Homecoming Queens
J. E. Sumerau

“It’s hard for me to keep a straight face at the thought of living in a place called Queens with my husband and former homecoming queen wife,” Jackson thinks when his spouses inform him of their desire to move back to their hometown following the death of a parent. In *Homecoming Queens*, this decision sets in motion events that will dramatically transform the three spouses, their understanding of the past, and the town itself. As Jackson Garner leaves Tampa, he introduces us to Queens, a small town in Georgia situated between Atlanta and Augusta. In Queens, Jackson, Crystal and Lee encounter supportive regulars at the diner they take over from Crystal’s father as well as hostile locals who find bisexuality, polyamory, and other “alternative” lifestyles unsavory. They also confront the traumatic event that led Crystal and Lee to leave town after high school. Along the way, they face the history and ghosts of the town, the tension between an LGBT friendly pastor and some of his anti-LGBT congregants, the struggles of a kid seeking gender transition, and the ongoing battle between progress and tradition in the American south. *Homecoming Queens* can be read purely for pleasure or used as supplemental reading for courses in sexualities, gender, relationships, sociology, families, religion, the life course, the American south, identities, culture, intersectionality, and arts-based research.

“Witty, action-packed, and full of surprises, *Homecoming Queens* will speak to anyone who has ever tried to go home again. Sumerau’s novel is an eye-opening read that sheds light on the dynamics of polyamory and queer presence in the Deep South. Secrets and mysteries intertwine with friendships new and old as the three spouses navigate Queens as sexually non-conforming adults.”  – Katie Acosta, Ph.D., Georgia State University and author of *Amigas y Amantes: Sexually Nonconforming Latinas Negotiate Family*

“Homecoming Queens educates you about being queer, trans, and poly in the South while also entertaining you with a captivating story from start to finish. Seriously, this story should be turned into a play or movie – or both!”  – Eric Anthony Grollman, Ph.D., University of Richmond and Editor of *ConditionallyAccepted.com*

“Homecoming Queens shows that while the past may sometimes reverberate into our present, it does not necessarily have to define our present or the futures we seek. This book will keep you guessing and wondering long after you’ve read it.”  – Lorena Garcia, Ph.D., University of Illinois Chicago and author of *Respect Yourself, Protect Yourself: Latina Girls and Sexual Identity*

J. E. Sumerau is an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Tampa. Their writing focuses on sexualities, gender, religion, and health in the interpersonal and historical experiences of sexual, gender, and religious minorities. They are also the author of two previous novels – *Cigarettes & Wine* and *Essence*. For more information, visit www.jsumerau.com
Homecoming Queens
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Homecoming Queens

J. E. Sumerau
ADVANCE PRAISE FOR
HOMECOMING QUEENS

“Homecoming Queens is a fascinating window onto rural queer life. Through the experiences of the novel’s protagonist, Jackson, a bisexual, polyamorous man who leaves Tampa to support his spouses in moving back to their hometown in rural Georgia to run a family business, Sumerau addresses complex issues related to identities, families, and relationships among people across a diverse range of gender identifications and sexual and relationship orientations. Grounded in extensive ethnographic research on religion, gender, and sexuality in the American South, Homecoming Queens presents an intimate, compelling depiction of how polyamorous people live and love.”
– Brandy Simula, Ph.D., Emory University

“J.E. Sumerau is an incredibly gifted writer. By the end of Homecoming Queens, I felt as though I personally knew Jackson, Crystal, and Lee (the three main characters) because Sumerau wrote them in such a way that they seem unique (as bisexual poly folks) but like every other human in their emotions and desires. Homecoming Queens educates you about being queer, trans, and poly in the South while also entertaining you with a captivating story from start to finish. Seriously, this story should be turned into a play or movie – or both!”
– Eric Anthony Grollman, Ph.D., University of Richmond and Editor of Conditionallyaccepted.com

“Homecoming Queens immediately draws you into the lives of characters that are faced with decisions to make as both individuals and as part of a committed union. The past, present, and future come together to set in motion a page-turning story about what it means to go home and the homes and families people build along the way as they build lives that defy gender and sexuality binaries. The characters offer a down-to-earth and insightful perspective on the multiplicity of gender and sexual identities through their
relationships and interactions with one another, especially that of bisexuality and polyamory, often not centrally situated in academic or fictional writing. *Homecoming Queens* shows that while the past may sometimes reverberate into our present, it does not necessarily have to define our present or the futures we seek. This book will keep you guessing and wondering long after you’ve read it.”

– Lorena Garcia, Ph.D., University of Illinois Chicago and author of *Respect Yourself, Protect Yourself: Latina Girls and Sexual Identity*

“*Homecoming Queens* is an intertwined, genuine, and hilarious story about love, compromise, and what it means to be unknowing-but willing-to follow love to wherever our loves can convince us to go. Sumerau is (somehow) brilliantly able to capture what it means to be trying for multiple people, while figuring out ourselves. Undoubtedly, this novel broadens our ideas about relationships, identity, and companionship, making us question our own boundaries and what we’d be willing to put on the line for the people we care for the most. In return, we start to recognize all of the ways in which others do the same for us. Heartfelt, genuine and just straight up fun, *Homecoming Queens* certainly, and deservedly so, takes the crown!”

