

Prologue from...

Only A Few Bones by John Philip Colletta

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PROLOGUE

MARCH 4, 1873, 11:30 P.M.

I can see it now, the Ring & Co. store, blazing like a funeral pyre in the swampy desolation of the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta. Through the enormous flames lapping the walls and clawing across the roof, I see the outline of the two-and-a-half story building as though I were standing there, right in front of it, that Tuesday night, March 4, 1873. The heat sears my face and the smoke stings my eyes, though behind me the air is cool and filled with drizzle. It rolls down the back of my neck and chills me to the bone. The monstrous roar, the crackling and popping, spitting and smashing pierces my ears and throbs in my head and I wince from the pain.

For 30 years I have been standing here, shivering in the steamy blackness of Rolling Fork Landing, mesmerized. The broad cypress roof collapses into the second story. The second floor crumbles into the first. The gigantic chimney crashes to the soggy ground with a thud, and a geyser of sparks and ashes and thick smoke billows triumphantly skyward. I have been straining to identify, somewhere within the din, a pitiful tiny scream.

Perhaps the people inside *are* screaming. Even if there were some witness standing as close as I—and there is no one within 50 yards of the place—the victims' cries could never be heard above the clamor of the inferno. Yet I keep listening for the wail of a man or woman or child.

Blinking uncontrollably, I keep peering into the flames to see whether Joe Ring comes rushing out to the safety of the Sunflower River.

For three decades I have been planted here, appalled, and the fire keeps raging, and the huge cypress timbers keep snapping and collapsing, and the bricks of the chimney keep tumbling in thumps that vibrate the ground beneath my feet, and the pillar of smoke and sparks keeps dissipating into the mist, and still I am not satisfied.

I first heard the story of “the Rolling Fork tragedy”—a sketchy and garbled version of it, at any rate—from my grandmother when I was a boy. I had no idea that it would take possession of me. I did not even believe it. All I wanted was a family tree. It was 1963, a summer’s day, and Grandma Ring had come on the bus from her home in Buffalo to ours in the suburbs. As she unfolded her cotton fabric on our dining room table, I assumed a chair nearby, a fresh Composition Notebook on my lap, a sharpened pencil in my hand. I was 14 years old.

With a sweep of her palm, the matriarch flattened the creases and expelled the air bubbles. I think it must have been a floral print, something in yellows and greens, because this is how I remember all of Grandma’s dresses. Then as she arranged the odd shapes of tissue on the material, I began self-consciously to pose the questions. Grandma responded willingly, ancestor by ancestor, generation to generation, branch by branch, without looking up from her work. She was pinning the pieces to the fabric. But when I asked for the name of Grandpa Ring’s grandfather, her busy fingers stopped.

Grandma did not know, as I do now, that his name was Joe Ring.

After a moment of reflection, her fingers went back into motion. She did recall hearing that the man owned a plantation. In Mississippi. A *large* plantation. In Rolling Fork.

“Ha!”—It amused Grandma to remember after so many years.—“Rolling Fork!”

“The man owned many slaves. And one day they revolted. They killed him, and burned the house to the ground.”

She picked up the scissors.

“Everybody in the house was killed.”

She began to cut. Her voice quivered now with outrage, as though she herself had been there.

“Oh, it was terrible!”

I sat there nonplused. Not by the far-fetched story—things like that did not happen in real life—not in *my* family, anyway. Rather, it was the strength of my grandmother’s belief. Gently I pressed for details. Grandma protested.

“That’s all I know! Nobody ever talked about it. It was too long ago.”

The scissors maneuvered with surgical precision along the pin lines. Their rhythmic slicing measured the silence, and evidently cleared Grandma’s memory.

“Somebody said once that it was highway robbers. That the man had traveled to Greenville, to take care of some plantation business. He was returning to Rolling Fork with a lot of money—a payroll or something. They killed him and robbed him, and left his body on the road.”

The old woman looked up and glared at me, shaking her shears menacingly.

“But that’s not how *I* heard the story! It was the darkies!”

Now she was angry.

“And they burned the house to the *ground!* With the people *inside!* It was *terrible!*”

Her eyes lowered and her hands went back to cutting. She was calm again.

“So the man’s wife,” she continued thoughtfully, “Barbara”—she knew *that* name because they had met once in 1912—“Barbara came back up to her family in Buffalo. She came up the Mississippi River on a steamboat, she and the boys. She had four boys. But the boat sank—the boilers were always blowing up in those things!—and the baby slipped out of the poor woman’s arms and drowned. One of the other boys disappeared, too. Only in the morning they found that one. Floating on a mattress in the river. Alive.”

