



Born on the Bayou: A Memoir

By Blaine Lourd

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In the tradition of the modern classics *The Tender Bar* and *The Liars' Club*, Blaine Lourd writes a powerful Gothic memoir set in the bayous and oil towns of 1970s Louisiana.

In this rags-to-riches memoir of finding your way and becoming a man, Blaine Lourd renders his childhood in rural Louisiana with his larger-than-life father, Harvey “Puffer” Lourd, Jr., a charismatic salesman during the exploding 1980s *awl bidness*. From cleaning a duck to drinking a beer, Puffer guides Blaine through the twists and turns of growing up, ultimately pointing him to a poignant truth: sometimes those you love the most can inflict the most pain.

Set against a lush landscape of magnolia trees and majestic old homes, haunted swamps and swimming holes filled with wildlife, Lourd gets to the heart of being a Southerner with rawness and grace, beautifully detailing what it means to have a place so ingrained in your being. Just as the timeless memoirs *All Over but the Shoutin'* and *The Liar's Club* evoke the muggy air of a Southern summer and barrels of steaming crawfish, so does Blaine's contemporary exploration of what it means to find yourself among the bayous and back roads. Charting his journey from his rural home to working the star-studded streets of Los Angeles as a financial advisor to the rich and famous, Blaine's story is about the complicated path to success and identity. With witty grace and candid prose, he pays homage to family bonds, unwavering loyalty, and deep roots that cannot be severed, no matter how hard you try.

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Editorial Review

Review

"As the youngest brother and son of a father whom I respected, feared, and idolized, I know well the rights of passage Blaine writes about: We don't really become men in our fathers eyes UNTIL we buck them and go our own way. Hard, scary and at times unfair, it works. Blaine Lourd tells a personal story that a lot of sons and little brothers know well. A story that a lot of us wouldn't be where we are today without." (Matthew McConaughey)

"With affection and sympathy for his father, his mother, and the ways of the South...[Blaine Lourd] writes with...plenty of heart and intelligence." (Kirkus Reviews)

"[A] sensitive and funny memoir...Lourd effectively recalls the halcyon days of a man who proudly defined himself as a 'coonass'." (Publisher's Weekly)

"A corker of a tale about growing up in Cajun country...thoroughly engrossing." (People Magazine)

This witty, evocative memoir puts a vivid Southern spin on the classic rags-to-riches tale. Lourd recalls his Louisiana upbringing and life with his father, "Puffer," a magnetic, engaging salesman who helps the author find himself. (Entertainment Weekly)

"An inspiring read for just about anyone." (Goop.com)

About the Author

Blaine Lourd was born and raised in New Iberia, Louisiana. He now resides in California with his wife and three sons and works in the finance industry. This is his first book.

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Born on the Bayou

1



My father was a salesman. Throngs of high school graduates, liberal arts majors, frat boys, and C students become salesmen. Others, like Dad, become unofficially designated as such. It is the fallback position. Born of great confidence. My father's favorite line when I was a boy was "I never had a bad day." For most of my childhood, I believed that.

In the late fifties, an affable college dropout like Dad had several choices for work in south Louisiana. He could become a sugarcane farmer, work for the Wildlife and Fisheries Department like his father, or go into oil. Dad chose the oil business—he wanted to tie his star to growth, and growth in south Louisiana meant oil.

My father was a betting man, like his father before him. But salesmen are made, not born. No one likes rejection. So there is a considerable premium to be earned for having to listen all day long to lines like

“How’d you get my number, boy? I’d like to come down to that high-rise office of yours, pull off your head, and shit down your neck.” Rejection pays. Always has. Always will. A salesman who takes rejection well can make money. My father was a great salesman.

The oil business in the South translates into “awl bidness.” In 1972, when I was ten, before the oil embargo, oil was a good business. After price controls were instituted by Nixon in 1973, it was a great business. Oilmen are not dumb. Price controls prevented oil companies from passing on to consumers the rising cost of crude imports. Swifter than the politicians, they saw an opportunity. So when price controls were instituted, oil companies reduced imports and cut gasoline sales to independent gas stations in order to keep their own branded outlets supplied. The lines and shortages that form our collective memory of the oil crisis were the result of price controls—not, as is popular belief, the Arab oil embargo.