– Brittany Harder, Ph.D., University of Tampa

“Witty, action-packed, and full of surprises, Sumerau’s *Homecoming Queens* will speak to anyone who has ever tried to go home again. In a web of local color and southern charm, *Homecoming Queens* transports us from queer-friendly Tampa, Florida to the small, conservative town of Queens, Georgia – *hometown* to two of three spouses in a polyamorous relationship. Sumerau’s novel is an eye-opening read that sheds light on the dynamics of polyamory and queer presence in the Deep South. Secrets and mysteries intertwine with friendships new and old as the three spouses navigate Queens as sexually non-conforming adults. When the past meets the present, rumors collide with truth and all hell breaks loose, but will Queens and her newest poly residents survive?”

– Katie Acosta, Ph.D., Georgia State University and author of *Amigas y Amantes: Sexually Nonconforming Latinas Negotiate Family*
“In this beautifully written novel, Sumerau illustrates the passion, heartache, joy, frustration, and sheer complexity of what it means to be in a loving, committed partnership, especially when that partnership does not fit the monogamous and heterosexual standards of American society. Moreover, *Homecoming Queens* is not just a story about Queer folks navigating relationships and life in the American South. It is a story about the compromises we make to love and to be loved in return. It is a story about the lessons we learn when we take the time to examine how our own lives – and the lives of those around us – overlap and intersect across time and place. After reading this novel, I am reminded of the struggles we face when we walk paths of most resistance; yet, I am also left with a sense of optimism about the often small but impactful footprints we leave as we walk along those paths. Whether you’re interested in learning about people in Queer relationships or you’re simply looking for a short but illuminating read, *Homecoming Queens* is sure to have just what you need.”

– Harry Barbee, M.S., Doctoral Candidate and Instructor at Florida State University

“Sumerau’s book captures the essence embodied in and through true relationships—starting right away through the ‘hate’ that can only come from love. Sumerau successfully offers insights into the core of relationships, no matter the package they may come in, through immediately drawing the reader in through the loving yet complex matters the book’s trio must face. Through the conversational writing style, the book creates a welcoming environment where the reader connects with the narrator’s (lack of) conundrum, as they enter down a life path they promised they never would, and yet within five minutes are swept away because of love—messages and accessible examples of love even more needed in the current social context. The book captures local details without distraction or feeling forced, helping to uplift the importance of space, place, and context to lived experience. As with classic novels, the timelessness that comes from the time and space-specific writing quickly transports the reader to a new place. The details help the reader to see the shared humanity of
hopes, dreams, and hobbies that drives each of us, no matter our age, sexuality, race, or career (or lack thereof). The book offers a bridge across stereotypes, relationships and places, along with another much-needed outlet to help people see the continued, if not increasing, power of words.”
– Amanda Koontz, Ph.D., University of Central Florida

“J.E. Sumerau brings us another rich, complex, and hilarious novel about people navigating relationships, sexuality, and friendships in the deep South. Exploring bisexual, trans, and polyamorous experience along the way, Homecoming Queens feels both familiar and fresh as Sumerau unpacks the tensions between tradition and the transformative power of love. Homecoming Queens shines a light on the deep desire for and limits to community building across social divides and gifts us with characters who remind us that “home” can be as fluid as love.”
– Katherine McCabe, M.A., Doctoral Candidate and Instructor at University of Illinois Chicago
Previous Novels by J. E. Sumerau

Cigarettes & Wine

Essence
To Lain, for so many reasons
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It’s hard for me to keep a straight face at the thought of living in a place called Queens with my husband and former homecoming queen wife,” Jackson thinks when his spouses inform him of their desire to move back to their hometown following the death of one of their parents. In *Homecoming Queens*, this death and decision set in motion a series of events that will dramatically transform the three spouses, their understanding of the past, and the town itself.

As lifelong city dweller Jackson Garner leaves behind his comfy life in Tampa, his “favorite” casual lover who visits every year to see him, and the first place he’s ever felt at home, he introduces us to Queens, a small town in Georgia situated between Atlanta and Augusta. While the spouses – Jackson, Crystal and Lee – adjust to small town life, they encounter supportive regulars at the diner they take over from Crystal’s father Chuck, hostile locals who find bisexuality, polyamory, and other “alternative” lifestyles unsavory, and the traumatic event that led Crystal and Lee to leave town after high school in the first place. Along the way, they encounter the history and ghosts of the town, the tension between an LGBT friendly pastor and some of his anti-LGBT congregants, the struggles of a teen seeking gender transition against the beliefs of their family, and the ongoing battle between progress and tradition in the American south. Through Jackson’s eyes, we walk with the spouses as they navigate tensions about sexuality, gender, family, race, and religion brought to the surface by their arrival.

Although written as a first-person narrative that allows readers to imagine themselves in Jackson’s situation and experience the town and tensions first hand with him, *Homecoming Queens* is a novel about relationships; the ways our past often shapes our present whether we notice it or not, and how the people we become often relies heavily upon the other people, places, narratives, and cultures we encounter. As in life, the ways individuals are intertwined within various relationships permeate the events captured in the following pages. *Homecoming Queens* offers a view into the ways various types
of relationships and cultural norms play out in the experiences of a given romantic, geographic and familial context as well as the ways people adjust to unexpected events in the course of their lives. It also provides a first-person view of the ways families, hometowns, friends, lovers, spouses, local histories, places, religions, and broader social norms influence relationships.