The scissors never wavered. Grandma never looked up. A fine net flattened her grayish-brown hair. She had been a radiant young seamstress once. She clicked her tongue and shook her head.

“When I think of it! The poor woman.”

Determined to fill my Composition Notebook with information more credible than this outlandish tale, I returned forthwith to questions about branches of the family Grandma knew first-hand. Nevertheless,

the notion had already lodged in my head that one day I might try to find out what *really* happened to my great great grandfather.

Now I know. It *was* terrible. Grandma was right—about *that*, at least. Three decades of searching have verified that there was indeed a conflagration, and the people inside did perish. Only it was the Rings' country store, not their house. And they lived on a modest farm, *not* a large plantation. And they never owned slaves. Burglary *may* have figured into the true story—though certainly not highway robbery as Grandma had heard. And Barbara's riverboat did indeed go down, dumping the widow and her boys into the river. Only it was *not* the boiler, and it was *not* the Mississippi, and it was *not* just one member of the family who drowned.

Still, in the end, it would amaze me how much of what Grandma repeated to me on blind faith turned out to be factual.—But factual in a deceptive way, a smattering of misshapen pieces of the truth, jumbled and insufficient. Stitched together, they would never add up to a whole garment. So Grandma never knew, as I know now, how truly terrible it was.

She never knew that Joe and Barbara Ring went South *after* the Civil War, not before. Naturally, then, her narrative included no mention of Reconstruction, or carpetbaggers, as it did “the darkies.” She had no clue that this mass murder—if indeed it *was* murder—was just one more obscure incident, violent and brutal, in a time and place unparalleled in American history for violence and brutality.

I turned 21 before I ventured south of the Mason-Dixon Line. I had already criss-crossed the city of Buffalo from library to historical society, from one Catholic parish to another, from cemetery to Erie County courthouse, culling every fact about Joe and Barbara Ring I could find. But their life in Buffalo shed no light on the circumstances of Joe's demise in Mississippi. So as soon as I could—it was 1971—I shifted the field of my investigation. Five more trips to the Delta would follow over the years, as well as excursions to federal, state and local repositories in other states, too. But it was on that first trip south that I discovered George F. Ring.

There was no George F. Ring in Grandma's account. Evidently she had never heard of him. Yet without him she would have had no story

to tell. George would turn out to be the instigator of it all. Without him, Joe and Barbara would never have been lured away from the humble tranquility of Buffalo's Cherry Street. They would never have found themselves co-owners of a building and stock of merchandise in the savage swamps of the Delta. Yet I stumbled upon George's name by accident, in real estate transactions involving Joe Ring, and before I flew home, I had determined that the two were brothers.

Even if Grandma *had* heard of George, though, she would not (knowing Grandma) have repeated the rumor—one of many that circulated after the event—that George himself was responsible for the crime. Grandma would never have perpetuated the accusation—made by certain parties at the time—that Joe had not really perished in the fire at all.

As a boy all I wanted was to draw a family tree. I never imagined, as I transcribed the names and dates Grandma dictated while she cut out her dress, that one branch of my ancestry would lead me to this gigantic building collapsing in flame. I never imagined that I would become obsessed with unpuzzling what *really* happened, and why, and that the only way for me to behold the truth was to tailor anew the ghoulish raiment in its entirety. For that is precisely what I had to do: piece together the historical context of this family story. The events Grandma related had not happened in a void; they had transpired in a real physical place at a particular moment in time. The challenge taunting me was to reconstruct the social, political, economic, cultural and geographic conditions that prevailed in the Rolling Fork of 1873. How else could I identify suspects, and motives, and evaluate them, and determine who was innocent and who was guilty?

The task might not have taken 30 years had I not been hampered by preconceived notions of "The South." Time and again the facts I uncovered failed to fit with what I had learned in school about Mississippi, about Reconstruction and carpetbaggers, and emancipated slaves. On the contrary, my findings, at every turn, exploded stereotypes and contradicted traditional scholarship and common knowledge about "The South." Repeatedly I had to shake my head clear and start again.