During the following years, Congress instituted a number of measures to “remedy” the situation, but they all had one thing in common, just as they always do. They distorted the market and created perverse incentives—in this case, incentives that made America more reliant on foreign crude. It’s like skating to where the puck was; politicians and money managers do it all the time.

However, at the time, the oil embargo meant great business for the Southern oil and gas states. Though the embargo caused misery for the rest of the country, from the mid-seventies through the early eighties, there was no business better than the awl bidness. Dad had people working for him making \$100,000 a year whose wives would not allow them to manage their own checking accounts—a level of wealth as disproportionate to merit in the oil business as it is cyclically known to be on Wall Street. These realities would shape our family profoundly, but not until later.

My father dropped out of college in 1959, a few years after he met Mom, a shy churchgoing blonde from Texas named Sherion. She was in awe of him. He would go to her house after school and lie on the couch while she pored over her homework. She thought he was so smart because he never had to study.

For her part, Mom had hoped to marry Dad since the day he had first winked at her in the hallway of New Iberia Senior High School. He was thin, confident, and handsome—an all-state baseball player for the New Iberia High Yellow Jackets. His eyes were so bright, they shined electric blue from his place on the dirt diamond at second base, as he kicked his cleats gently into the dirt and chattered, “Hey, batter, batter,” waiting for the pitch to be thrown.

Mom’s father, Clyde Burley Brice, was a six-foot-tall, soft-spoken Mason who had supported his family as a manual laborer since he had been old enough to work and too young not to cry. His friends called him C.B., and years later, I would come to know and love him as my grandfather Paw.

One of my earliest memories is of Paw walking down the long driveway of his Lietmeyer Street home after a full day at the carbon black plant, his hard hat in one hand and his gray lunch pail in the other, smiling at me as I ran up to greet him. In his prime, Paw was a towering figure to a boy of six. In his monochromatic work clothes, with his jet-black hair and wide shoulders, he looked like Johnny Cash. We would greet each other with a handshake that would quickly turn into a test of strength. No matter how old he got or how strong I got, he always won. His unchanging strength, which maintained the natural order of things, was more important to me than I could know. He’d giggle as he made me submit, and he’d always say something like “I can still whoop your butt, boy.”

Paw showed me how to sharpen a pocketknife, and he taught my older brother, Bryan, how to play cards. Bryan liked playing bridge with Paw, our grandmother, Margie—whom we called Maw Brice—and Mom

because, like Bryan, Paw knew how to listen.

One spring morning Paw made some over-easy eggs, crispy bacon, and biscuits, and then neatly organized the leftovers on top of the stove—to be sure to return to them later. In fact, I never saw Paw waste one morsel of food his whole life; he even went so far as to take everything home from restaurants in a doggy bag, down to the bones and the bread.

Even though Paw was not classically educated, he read and played various games of intellect and strategy, like bridge, chess, and gin. When we were alone with Paw, he always called us “son,” and when we were all with Dad, he always called us by our names. He was a gentleman to the core.

“Son,” he said to Bryan, “the key thing about bridge is, never bid too low.” Bryan would listen to whatever advice Paw gave about cards, and never need clarification, because Paw was direct, and Bryan was smart. They would play bridge and gin for hours. One day when Bryan was fourteen, he confided to Paw during a bridge game that he found his opinion differing from our father’s about what to do with his future.

“Son,” Paw said, “Mr. Emerson said that there is a time in every man’s education when he arrives at the conviction that imitation is suicide—that he must take himself, for better or for worse, as his portion.” Bryan took it in, nodding in silence.

Paw had been transferred to Louisiana from Texas when he’d been promoted to manager of the Ashland carbon black plant. The only curse word he ever used was “sheeit,” in a thick West Texas accent, and he only used it when he was out of earshot of any woman—and especially far from the hot-tempered, redheaded Margie, whom Paw always called “Wife.” In turn she called him “Husband,” affectionate nicknames established in an era when marriage was still considered an unshakable, lifelong, till-death-do-us-part commitment.