*Homecoming Queens* also presents explorations of bisexual and poly relationships all too rarely available in contemporary media or academic materials. Alongside academic and media portrayals of the world that generally only focus on monosexual and monogamous options (i.e., what scholars call mononormativity), *Homecoming Queens* allows readers to imagine what such norms look like from the perspective of a bisexual, poly person as well as the ways Americans often react to these realities when they come into view. Especially at a time when these subjects are often difficult for even college professors to talk about and generally missing from social scientific scholarship, *Homecoming Queens* supplies readers with an opportunity to view the world, society, the American south, families, marriage, and small towns through a bisexual and poly lens. Readers seeking more information on these subjects may also want to check out, for example, https://bisexual.org/home/ for information on the bisexuality spectrum, and http://www.lovemore.com for information on poly sexualities and relationships.

While entirely fictional, *Homecoming Queens* is grounded in my own experience as a bisexual (on the pansexual end of the spectrum), genderqueer (formerly identified as a crossdresser and still considering potential transition), and historically poly person raised in the American south. It is also built upon years of ethnographic, auto-ethnographic, historical and statistical research I have done concerning intersections of sexualities, gender, religion, and health, and hundreds of formal and informal interviews I have conducted – professionally and for personal interest – with bisexual (across the spectrum), transgender and non-binary (across the spectrum), lesbian, gay, asexual, heterosexual, intersex, poly, kink, cisgender and Queer identified people who span the religious-nonreligious spectrum and were raised all over the world. Since stories – both fictional and non-fictional – are often powerful
pedagogical tools for stimulating reflection and discussion about even the most challenging topics, I crafted this novel as a way for readers to see the world experienced by some bi and poly people, and in so doing, hopefully acquire a starting point for discussion and understanding of sexual complexity in contemporary society.

For me, *Homecoming Queens* is a pedagogical text blending my artistic and research endeavors in a manner that has, throughout my career thus far, been incredibly effective in classrooms. In fact, the novel itself developed from my own recognition of the ways such stories could have been useful to people like me growing up in a world where explaining bisexual, poly, and transgender experience – even to fellow Ph.D. holders – remains an exhausting necessity. Further, the novel developed in a social context where many monogamous Americans suggest everyone can now get married legally even though this is not yet true for poly people. As such, *Homecoming Queens* may be used as an educational tool for people seeking to better understand growing numbers of openly bi and poly people; in relation to debates concerning extending marital rights to poly unions; as a supplemental reading for courses dealing with gender, sexualities, relationships, families, religions, narratives, the American south, identities, culture, or intersectionality; or it can, of course, be read entirely for pleasure.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Patricia Leavy, Peter de Liefde, Jolanda Karada, Paul Chambers, Robert van Gameren, Edwin Bakker, and everyone else at Sense Publishers and the Social Fictions series for your faith in me, your willingness to support creativity, and your invaluable guidance. I would also like to especially thank Shalen Lowell for your considerable assistance and support. I cannot overstate how much the efforts and support of all you means to me.

Thank you especially to my life partner Xan Nowakowski for giving me the courage to write novels in the first place, and walking by my side as I completed them and sent them out for consideration. My books would not exist without your inspiration, guidance, and faith, and I will never be able to thank you enough for what your support and encouragement means to me.

I would also like to thank Lain Mathers, Kate McCabe, Shay Phillips, and Eric Anthony Grollman for providing constructive comments and insights throughout this process. There is no way for me to express how important your efforts have been to me.

I would also like to thank someone I have never met. This novel was written while I was listening to the works of Brandy Clark nonstop, and her records provided a soundtrack for the writing, editing, and revision of the work.

Finally, this novel would not be possible without the years of research I have done on sexualities, gender, religion, and health. I have had the privilege of interviewing and observing so many wonderful bisexual, transgender, non-binary, lesbian, gay, intersex, poly, kink, asexual, and otherwise Queer people formally and informally over the years, and many of their experiences find voice throughout this novel. I would thus like to thank all of them both for sharing their stories with researchers like me, and for being role models to many of us navigating gender, sexualities and relationships throughout contemporary society.
“Please tell me you’re kidding,” I say on the phone with Crystal. It’s hard for me to keep a straight face at the thought of living in a place called Queens, Georgia with my husband and former homecoming queen wife, but she is serious.

“We need to be here. Daddy’s place is too important to the town to just disappear and become a Sonic or something. There is no one else to take it, and I don’t want to sell it. I grew up in this building. It’s sad enough that it’s closed right now. I don’t want to think about it being closed forever as long as it can be saved.”

“You can’t be serious, look, I know I’m a jerk sometimes, but this prank is too far. Do you really expect me to move to the middle of nowhere so some small-town folk can eat the hamburgers they’ve been eating since the 1960’s? This is not funny Crystal.” I’m hoping this is another one of her pranks. I’m hoping it’s like the time she locked me out of the house when I fell asleep naked on the upstairs front porch at night. I’m hoping it’s like the time she set a hidden alarm to go off every night at 2 am after I kept accidentally waking her up. I’m hoping it’s like the time she – with Lee’s help because she paid him off with designer chocolate – convinced me she had decided she just had to have a kid after all and watched me freak out for two weeks. In many ways, Crystal made a kind of second career of messing with me over the years, but this might be her masterwork. Please, let this be her masterwork.

