scorn for

the conventions of society.” They could just as well have put my picture in there, except that I don’t claim to be a poet. I don’t have those creative juices that result in a finely turned phrase. What I see, hear, and feel -- I just tell it like it is, no fluff, no frills.

I think what struck me most in reading about Lord Byron was that he hated the cruelties that men practice on one another. I identify with that, because I’ve seen the worst kind of cruelties that men can bring against other men, and women too. When I tried to do something about it, I learned the hard way just how powerful and immovable what someone believes in can be.

My Mother tells me I was a difficult child from the git-go. In the first place, I was enjoying life too much inside her womb, just lolling around in all that nice warm fluid and getting fed some pretty fine stuff through a big old straw. When the dam broke and I was left high and dry, I was determined not to pass through that drainage hole that kept getting bigger and bigger. I planted my hands and feet on both sides of the hole and refused to come out. I guess maybe that’s why I like water and what lives in it so much, even if it is swamp water. You might think it strange, but I even like the smell of it, the smell of decay, because new life is growing out of it, and I can smell that too. New life has a freshness like clean air after a rain.

Well, eventually I did come out, but I was mad and spitting and snarling like a bobcat. I’m told my chubby little face was screwed up and red as a firecracker about to explode, and my crying voice penetrated the walls and people could hear me way down the hall from the delivery room. To this day, as a result of that violation of my sanctuary, I do not hesitate to loudly voice my opinions, which are nearly always right.

I figured the world was placed here for me to explore it. I soon set out doing that by climbing the side of my crib and flailing the air as I plummeted to the floor. I didn't cry or anything. I accepted that was the normal way a person got out of bed. Once I hit the floor, I was moving, picking up and tasting everything I could get my tiny fists around.

Nobody ever yelled at me except when I was about to endanger myself. I remember being picked up a lot and cuddled and talked to like I was a puppy or a kitten. Kitchey kitchey koo! Kitchey kitchey koo! Except my Dad and Grandpa never talked to me like that. Maybe that's why I liked them better than the soft womenfolk. They had deep loud voices and they played rough and tough with me. I liked it that way then and I like it now.

My big sister, Tina, didn't like it rough. She was a year and a half older than I was and, at age five, had already succumbed to the soft side of womanhood. She liked to play dress-up with some of Mother's old clothes and hats and clomp around in Mother's high heeled shoes that were three times too large for her. When she tried to entice me to join her, or worse, try to dress me up and treat me like one of her dolls, I fought her and ran away to some other place in the house. As much as I loved my Mother and our Cajun housekeeper, Agnes Crevier, who was also my *marraine*, my godmother, at age three, I wasn't ready to become like them.

Of course, that thought process didn't occur to me when I was three. But I was born with a kind of genetic instinct as to the person I wanted to become. It wasn't soft and compliant.

When Tina tried to get me to play dolls with her, I was more interested in the mechanism that made the doll pee than having her walk and squawk “mama.” I couldn’t understand why my sister became so upset with me when I twisted off the doll’s head and arms and legs trying to discover the source of this liquid magic. Tina’s scream of rage brought Mother running. When she saw what I’d done, she shook her head with great concern, then held and rocked my crying sniveling sister who clutched the doll parts to her like the synthetic plastic was her own flesh and blood.

Although I didn’t feel strongly about dolls, I did feel strongly about other things, especially living things.

Except for the smell of food in the kitchen, there wasn’t much I cared about in the house, so from the time I could walk, I was always trying to get out to where I could hear the musical calls of birds and the trilling of frogs and insects from the swamp. Despite the latch mama had installed on the front door, I managed to get out more often than not. Then she and Agnes would come chasing down the road after me frantically calling my name. They usually found me, because our family dog, before I had my own, would stick right with me as though he knew I was doing something I shouldn’t. He set up barking when he heard Agnes and my Mom calling me or they’d spot his shiny black lab hide and signaling tail.

I was an explorer all right and I didn’t know the meaning of fear like I know now. Maybe because I never understood what danger was at that age. A little pain didn’t bother me. I just sloughed it off and went on about my business. I didn’t even cry when I got spanked. I just responded with great indignation on my face that someone had the nerve to strike me, even though I had been doing something I shouldn’t have.

Also, our dog, Mike, saved me a few times from certain death by getting in harm's way. He once took a snake bite intended for me from a big old swamp rattler that caught my attention one day when it was trying to keep cool in the shade on our stone wall where the driveway met the road. I was just about head high with the top of the low wall. I'd seen the snake crawl up there and, of course, I was curious about any critter that moved then. Still am.

Mike knew in an instant what I intended to do. He also knew what a danger a snake could be. As soon as I made my move, he was up off the porch and charging down the hill after me. We arrived at the wall at just about the same moment when I was going to reach up and grab the thick rope of coils and come face to face with death itself. Mike knocked me aside an instant before the snake arched back into an S curve. The triangular head shot forward too fast to see and the long needle fangs caught Mike in the right leg.

From Mike's screeching and howling and the snake's sinister rattling and hissing, I figured it would be best to get away from there, which I did. As I ran to the house, my Grandpa rushed out onto the porch at all the noise and took in what had happened. First, he checked me out and saw I was all right, then he went after Mike, who was limping away from the wall. The snake decided the wall wasn't a good place for a nap after all and vamoosed.

Grandpa carried Mike to his pickup truck, put him in the back end, and roared down the driveway headed for town to the vet. Mike didn't come home for a few days and, in my childhood way, I missed him and worried about him, especially after Grandpa explained how Mike had saved my life.

