

## **Four Nights at Elaine's: The Last Will and Testament of a Great Saloon by Wright Thompson**

I remember the moment when I realized I wanted to write. I was at home, in the 10th grade, sick. My days and nights got mixed up, and when the house was quiet, I'd sit downstairs and read. My mom was a high school English teacher, so the place was filled with books. One night, I pulled one by Willie Morris off the shelf. It was called *North Toward Home*, his memoir of going from small-town Mississippi Delta boy to editor of *Harper's*. When I started reading, I thought I'd end up running my dad's law firm after college. When I finished, I wanted to be Willie. That seemed impossible. You have to understand what Willie means to Mississippi and to Mississippians. In my home state, there's Faulkner...and then there's Willie. When he died, his body lay in-state in the Old Capitol Building, like a conquering general or a governor. So the next morning, I told my parents about the book. My mom smiled. It was one of her favorite books, too. My dad was friends with Willie, so a few days later, my own copy arrived with an inscription. He also sent me *New York Days*, in which he talked about his writing life, and a lot about a bar called Elaine's. Those two books lit something.

Two years later, I went to journalism school at Missouri. At Mizzou, you have to apply to the J-School after your sophomore year. The first time, I didn't get in. When I finally did, I found the group of friends I still consider to be brothers. We spent our time reading stories and writing our own imitations, cocky kids with big, irrational hopes. During spring break of my junior year, in 2000, I went to New York with Seth Wickersham to try to make those dreams into something real. We both wanted to be magazine writers, like Dan Jenkins, like Gary Smith, like Willie Morris. Seth had interviews all over town, at *ESPN The Magazine*, *Sports Illustrated*, and the *New York Times*. I was more of a tagalong. His meeting at *ESPN Mag* went pretty well. Mine...not so much. The editors at the magazine forgot about me, so I sat out there for an hour or two, on a bench by the security guard, until someone noticed. There was a sign above my head that said "Visitors," and in front of me, through a big glass wall, the world I wanted to enter. The metaphor was unmistakable.

But even if we weren't magazine writers, we could act like them. We went to P.J. Clarke's for the first time; Jenkins's photograph on the back of *You Gotta Play Hurt* showed him outside the window. And, mostly because I insisted, we went to the bar Willie wrote about in *New York Days*.

We went to Elaine's.

### **April 2000**

We went looking for ghosts. Everyone did by then. Whatever Elaine's once was, a place where celebrities came to gawk at writers, where ballplayers came to chase movie stars, that place no longer existed. The '60s and '70s ended, and even though Elaine's stayed in business, it always seemed fleeting, part of an older New York. What was left was an idea, a place where the writers whose books covered the walls were just as important as the athletes who played on the television in the corner. For writers, this was where some sort of dusty magic lived, and people came looking for it as if visiting a religious shrine, leaving an offering and hoping something intangible would be given in return.

The long, yellow awning and amber lights looked intimidating from the sidewalk. A bar is its own world from the sidewalk, with blurry figures and muffled laughter, the melodic little music of whiskey and ice. The door is never as heavy as you expect it to be.

A lot of people have walked through that door searching for something. Mostly writers. Gay Talese and William Styron and George Plimpton. On and on. Elaine nurtured broke young writers, kept them fed and watered until they made it. She loved all of them, but perhaps none of them more than Willie, an outsider, a southern boy a long way from home.

We found a table, ordered a drink, and stared at the prices on the menu. We gawked at the people around us, and at all the books and photographs. A few tables away, Elaine sat by herself. She seemed like an apparition, something left over from a time long past. She was impossibly wide and her voice sounded like cigarettes. Everything about her was hard, as intimidating to me as her dark, wood bar and smoke-stained walls. I steeled myself with whiskey and went over, and, in a shaking voice, told her my story, about Willie and *North Toward Home*. I told her about how much we all missed him; he'd died less than a year before. She softened and the light in the room seemed to change. Funny, but the bar had a way of responding to her. It's like they were connected.

We sat at her table, and she asked for stories about Willie in Mississippi. She made sure to insist we come back the next night, and one more after that. She included us. She made us feel like writers. I was so far away from being a magazine writer that the place where I now work literally forgot about me, but Elaine treated us like we belonged.

### **April 2002**

Another spring break, two years later. My friend Justin Heckert came to New York, much like we did several years earlier, looking for a job. Seth lived there and I flew up from New Orleans, where I was covering college football for the *Times-Picayune*. This trip would be successful for Heckert; he'd end up with an internship for *ESPN Mag*, where Seth had a full-time job. Before Seth had left for the city, I'd given him a copy of *New York Days*, as something to read, sure, but also as a talisman. I felt like Willie would keep watch over my friend. Seth had recently written his first magazine feature, a profile of Indiana quarterback Antwaan Randle El. We were actually writers. Not the writers we wanted to be, but we got paid money for words.

We spent a lot of that money on booze. That night, we scored a table in the window and started ordering whiskey. At some point, Seth realized that Neil Leifer, the famous photographer, sat in the back. Seth always recognized people; we were, frankly, journalism stalkers. A plan was hatched. We had a disposable camera with us...and he was Neil Leifer. We decided: When he stands to leave, we'll go outside, and I'll line them up by the window for a picture, and then he'll walk out and I can ask him, as if I don't know who he is, "Excuse me, sir, would you mind taking our picture?" Then we could have a photo of us taken by Neil Leifer on a disposable camera.