“I’m not kidding at all, Jackson,” oh shit, there is the curse word version of my name, and it hits me that Lee – always the easier one to win an argument with, always the peacemaker in our family – is not on this call. This is an ambush, and I’m outgunned. She really wants me to be the queen that moves to queens with his two loving queens, what the hell is happening to my life. This is all because stupid Chuck had to go and die the night of Lee and Crystal’s high school reunion. I want to dig up Chuck and make him pay for this.
“Come on Crys, let’s be real here. We have a home in Tampa, we have careers here, we have plans. You want to leave all that behind to take over your dad’s restaurant?” Okay, I’m cheating here a little bit. I don’t mention that I’ll miss all the record stores, that we have Queer clubs we can go to as a trio anytime we want, or the wonderful selection of local breweries. I look at my little can of Florida Cracker, and think about being stranded in Bud Light country with no way out. I want to punch whoever said love is about compromise.

“The house is paid for,” she’s right. “I can take a leave from school, I have a sabbatical coming up anyway, so I can see how it goes for a year,” I hate how smart she is. “You can write from anywhere sweetheart,” damn it, I feel like I’m already losing this one. “You can get your records on Amazon, and they actually have a record store here now believe it or not.” I should have known she’d see through the practical reasons I offered and get to the heart of the matter, “And Atlanta is not that far away if you want to go dance.” Note to self, marry dumb next time. “Lee and I feel like this is something we need to do.”

This is an ambush, and she took the worst fighter out of the conversation. She’s a couple steps ahead of me ready for whatever I say, and I realize that odds are I’m going down. Not without a fight, I think and try to come up with something to shift the conversation. “Where is Lee,” I say thinking I can talk him out of this.

“Lee is down at the lawyer’s office working on the paperwork with dad’s estate so it will be ready for me in the morning, and checking in with the local paper about freelancing,” she says almost singing the words because she’s knows I don’t have a good argument. Okay, this is not going well, time to pull the trump card. It’s not fair, but desperate times and all that.

“Have you thought about safety? You have two bisexual husbands who have been – and would like to stay – out of the closet for a long time now. You are also openly bi, and may want to occasionally date other women from time to time like you always have Crystal? Did this factor into your thoughts? What if some redneck decides he doesn’t like that very much? Have you thought about that?” I realize I’m being a jerk the moment the words come out of my mouth, but I chalk it up as collateral damage until I hear the pain in her voice.
"You’re an asshole Jackson! How dare you suggest I would put my family in danger? And you know damn well I think of the dangers all three of us face every damn day! Of course, I have thought about that – the same way I rushed home at the speed of light hoping y’all didn’t go out that night when the bar was lit on fire in Tampa and called you frantically from the conference in Alabama in the middle of the night when the shooting happened in Orlando. The same way y’all freaked out and interrupted Alice and I that night to make sure I was safe after that group of assholes attacked a bunch of the girls leaving the bar over in St. Pete. Of course, I thought about your safety, our safety, and I can’t believe you would suggest otherwise.” She’s right, of course, this was a low blow. Her voice makes it clear she’s hurt, and I can’t blame her.

I feel bad for a second before imagining myself living in Queens, Georgia. Somehow, the thought of living there removes all the magic and only leaves the terror in Lee’s stories. Then, I say, “But you’re talking about small town Georgia Crys. I get it, it’s dangerous everywhere, but do we even stand a chance in a place like where you grew up? Isn’t that a big part of why you and Lee wanted out of there in the first damn place? Have you forgotten how scared you were someone would find out or what it was like when that coach found out about Lee’s extra activities when you were both in high school and only his skill on the football field saved him from being outed to the whole damn town? Is this really what you want to go back to now? Do you want to be back in a place where we might be better off hiding?"

“It’s not 1998 anymore Jackson! Yes, bad things still happen to our people here and elsewhere WAY TOO MUCH, but there are also good things happening. Augusta started having Pride events a couple years ago, and there are already two people here in the town that are openly out and doing fine here raising their daughter. I know it’s not ideal honey, but I think we’ll be okay and we can always leave if it doesn’t work out. I mean, didn’t you say yourself that it was important for more of us to be out and visible in unexpected places.”

If it was possible for me to hate Crystal, I probably would have right in this moment. One of the terrible things about loving someone smarter than you is they can often use your own arguments against you
after the fact. Why didn’t I marry someone I could outsmart? Instead of focusing on Crystal winning this argument with little effort, I just started hating Chuck with all I had. In my head, this was all his damn fault and I wished I could make him pay. I was beaten. I knew it. She knew it. I had no leverage at all. I was done.

I could either stay in Tampa and risk losing the loves of my life who would have every reason to read my absence as a lack of support for them (especially after they’d supported this whole crazy writing dream I had when we got to Tampa years back), or I could get ready to become a queen living in Queens with my queens. In the end, it wasn’t much of a decision – they were my family and I did not even want to – even if I could have made myself – imagine my life without them. In some ways, I guess that was how they were feeling about the damn restaurant and town after Chuck’s death, but I didn’t think of that at the time.

At the time, I wondered if a place in the middle of nowhere had wifi yet. I wondered if there was a bookstore, or something else worth visiting. I remembered a weekend trip we took to Chiefland, Florida, just up the coast from where we lived, and how I barely made it through the trip because I felt so isolated and bored. It was a beautiful town, and as one of the locals pointed out a little too excitedly for my tastes, they had a new fancy Dunkin Donuts coffee shop. The trip had even been my idea because I occasionally stopped there when I was driving around the state fighting against my old friend writer’s block. It was a nice place that I hated within two hours. I couldn’t wait to get back to the city, and I never wanted even that much exposure to a quiet, peaceful, small town again.