When he did come home, his right leg was gone. Grandpa explained why the vet had had to amputate it. I decided that out of love for Mike, who loved me, I would try to be more careful. I consider that Mike was one of my first teachers.

The chain of events began eighteen years ago on a hot August night. A young Black woman with a three year old child was dropped off by the driver of a logging truck at the center of town. At that hour, the town square was deserted except for a stray cat or two. She carried a large suitcase and her child clung to her other hand and the soft folds of her floral cotton dress as they walked out to the old bronze statue of General Treseder and waited as though she expected someone was coming to meet them. Her name was Odetta Jones and she had escaped from a man who wanted to kill her, or so it was assumed by her later unwillingness to be seen.

I came to know of her, because I heard her talked about by my Mother and Agnes. Odetta lived in what had been an old deserted house in South Norman, where most of the local Black people lived. She took in sewing to support herself and her little boy and that's where I came to hear her name. Her reputation as a dressmaker and seamstress spread to the white community and her business thrived.

I didn't know that she had come to Norman to hide and that there were people here who helped her. She always lived in fear of being discovered by the man who was trying to find her. I learned more about her some years later when I became friends with her son, Aristophanes Jones. And later I learned that her name wasn't Jones at all. It was Charbonneau.

My friendship with Aristophanes and what happened afterwards are all related to science, which is the study of life. I planned to be a scientist someday. It's probably not what my Mother thought of for me, but I think she kind of respects me for the goals I've achieved. Then, I didn't know what kind of scientist, but somewhere out there mucking around where there are wild critters, probably one of the fields of biology.

What Mr. Maher and biology have taught me I can't just put into a few words, because I'm still sorting it out and will be for a long time. But among the many things we studied that is well-planted in my head is that organisms adapt to survive and reproduce in their own particular environment. Any living thing is fitted to live where it does in fact live. Everyone knows that fish swim in the water and birds fly in the air, hawks feed on mice and bees feed on honey. So you think, well, that's easy enough to understand. But the details of their behavior require close study to really understand.

How did the hawk come by its swift flight and ability to dive, its sharp beak and talons and vision that allows it to see a mouse stirring far below? The answers to these questions and others like them are not so obvious. Biologists help to define life by telling what living things look like and what they do.

Mr. Maher said that facts are the starting point of science. Then people create theories to explain the facts. But it is facts again that judge the value of the theories. It's kind of like predicting what is going to happen. "A good theory in science not only explains all it started out to explain, but also predicts new facts to be looked for. If a theory predicts well, it's a good theory. Well-established theories and ideas are the guideposts which take the scientist out into the details of the world. If you really want to know what goes

on in the world around you, you should let the facts, not your prejudices, inform you.

Wishful thinking never determines or causes what in fact goes on in reality.

“The persistence of life on earth is based on the ability of organisms to reproduce themselves. What endures on earth is not the individual organism, but the race, and it’s endurance depends on reproduction as the vital bridge that spans successive mortal generations.”

I don’t know how old you are, who is reading this, or what your experience in life might be, but the day Mr. Maher told us those words in class is more meaningful to me now than ever,

Bayou Norman feeds into the Red River which flows south into the Atchafalaya basin before the Red River joins the Mississippi. Norman lies southeast of Alexandria deep within Avoyelles Parish.

Two and three generations of men and, more recently, women, worked in the paper mill in Norman which is the main livelihood for most of the people in our parish, that and hunting and fishing. The town is surrounded by a wilderness of vast pine forests and deep cypress swamps filled with wildlife. We are a people (I still count myself among them.) who live under the influence of an ever-changing patchwork of land and water. Bayou Norman does not run a rapid course. Its lazy descent is gradual and does not build up enough speed or power to gouge a deep channel. But small and mid-size boats or *bateau* can navigate its meandering muddy green tributaries.

From what I saw on television, in the world outside, if you don’t get mugged or run down trying to cross the street or someone shoots you because they don’t like the way you drive or because of the color hat you’re wearing, you’ll die of air pollution related



diseases or toxic waste seeping into the water you drink. And sure, there's nothing more certain that will happen to us than death, but why make it easy.

Where I lived is both beautiful and lethal. Vegetation in the swamp engulfs everything. Along quiet streams overhung with Spanish moss and carpeted with the greenish gruel of duckweed rise startling bursts of color, yellow butterweed, grass-pink orchids, ruby-red jewelweed, Carolina mallows looking like a white tart with raspberry filling, and dark lavender spiderwort. Nearly everywhere massive colonies of water hyacinth move with the sluggish current and change the contour of the bayou.

Here in Norman, we have natural disasters to worry about like tornadoes and 200 mile per hour hurricanes and spring flood time when the Red River backs up and the bayou tops our levee. We have to watch out for gators and poisonous snakes. Our region has its own early history of violence too, thieving and murders over territory and claims to fishing and trapping waters, or competing for a woman. Sometimes a flare up that seems to come from nowhere arises out of the oozing wet heat that hangs in the air and pushes a person to the explosive edge of hatred and distrust. And there is the underlying difference of race that people would like to pretend isn't here or can cause to go away, but despite legislation to the contrary, it shrouds our lives like an invisible curtain, just as in the incessant hunt for food among the dwellers of the swamp.

I've learned that education is about survival, different kinds and different levels. The swamp is a great teacher. I had friends in there who taught me how to survive. It doesn't have anything to do with how much money a person has, or how expensive their car is or the house they live in. It does have to do with what they believe in, their integrity as a human being, and the color of their skin.