

# Shem Creek: A Lowcountry Tale (Lowcountry Tales)

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The author of *Isle of Palms*, *Sullivan's Island*, and *Plantation* continues her evocative saga of life in the steamy, coastal lowcountry of South Carolina. 250,000 first printing.

Dorothea Benton Frank was born and raised on Sullivan's Island, South Carolina. The New York Times bestselling author of *Isle of Palms*, *Sullivan's Island* and *Plantation*, she is a nationally recognized volunteer fundraiser for the arts and education, and an advocate of literacy programs and women's issues. A Postcard From Linda

Can I just tell you why I am so deliriously happy to drive all through the night from New Jersey to South Carolina? Here we are, boxed in between this wall of eighteen wheelers on our left and right, in front and behind, in this little pocket of flying road, racing down I-95 at seventy-six miles an hour. My daughters are asleep beside me and in the backseat. I don't care that it's pouring rain. I don't care that it's dark. On another night, I would be terrified out of my skin by the blasting of horns. But not tonight. Let me tell you something. These trucks are like huge guardian angels rushing us to safety and the rain is washing us clean. Life has been a little rough around the edges and it was time to break out. Yeah. A little rough would be one way of understating it.

Oh, eventually you'll hear the whole story, because this is a long ride and there ain't much to do besides tell secrets and think about life. Thinking about life is what I had been doing for one very long time. I finally decided to quit the thinking nonsense and do something. I mean, I was even driving myself crazy from my own whining. Then I came to this conclusion. You don't like your life? Go get another one and shut the heck up already, right?

Look, I know I'm not the only single parent in the world. And I know I'm not the only one who's tight for money all the time, okay? And, I might not be the biggest gambler you ever met, but I know when it's time to change the scenery and if you don't do it when you feel the urge, you might be blowing off the last life raft that ever floats your way. It's probably worth noting that I waited to change the scenery until I went digging for my mascara in Gracie's makeup bag (my fifteen year-old daughter, thank you), and I found birth control pills, some other unidentifiable pills, and a baggie of pot. Then, I hemmed and hawed around until I found Lindsey weeping over her weight-she's five feet five inches tall and weighs one hundred and twenty pounds, the same as Gracie. She doesn't even have a freckle. Her date for the prom told her he couldn't go with her, that she was too fat. She was standing naked in front of the full-length mirror, sobbing and reading Sylvia Plath aloud-remember her? She's the poet who stuck her head in the oven and killed herself. The final straw was the romantic dinner I had with Louie Provost at Epernay when his wife, Cherry, showed up to introduce herself. Um, didn't know there was a wife? Thanks, Louie. Can't have dinner there anymore.

I said to myself, Linda? You can definitely do better than this. All of a sudden it was clear to me that I had a stupid job and we had a very stupid life. So I called my sister and she said, Honey chile? You put yourself and your girls in your car and come on down to me!

So, that's what I'm doing out here in the middle of the night in Virginia, traveling under the wing of all these trucks. But can you keep a secret? I quit my job. We're moving to Mount

Pleasant and no one knows it except you and me. I know it seems slightly sneaky and a little impetuous but you know what? It's not. Look, if New Jersey has wanted us, it would have given us a reason to stay. It didn't.

I have to find a job. And that, my friend, should be the easiest part. I could get hired as a grave digger and make myself believe that I was working at Mardi Gras. But hey, brighter days and better days are coming. I can feel it in my bones! I really can. I am absolutely going to make this work.

## Prologue

My mother always used to say that if a man could count his real friends on just one hand that he was a wealthy man indeed. My mother was right. I'm going to tell you a story about heaven and hell and how I got out of one and found the other-both with the help of a true-blue friend. Hell was being married to Loretta and working for her father. Heaven is our restaurant on Shem Creek, which we would never have had, except for the generosity and ingenuity of my best friend and partner, Robert. We call it Jackson Hole because my last name is Jackson and I guess you can say it is a hole in the wall. Yeah, it's definitely a hole in the wall. And, Robert like to ski guess where. I know. It's a less than nimble play on words, but let's get this on the record right now-when the whole world conspires against you, a healthy sense of humor can be a very valuable tool. And, up until eight months ago, the world conspired. Worse, I was thrashing around in my quagmire of self-deception watching it happen and didn't do a thing about it.

I used to come down here all the time, in between deals, and I guess I've been fishing the waters around Charleston for fifteen years. There isn't a creek in this whole area that hasn't seen the bottom of my boat, but that said, every time I dropped a hook in the salty creeks and rivets, it always seemed like the first time. The landscape and the light-well, it was always a little different. Quiet but vibrant. You could have made yourself believe that the good Lord Himself was somewhere in the thicket, waiting patiently for you to remember that He was still there. It finally got to the point where I just left my boat in South Carolina. And my heart? Well, looking back, it seems now that the only time I ever thought about it was when I was floating on the Lowcountry waters.

We should discuss this heaven and hell thing, which all begins with my newly-acquired-at-great-personal-loss philosophy. Here it is in a nutshell. When you choose the wrong partner at the dance (whether it's marriage or profession), you will surely bust you ass.