Sometimes we don’t get what we want, I thought, and said, “Okay, if you two are sure about this, I’ll start looking into what needs to be done down here and when I can get up there.”

“Jackson,” she said almost immediately starting to sound like the woman who loved me again, “You never know, this could be a lot of fun for you. I know that sounds crazy to you right now, but you do love those Brandy Clark songs and Lee’s stories about this place. I mean, hell, remember when you dragged us to hear that Isbell guy and every damn song was a story about small towns in the south? You
can experience that world yourself now. Maybe you’ll have more fun than you think, and I think you know we’ll always appreciate you making this change for us no matter how long we stay. Trust me, I’m sure it’s going to work out okay.”

There it was, and she knew it. The reason she was winning this one no matter what Lee thought. Even if Lee disagreed as much as I did, we were a team, we supported each other’s dreams, and we changed anything and always had to that end. For whatever reason, she needed this – and later I would realize that Lee did too – and in the end, that was enough for me to get on board and at least give it a shot. It was the same way I sometimes needed to go out to Ybor city to meet new guys – especially my favorite tourist – or she sometimes needed someone like Alice to spend nights with or Lee sometimes needed to take random trips to various cities he only knew about from television – we always supported each other’s needs.

The fact was, our relationship was built on sharing our needs with each other and trusting each other to always come home, work for the whole, and be open with one another. At various times throughout our marriage, one of us had an urge they needed to follow – me not looking for work and instead trying to write while they supported me when we got to Tampa, for example – and the others had adjusted as necessary to make such pursuits possible. It was this idea that if we trusted each other, we could find a way to make anything work. And there was the point, I did trust her and Lee too, that was the basis for this whole life we had built over the past 12 years. After all, maybe love really was about compromise even at times when you wanted to shoot whoever the hell said that in the first place.
CHAPTER 2

Queens, Georgia was founded as more of an outpost than a town in the late 1800’s. There were travelers making their way between Atlanta and Augusta on a regular basis, and a group of farmers decided they could capitalize on this fact. The travelers would pass through the little area and it’s farms every few days on their way to and from the markets in the cities and the rivers that carried goods to and from Savannah. They would sit and chat on the benches outside the shops, and buy a piece of fruit or two and a shot of whiskey to pass the afternoon or evening in question. There were rumors that one of the farms owned by an old white family served as a kind of brothel that was very popular.

Like much of Georgia at the time, the place was mostly just farmland with a little patch of shops for the farmers’ needs in the middle of the area near a little bit of water – Lake Brandy it was called, which was more like a pond the size of one you might find on a mini golf course than an actual lake and named after the favorite drink of a local farmer described in the history of the town as the ultimate smartass. Unlike much of Georgia at the time from what I could tell by the historical records I was able to access from my home office, the town owed its existence to freed people of color who made up the owners of three-fourths of the farms in the area – benefits of effective reconstruction policies and transformations at the time –until the establishment of Jim Crow in the south led them to abandon the area for other parts of the country where they hoped for a fairer shake – a pattern people of color unfortunately still face in America today. Very few of the townspeople, I later learned, knew this bit of history, but every single one knew about the whorehouse.

By the time Crystal’s father Chuck turned 18 in the April of 1964, the days of travelers passing through Queens on their way to and from Atlanta and Augusta were over. The establishment of Interstate 20 in the late 1950’s combined with increased use of cars by Americans in general rendered the town pretty well isolated. Augusta remained and expanded about 45 minutes north, and Atlanta existed some two
hours by car to the west, but there was no Interstate exit that directly connected these areas to Queens. There still is not I realized with a sinking feeling as I was studying the area hoping to find something good about moving there. Instead, Queens existed outside of the knowledge of most people – even those in nearby cities like Atlanta and Augusta – as a small farming community with a 2 mile stretch of shops downtown. As 1964 passed, and in the rest of the country the rights movements and other activist events shot into high gear, most of Queens was deserted and most of the storefronts – about 12 of them at the time – were empty.

According to the diaries Lee found in the attic the day after Chuck’s funeral, which would now live – thanks to the magic of the postal service – in our Tampa home for safe keeping, Chuck considered leaving like so many other young people were doing, but Thelma’s mother was experiencing health problems and he had already decided Thelma was the most amazing thing the world had to offer. The two were married not long after his father passed away in an accident at the energy plant 30 minutes away in Waynesboro. Though the details were sealed at the end of the case, Chuck’s dad, as the story goes, went to work for the power company after visiting Waynesboro one year for the annual Bird Dog competitions, and enjoyed his work there – including the drive back and forth between the towns – until one night an electrical panel he was working near malfunctioned and sent him to meet Jesus. The power company, to the surprise of many of the workers in the area, accepted responsibility for the accident and paid Chuck a nice sum of money.