Who could have imagined that Mississippi was a land of promise for Blacks after the Civil War? But it was, in the Delta. Who would have

guessed that a majority of the merchants were foreign-born, and that most of those were German-speaking, and Jewish? But they were, in the Delta. Who ever heard of landowners leasing convicts from the state, or importing coolies from China, to work their fields? But it happened, after the war, in the Delta. The Yazoo-Mississippi Delta—what unexpected realities lay veiled within that compounded Indian name!

It was the last American frontier east of the Mississippi River. It engendered a new society, heterogeneous and inflexibly stratified. It was the only place where the antebellum plantation system persisted long after the Civil War. The Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, it would turn out, was a part of the South, true enough; but the South was certainly *not* the Delta. Learning the truth about my great great grandfather would require that I abandon all presumption, and examine from a purged perspective the myriad factors that collided to produce the horror of March 4, 1873.

Searching document by document, year after year, I would find George, Joe and Barbara no less troublesome to discern, and no less entrancing once they took shape, than the facts of the incident itself. George F. Ring was the classic American success story: the poor immigrant who comes to America, uses his wits, drive and muscle to amass a fortune, and enjoys a self-satisfied life of comfort and prestige. Joe Ring, on the other hand, was the “unsuccess story” rarely told: the immigrant whose attempts to achieve the American dream fall short, one after the other, and lead only to a pathetic end. And Barbara, Barbara was the first-generation American: imbued from infancy with the age-old values and customs of her parents’ European homeland, yet coming of age in an America more powerful and materialistic, more self-righteous and susceptible to corruption, than any middle class society the world had ever seen. Three disparate personalities interlocked and swirling together for as long as fate would allow—or God ordain—in the still eye of a national tornado: Reconstruction.

This book presents the harvest of my long season of gathering. It is a true account, a narrative grounded in fastidious research, of “the Rolling Fork tragedy.” To tell the story most vividly, rather than simply relate historical facts, I have re-created the settings in which those facts occurred. However, this is *not* a novel. I never presume to know, and I

do not attempt to describe, the thoughts of George or Joe or Barbara, or any of their contemporaries. I introduce no fictional characters, and I depict no action that is not suggested persuasively by documented circumstances. When there are gaps in the historical record, or contradictions, I note them, and evaluate them. Where supposition is introduced, I label it as such and state the grounds for it. Dialogue in quotation marks is taken from original sources; dialogue *not* in quotation marks is insinuated from factual situations. Every line of narration, every word of description that is documentable has a footnote citing its source. The rest is written to convey the whole truth of what all those queerly-shaped pieces add up to when sewn together.

For family historians, therefore, this book represents a case study of how to build historical context around an ancestral event. Depicting graphically how family history and national history converge, it may also remind academic historians that the story of one family often serves to enlighten the story of a whole nation. At the same time, this work at its core is a demonstration of the essential and valuable role that oral tradition plays in a thorough and accurate understanding of the past. Information gleaned from three different kinds of sources is united here to reconstruct the whole truth of “the Rolling Fork tragedy:” written records, oral lore and material culture.

Twelve possible explanations for the calamity are explored, each as it arises in the course of the narrative. These hypotheses emerged over the years as the event came into focus, and each one is tested here against the known players, to see whose thumb might fit the print.

At 11:30 Tuesday night, March 4, 1873, Barbara Ring is at home with her four boys, sleeping probably. “Joseph Ring . . . resided at that time with his family about two miles from Vicksburg,” William Muller, a colleague, will state under oath, “a small farm of sixty acres.” The land rolls with lush spring vegetation and deep green woods. The house is almost new—built just last year—and stands on a dirt lane that winds out to Baldwin’s Ferry Road. In the cloudless sky glows a waxing crescent moon. (Although drizzle is falling at Rolling Fork Landing, newspapers will report that Vicksburg’s weather has been “clear and pleasant throughout the day.”)

At 11:30 Tuesday night, March 4, 1873, George Ring is in Vicksburg,

presumably at home in bed beside his wife. "I was in Vicksburg when the fire occurred," he will testify in court, and *that* statement, at least, no one will contest. The bedroom he and Catherine share is on the second story of their large residence at 700 Adams Street.

And Joe Ring . . . At 11:30 p.m. on March 4, 1873—maybe still breathing, maybe still aware—Joe Ring is 40 miles distant at Rolling Fork Landing. "Enough was found to justify the jury summoned in returning a verdict," Justice of the Peace Noah Parker will report, "that the remains found were that of Joseph Ring." The packet Joe intended to board this morning to return to Vicksburg never showed. So he is spending one more night in the Ring & Co. store.

His last.