Women seem to know this by instinct. Men don't. men are conditioned from birth to be providers and basically, our success is measured by how well we do that job. This somehow neatly translates to how much we earn and how many trophies we can accumulate over a lifetime. Cars, second houses, antiques, jewelry for the wife...this list goes on and on. We have to graduate from the rights schools, become a partner in the right firm, marry the right girl, be invited to join the right club and develop a decent game

of golf and tennis.

Right? Wrong! That entire unholy plan, my friends, is a truckload of manure.

Isn't it? I swear, I laugh now when I think about the years I spent chasing the almighty buck. Money, money, money. And, chasing the almighty buck with my wife, Loretta, who always was and continues to be a misery. Well, I can laugh now, but a few months ago, it was not funny at all.

Overall, daughters are so much luckier than sons. Their mothers tell them to follow their hearts, right? They say, Darlin'? If you want to go study history, you go right ahead. Honey? If you want to be a chemist, go right ahead! Sure enough, women will graduate and can usually earn a decent living with their degree, doing something they love. Of course, women get screwed left and right because they don't earn the same money that their male colleagues do for performing the same jobs and for a whole variety of other reasons, but for the most part, I think women are happier in their professional lives. And yes, I guess you could say that I am kind of a male feminist.

But, sons are another matter entirely. When I look at the number of kids coming out of graduate school with business degrees, I am absolutely astonished. I mean, where are they all going to find the fortunes that they think are waiting for them? The ones they think they are entitled to? And law school? Don't get me started! Do we really need more lawyers?

What has happened to humanity is this. The world has become vicious, because the devil's real name is greed. Our ability to justify our greed is staggering. If you believe what you read, see and hear around you, our children's future will be all about heeding the call and joining the detestable clamor for money and power. It breaks your heart.

When I think about how I used to run my life, I am sure I must have been completely out of my mind. Besides working seventy-hour weeks, I used to read three newspapers every day- The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, and The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. No more. Now I read the front page of the Post & Courier and guess what? It's as much as I want to know about what's going on "out there". And, I check the weather and the tide tables.

Let me ask you something. Have you ever been to Italy? Did you know that Italy has the sixth largest economy in the world? But when you go there, you see shops closed for hours in the middle of the day, everyone seems to be drinking wine and espresso, smoking Marlboro Reds, and it looks like no one's working! What is going on in Italy? Ahen. They are really living. And, guess what? Their lives last just as long as ours do. But! They're enjoying their lives one helluva lot more than we are. So, I said to myself, Brad? One day, you're gonna be dead and buried. That's when I decided to become Italian.

I want to have a romance with life! I want to love women and children and savor all the beauty and good to be found in the world. I was missing everything. So hitting rock bottom was a good thing. Otherwise, I'd still be a hamster, running on a worthless, pointless wheel.

racing to the grave.

"Mr. Brad? Your appointment is here."

"Okay, I'll be right there. Thanks!"

That was Louise Waring. Who's she? Well, Louise is the greatest woman in the world, that's all. She runs the kitchen, everybody and everything. She's the chef when Duane takes days off, and the assistant chef when he's here. She is capable of almost anything, thank God. Shoot, just last week she stopped a knife fight in the kitchen between a busboy and a dishwasher. Seems one guy made a slanderous remark about the dubious nature of the other's birth, which was followed by a reference to the other fellow's lewd preference for his mother. Well, after that, the conversation switched to Spanish and could have escalated to life-threatening situation, but Louise stepped in and threatened to call the police. It's a good thing our customers don't know what goes on in the kitchen. It's bad enough what goes on in the dining room!

Rock bottom? It's almost embarrassing to tell you how I got there, but I've been thinking about it a lot. I figure that if I can save some other poor son of a gun from the hell I went through then it's worth it to put my pride aside. No, I've come to some very new conclusions and it all began with becoming separated from Loretta and going broke. I was forty-two, a smart fellow (or so I thought) with a platinum resume and suddenly I didn't have a pot to pee in or a window to throw it out of, like my grandfather used to say. It was the best thing that ever happened to me.

Look, you'll have to excuse me for just a few minutes. This interview shouldn't take very long. And, when I get back, I'll tell you why simplifying life is such a beautiful thing. Yep, think like an Indian and keep it simple. Just hold that thought.

#### Other Books

East Cooper, The stretch of land known as "East of the Cooper," featuring the charming town of Mount Pleasant, is interwoven with innumerable waterways; these waters pulsate with the ebb and flow of tides like a network of arteries, veins, and capillaries connecting to the living heart that is the sea. Mount Pleasant's location on the Charleston harbor and its deep water access has ensured that the sea has played a major role in the lives of its residents, providing thriving maritime industries that are at once historic and contemporary. East Cooper: A Maritime Heritage is a celebration of those industries and the families and vessels that have contributed to this vital part of Lowcountry culture. Throughout history, indigenous peoples, colonists, plantation owners, and seafood industry entrepreneurs have traversed the miles of rivers, marshy creeks, and coastlines of the East Cooper area. This collection of images demonstrates the ingenuity and artistry of these people whose descendants shared their pasts with the authors as generously as their ancestors shared their skills and intimate relationships with the local waters.

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