On their honeymoon, Thelma told Chuck about a dream she had where their small town became a community bonded together over a shared place or event like Waynesboro with its Bird Dog competitions or the famous bars in Savannah. She wondered aloud about this idea all weekend while they enjoyed the sounds, sights, and little shops on Tybee Island. They kept talking about the idea when they returned to Queens, and they started making lists of the kinds of places or competitions they could start with Chuck’s inheritance and feel capable of operating in the town. They chatted with local citizens young and old. They went to the churches and asked for
opinions. Uncharacteristically at the time, they even went into the black neighborhoods looking for advice and hoping whatever they built could better unify the town. They spent two years trying to come up with a plan.

On their third wedding anniversary, Chuck and Thelma opened a restaurant in the little downtown area they called “CHUCKS – A QUEENS TRADITION.” I found an old newspaper clipping – and many more over the years – celebrating the establishment of the place. It was seen, even at the start, as a new day for the town, and over the years it became a central meeting place. It was in that diner that the citizens – white and black alike according to the photos and comments I found in the newspaper’s online archives – met to discuss the race riots that broke out two years later in Augusta. It was in that diner the kids of different races met to await the bus when integration policies finally hit this part of rural Georgia in the 1970’s. A candidate for governor had even eaten a burger at the place one day in the 1990’s. It had been the first place in the area to host the classic car shows, specialty crafts fairs, and other events that became so common in the deep south in the 1990’s and later. It was a hub of activity that reflected the broader changes in the world over the past 50 years.

Fifty years of operation held a lot of milestones. It was in this space that Thelma announced her first pregnancy to a room full of kids celebrating their latest on the field victory in 1970. It was in this space that the first interracial marriage the town remembered or knew about or recognized – maybe all three – held its reception after the vows. It was here that the Bible studies were held when the biggest church in town burned during the lightning storm of 1985, and took six months to rebuild. It was in the same space the other big church did the same after it’s building burned due to an electrical issue a couple years later. It was in this place that little Crystal, who was quite adorable from the pictures I found, played wonder woman and other fantasies to the delight of the patrons. It was in this place that little Lee was unfortunately captured on film covered from head to toe in what looked like a wonderful example of the ways kids can break ice cream machines.
It was in this space where the town learned Thelma had, as the paper put it, “the cancer,” a few years ago, and where she would meet the group of town’s people who supported her as she said goodbye to this planet. It was in this space that Enis Jacobson, the All-Star Basketball player, got his trademark strawberry milkshakes after every game before ever catching broader media attention as the milkshake drinking cross over machine at the University of North Carolina. There was a photo of him holding up a basketball, he was probably in high school at the time a few years before Crystal and Lee would go to that school, wearing a Chuck’s shirt and smiling the same big grin immortalized in Sports Illustrated the night he was drafted into the NBA first overall. The more I studied the place, the more it seemed like every major moment in the town in the past half century had something to do with Chuck’s.

In many ways, the town itself had grown around Chuck’s. After the lean years and youthful desertions of the 1960’s and early 1970’s, the town began to grow with the influx of new jobs at the power plant over in Waynesboro, and the entrance of corporations like McDonald’s and Kmart in the 1980’s. McDonald’s remained with two locations in town, but Kmart had gone under in the face of the arrival of Walmart in the early 2000’s. The building that introduced Queens’ residents to big box stores was now a skate park and youth center with only a bit of faded lettering on the far end to suggest it was ever something else. Other corporations arrived, and so did local merchants to meet the modest needs of the families that populated the town. I read about these things, and couldn’t stop humming Brandy Clark’s “Big Day in a Small Town,” and wondering about Methodist men dealing with indiscretions.

As the town grew, there were celebrations and cross-promotions with Chuck’s and every week of every year found people gathering there over a burger and fries or a coffee and grits to discuss the goings on. By all accounts, Chuck and Thelma became pillars of the community, and were active in every local organization imaginable. They were there when the bookstore selling used paperbacks opened in 1989. I remember, at first, being very pleased that they at least had a bookstore. They were there when the corner drug store was replaced
by a brand-new Walgreens in 2003. They were there when the tire plant opened between the town and another town called Louisville a few years later just before the recession shook the whole country, and they were there as downtown shifted from empty storefronts in the 1960’s to small independent shoe stores, repair shops, and clothing stores in the 1980’s to a mix of surviving local businesses and empty storefronts in the 1990’s to finally a collection of niche goods including a record store – the one Crys mentioned I was sure – and a farmer’s mart in the past couple years. I remember thinking I could write an entire Reba McEntire album about Chuck’s, and wondering if I would meet Fancy when I got there if the lights stayed on.

From the broad windows of their restaurant, Chuck and Thelma watched all these events unfold, raised their family, and got to know every single person who ever passed through town. They were at the graduation ceremony where Enis promised to make the town proud, and at the trial when little Ralph was tried for killing his daddy after being abused most of his life. They were in the (almost entirely) white church on that fateful Sunday when the traditional worship service was moved to earlier in the morning for the purposes of offering a new service with more modern music later in the morning. They were also there when the White and Black churches started having shared cook outs, and even catered the first of these now annual events. They were there for the weddings, the funerals, the homecoming football games, and the holiday parade every year. They were also there for the unplanned pregnancies, the drunk driving accidents, the biggest deer killed each season, and the introduction of meth and the internet into the community at the beginning of the new millennium.