We waited. Leifer, turned out, had a hollow leg, and by the time he got up, we were all wrecked. Still, a plan's a plan. We went outside and, holy [moly], this was working, but as I lined them up, Neil stopped at the bar to talk to someone. We looked around, trying to figure out what to do next. And then, at that moment, a man appeared. The details are a little blurry but everyone agrees that, suddenly, George Plimpton was now standing in front of us.

"Excuse me, sir," I asked, "Would you mind taking our picture?"

He took the disposable camera, and we all grinned, high on ambition, Maker's Mark, and our New York days.

## September 2008

In 2008, W.C. “Bill” Heinz died. He’d lived a literary life, from war correspondent in Europe to the best sports writer of his generation, and maybe any other. He wrote what many consider to be the greatest piece ever written on deadline, and he wrote a novel that Ernest Hemingway called the finest ever about boxing. One afternoon after he died, a letter arrived from his daughter, who I’d gotten to know. It was an invitation to a celebration of his life in New York.

They were holding it at Elaine’s.

I hadn’t been back to the bar in a long time. My trips to New York were always full of meetings with editors, with my agent. I didn’t make the time to go to the Upper East Side anymore. I always meant to.

A lot had changed. I was married. Hell, all of my friends were married or about to be. All five of my brothers wrote for a living. Seth was still a writer at *ESPN The Magazine*, writing the kinds of stories we used to read in college. I was trying to write those stories, too, for ESPN.com and *The Mag*. I had an ID card that unlocked those glass doors.

This time, when I walked into Elaine’s, I felt like I belonged. The place was packed with writers and editors, with Andy Rooney and Rocky Graziano’s widow. People told stories about Heinz, and I felt briefly connected to him, felt like part of the world I’d first dreamed about when I read *North Toward Home*. I don’t know what the night meant to the other people there, but that night, at Elaine’s, I finally felt like I’d made it. I don’t mean peaked, or that I was satisfied with my stories, but I felt at ease. Near the end of the party, Jeff MacGregor asked a group of us to read Bill’s most famous story: *Death of a Racehorse*. We began. Elaine’s was quiet, like a church, the only noise from ice in glasses and our voices.

We closed the place down that night. Someone took a picture of the survivors. I have it framed and am looking at it now. There’s me and *Esquire’s* Chris Jones, Kevin Van Valkenburg and Jeff, Charlie Pierce, and Heinz’s daughter and granddaughter, laughing. It hangs on one side of my desk.

On the other is a photograph of Willie Morris.

## May 2011

I don’t remember where I heard the news that Elaine’s was closing. I know that Willie’s son, David Rae Morris, posted a story about it on Facebook. Truth is, I wasn’t surprised. When Elaine died in December, I’d been worried. That bar wasn’t just owned by her. It *was* her.

For about a day, I tried to talk myself out of doing what I ultimately did: call my friends and invite them to meet me in New York. A Monday night, three days before Elaine’s would pour its last drink and serve its last plate of spaghetti.

I felt warm inside when I pulled on the door handle, checking out my seersucker suit, hoping Willie was smiling. Kevin Van Valkenburg and MacGregor came. Rick Maese drove up. Ben Montgomery, from St. Pete, flew in. Seth arrived, and he brought his wife, Alison, and they brought a beautiful little baby girl. Madeleine Paige Wickersham. I’d never met her before.

The room buzzed, some people gawking, others saying goodbye to an old friend, or maybe to a part of themselves. I really took in the place, looking at every book on the wall, every signed dust jacket. We raised our glasses. Lots of hilarious stuff would happen in the next six hours. Alison would go home with Maddie. Seth would stand up to leave and somehow end up back at the table eating an enormous steak. We drank the last Maker's Mark ever at Elaine's, then we drank the last of the Jack Daniel's. At the end, when we almost got kicked out for reasons that still aren't clear, we were working on the Wild Turkey. Willie's son had asked me to raise a toast to his father, so we did that, too.

I thought about reading *North Toward Home* almost 20 years ago, setting into motion everything that's happened since. I thought about the places writing has taken me, and the places I've yet to go. I thought about Elaine. Her place wasn't a bar as much as a nest, and it took its closing for me to realize that. Amid the celebrity gossip and whispered stories about Sinatra and the cast of *SNL*, and Steinbrenner rolling through the door, that's often lost. Elaine's hope was to help other people nurture theirs, and she did it with people as famous as Willie, and she did it with people as anonymous as me. My friend, John A., told me a story that nailed both the woman and the bar. A big-time movie director was in, and Elaine noticed a writer staring. Elaine made an introduction, watched the writer and the director bond, and when the writer finally left, she asked, "Did I do good?"

So I thought about dreams, and about introductions, not just to a few celebrities but to a world. I thought about the moment, early in the night, when I said my own private goodbye to Elaine's. Seth had just walked in with his daughter. It felt like the end of something, and a beginning, too. He took her out of the little backpack deal – I don't have kids, so I don't even know what they're called – and carefully handed her across the table. I didn't know what to do exactly; all these years later, I laughed to myself, still pretending at Elaine's. I held Maddie, introduced myself, thinking about the people Seth and I used to be and the people we've become, about the hunger it takes to become a writer, about all the dreams that have come true in the past decade, and all the ones just being born. What will light this little girl's imagination?

I looked down at Maddie, who was looking up at me, a stranger, and I tried not to let anyone at the table see me cry. The last night at Elaine's was a time to remember, to celebrate what had been done and look forward to whatever was coming next.

That's what a great bar does. It stays the same so we can measure our own change. That's why we mourn them when they disappear.