Looking at photos, it was remarkable both how much the town had changed over time and how little Chuck’s place had changed in the same amount of time. It looked older now, and it was obvious it had been painted and renovated a few times over the years, but the old sign still shouted out into the street and the place looked mostly the same. While, according to one of Chuck’s journals, the original inclusion of “A Queen’s Tradition” was meant to be a joke, flipping through photos decades later it felt a lot more like a prophesy.
CHAPTER 3

“How you doing babe,” Lee asks when I answer the phone six weeks after Crystal and I grudgingly agreed our family was moving to Queens. Neither of them have been back home yet, but I have heard from them each on different days. I spent my solitude studying the town, packing and sending things they need for life in Georgia, and storing – and reading some of – Chuck’s journals since they arrived at the house three days after I learned I was moving to the middle of nowhere because I fell in love with these country folk.

“I’m okay. I finally got everything set up, and should be leaving in the next day or so to join y’all unless you’ve hopefully come to your senses?” I know I’m being a whiny brat, but I don’t care. My search of the town’s history has increased my curiosity, but has not changed my opinion that this is a silly idea at best. I spent each of the days over the last six weeks hoping against hope that they will get sick of the place before I join them.

No such luck, I think as Lee says, “Awe man, come on, it’s going to be great! We’re having a lot of fun running the restaurant. It’s like we’re kids again, and Crys has even started looking into maybe doing an oral history project about the town.” Great, just what I need, Crys to find another reason to stay in small town nowhere. At the same time, I smile because I was kind of worried she was going to drop her research and end up regretting it in the future. I’m kind of glad she’s found a way to do both even if it does increase my chances of living in a small town for more than a little while.

“What about you, and your writing?”

“You know, and I want to talk to you about this, but I think I might write a book. It’s very peaceful here, and thanks to Crys’ book sales, your book sales, and our family inheritances and savings, we don’t really need much income at all from me. I was thinking I might finally try to write the book.” Lee had been talking about writing a book the whole time I knew him. He wanted to write about his experiences with sports writing and culture. He wanted to tell his own story, but
blend it with things he noticed during his career. Crys and I thought it would be a great book, and once again I found myself accidentally happy about something that might more permanently take me away from the comfort of city life.

“I think it would be a good idea Lee, and you know Crys and I would help you any way we could.”

“I’m thinking about it a lot, but we’ll see,” and that was always what he said whenever this topic came up. “For now, I like managing the restaurant with Crys and I might do some freelance writing for the paper here, and maybe even the Chronicle or the Metro Spirit up in Augusta. Who knows, it’s an adventure, and maybe I’ll just write a blog about sports or about our move up here or about religion or something like that.” This was the Lee I knew and loved – a thousand ideas always coming through his pores, but very few of them ever actually happening. I was always amazed by the distinction between his unending list of plans and my relative difficulty coming up with one idea in the first place. “Anyhow, I just wanted to check in with you, and see what you were up to today.”

“You mean you wanted to make sure I was okay now that everything in Tampa is basically finished?”

“Basically,” he says with a chuckle.

“I’m okay. I’m just going to sit on our porch, wait for Marcus to arrive, listen to records, and say goodbye to the place.” Marcus was our neighbor, and maybe the only person who liked sports half as much as Lee. Marcus was from the south side of Chicago, and moved to Tampa to take a nice job at a bank downtown. Marcus loved this city, and thought it was insane that we were moving to a small town in Georgia. Marcus was going to keep an eye on, and if he wanted to, use our place while we were, as he put it, “hiding in the woods.”

“You make it sound like the end of the world Jackson.”

“I’m moving to a place called Queens where the biggest building in the area is a Walmart.”

Laughing, Lee says, “I know babe, I’m sure we both owe you big time for this one.”

Matching his laughter, “You damn right y’all do.”
“Okay, I love you Jackson, and keep us posted on your trip.”

“Will do babe, love you too,” I said as we hung up, and I turned the volume back up on my stereo. Michael Jackson’s voice came from the speakers, and I started looking over the hard copy I printed out of my latest book again. Editing always calmed me in ways I could not put into words, and I really needed that.

I tried to focus on the novel, but instead, I kept thinking about the first time I saw this house. Crystal had just taken her job at USF, and we were visiting to sign the lease on the townhome we expected to rent. For fun, we went driving through the city, and found ourselves in this neighborhood just off the bay. Crystal stopped the car, and pointed. In front of us, we saw this place standing captured by the sun. It had a porch on both the first and second levels that went all the way across the house. It had what looked like a massive, open downstairs space, and what looked like a small house for a second floor. It was Lee who spotted the writing on the for-sale sign that mentioned a third-floor loft separated from the rest of the house.

Two weeks later, we came back and began aggressively pursuing it. We looked up all the information on the place, learned that it was being sold in a hurry because of family issues, and decided this would be our home. It was only a few blocks from a series of shops dotting the intersection of Bay to Bay Boulevard and MacDill, and it was just far enough from the main roads to be quiet yet an easy walk to the fun shops. We fell in love with the loft, and were certain it was the perfect master bedroom for the three of us. It also had three other bedrooms – one for each of us to make our own space – and a fourth guest room. The kitchen was so big and so well equipped that Lee squealed when he saw it, and Crys and I imagined the dinner parties he was planning in his head that certainly included far too ornate wine lists. One of the smaller bedrooms, on the back of the house on the second floor, had a big bay window that you could sit in, and Crys sat there as we looked through the house the same way she had in our place in Miami while she wrote her dissertation. I was giggling at their excitement until we stepped out onto the house length front porch and images of me writing in this space flooded my brain. I too became a kid in a candy store.
We pooled our resources and bought the house, but we put it in my name for tax purposes – read tax breaks – because we already agreed that Lee and Crystal would be the ones to get legally married – read tax breaks – and there was no way for all three of us to do so. The house would be my link to them legally, alongside many other contracts our lawyer helped us put together to protect our union in a country that did not yet grant equal access to two aspects of our marriage. We sat on the hard wood floors on the first night laughing that our townhouse had already become useless, sipping wine, and fantasizing about the different ways we could decorate the place. As I replaced Michael Jackson’s *Thriller* with *Some Girls* by the Rolling Stones, I thought about that night and all the memories made in this place, and more than ever, I did not want to go to Georgia.

A couple hours later, I switched out my coffee for a can of Florida Cracker. I was listening to an old Marvin Gaye album, and looking over the map to make sure I knew where I was going when I left the next day or the day after that. I was having trouble deciding because I really didn’t want to leave, but everything here was already done. As I pondered the maps and found a bookstore listed in Milledgeville, Georgia that looked like an interesting stop along the way, Marcus came walking up to the porch with his son Dante. “I’m surprised you’re not playing some sad ass country music to get ready for your trip to the woods,” Marcus said with a chuckle as Dante started his usual practice of rummaging through my records. “Nice one, you got anymore because I don’t think this is hard enough yet?”

Laughing and slapping me on the knee before taking a seat, he says, “Nah, I feel for you man, I do. I would say I’ll visit, but I think they still got issues with people like me up yonder.” “Yonder” was drawn out in an attempted Southern drawl I appreciated. “I’m not sure they’ll like me any more than you.” “You ain’t wrong there Jacks,” he says laughing harder, and continues, “But they can see my black ass coming a mile away while you can just play with your husband and your Streisand records in private and maybe they’ll never notice.”
We are both laughing harder than I have in a while as Dante comes up to me holding a Natalie Cole 12-inch single from the box. “You want this one little guy,” I ask, and he nods in that shy way he always does, and I say, “Go get it DJ,” and his face lights up as he changes the records out like a pro. This is just one of the many rituals I know I’ll miss more when I finally do leave town the next day or the day after that or sometime next week maybe.

“If it makes you feel any better, your departure is annoying the shit out of Deidre and me,” he says cracking open the beer I hand him from the cooler. Deidre is his wife and Dante’s mom, and to put it simply, maybe the only person on the planet who makes Crys feel intellectually deficient. She graduated from Florida A&M with perfect marks, three national fellowships, and a powerful position as an engineer down here in the bay. Thanks to her, I know far more about the way this planet works than I ever thought possible even though I’m not sure if I really understand even ten percent of what she’s tried to teach me.

“How is my horror annoying you?”

“I told you from day one it was a bad idea to encourage Dante’s obsession with records, but no, you just had to infect him with your hipster shit and now that you’re leaving, guess what I have to do? Yep, I gotta start going to those dirty ass record stores you take him to, and figure out how to use last century’s technology all over again.” He bursts out laughing, I’m kind of surprised he kept a straight face through that crap. This is one of our running jokes. He was worried about Dante – they both were – years ago because the kid didn’t like anything. Sports, nope. Books, nope. Church, nope. Their jobs, nope. The kid was, it seemed, naturally apathetic to everything. And then, one day, he came over while Marcus and I had beers and made fun of each other, and fell in love. The kid has been obsessed ever since. He will make good grades, for a record. He will go to church and behave, for a record. Hell, the kid will do anything for a record it seems – I even got him to cut the grass for both our houses a couple weeks ago for a box of old forty-fives.

“Well, I could just take him with me, I mean, I could use the company,” and at this, we both start laughing harder than is probably
healthy. Marcus knows better than anyone other than my spouses that I find the idea of having children equivalent to the idea of being tortured for the rest of my life. I honestly cannot stand most of them, and often wish they didn’t exist. There are exceptions, like Dante, that I get along with at least partially because I can take them back like a good movie rented from a store at any time, but overall, I could do without them and have made sure they barely exist in my life. It would take something major I can’t imagine for me to ever bring some kid home to live with us.

Laughter and beer rituals accomplished, we leave Dante with the record player, and go inside. I show Marcus where everything is in terms of documentation, storage, and anything else he might need. He already knows the codes to the internet and security system and other technological aspects of the house because he sometimes has parties here with and without Lee when Crys or I are elsewhere, and because sometimes when Deidre is working on an especially stressful project that none of us can understand no matter how hard she tries to explain it, he stays in our guest room with Dante to give her space to think and work without having to worry about the two of them. After about 45 minutes roaming through the house, we find our way back to the porch where Dante is spinning an old Whitney Houston record.

“Come on kid, we gotta get you to music practice.” Dante is now learning piano and guitar. As they start to go, I motion for him to come over to me, and he does. I hand him a box I got from one of the local record stores, and inside it, I have put a collection of records he seems to play the most when he is at the house. He grabs it, tears run down his little face, and he hugs the box he has to strain to lift. Marcus smiles at me, I promise to call, and they disappear from my daily life in a way that aches more than I expected. Marcus is the first neighbor I have ever had who I truly enjoyed knowing, and I wonder how rare that might be. I can’t help but wonder what the odds of finding another friend like him are when I head for Queens the next day, the day after that, in a couple weeks, or maybe by the end of the year.