For most of Mom’s life, Paw had not allowed her to be alone with boys, much less date them, but that all changed when they moved to New Iberia and she turned sixteen. She still had a dusk curfew, except on Friday nights, when she was allowed to stay out until eleven. She was not allowed to drive, so Margie or another church mom would pick her up and drop her off at places where other teens congregated in the late fifties, like the drive-in, the malt shop, or the American Legion baseball park—where my dad, Harvey Hopkins “Puffer” Lourd Jr., was king. My father’s nickname, Puffer, was given to him by his father when he was four because he was always retrieving cigarette butts and trying to get the last puff.

Dad, for most of his teen years, had dated a girl from the neighborhood named Miriam, whose main attraction was that she lacked the Puritan morals that most of the girls in New Iberia possessed. But that changed very quickly after he was swept off of his feet by Mom’s quiet beauty, angelic innocence, and rapt attention. They courted, at first, from afar at the baseball field. After a while, they talked at school, where he was a senior and she was a sophomore.

Dad’s personality was infectious to behold, even then. He’d walk onto the baseball field with a swagger that said he had not a care in the world, sprinkle around a generous, confident laugh, and his teammates would spark to life in ways the coach never saw in his absence. His coach loved him, but could get frustrated with his let-the-good-times-roll attitude. “Puffer Lourd, you are a leader, son, but you are the wrong kind of leader,” he’d say with concern.

There was so much glee in Dad’s eyes, in the way he threw his head back in deep amusement, that whenever he told a joke, other people kind of had to laugh, even if it wasn’t funny—they just wanted to laugh with

him. Puff never applied himself in school, but he had a magic way of turning Ds into Cs and Cs into Bs, because teachers loved him. He was the kind of guy who, in some ways, you wouldn't want your daughter to date but, in others, you'd want him to be the only guy she ever dated. Men wanted to be him, and women wanted to hold him.

His skill on the baseball team was known from Baton Rouge to Lake Charles. Dad's teammates would run through a wall for him because they knew he could always be counted on to get a base hit at the right moment, and he never missed an opportunity to turn a double play. When Mom met Puffer, he had just accepted a baseball scholarship to Tulane University, where he planned to study dentistry without regard to whether or not it was a scalable profession.

One day, Mom noticed him at the local bowling alley while she was sitting with her friend Myrna at the dining counter. She was wearing a white skirt that fell below her knees, a blue sweater, bobby socks, and blue-and-white bucks—the picture of Church of Christ innocence as she sat there, her heart racing, hoping he felt the same way she did.

Across the smoke-filled room, Dad stood against a wall, a Miller High Life in one hand, a red bowling ball in the other, and a cigarette hanging from his mouth. His green-and-red-striped bowling shirt had “Puff” printed over the right front pocket and “Texaco” on the back. The hall was filled with the smell of burgers frying and the sounds of balls rolling, pins dropping, Chuck Berry on the jukebox, and men loudly talking in happy, carefree drunkenness.

Not far from the men were the young ladies, ladies of all types, sitting around the periphery of the bowling lanes—Southern women who believed their place was by a man, and had little ambition other than to marry their high school sweethearts and have children. Most were virgins. Some were pretending to be, even to their closest friends.

I can imagine my mother among them, waiting until he called out to her before she turned her head, how she must have smiled as she stared down at her Dr Pepper, her smooth, fresh face flushed with excitement. She had never been without her overbearing, judgmental mother breathing down her neck for long enough to enjoy the attentions of a boy like him. She watched him step up to the line to roll a strike with a perfect draw and then saunter away from the group of boys to say hello to his future bride.

“Hey, Sherion.”

“Hey, Puff. Good game you're rolling tonight.”

“Yeah, pretty good. I'm a little upset about that eight in the six frame. I was robbed. What are you doing after the game?”

“I have to be home by eleven. My dad will be waiting up for me.”

“I got to come over there and get C.B. to understand that you're always safe when I'm around.”

“Yeah, good luck with that.”

“You doubting my sales ability?”

“No, I'm doubting my dad. But you could always come over some night and talk to him about it.”

“I might just do that.”

I can picture Dad there, sipping his beer through crooked lips, asking Myrna politely whether they could have a minute alone, and then looking into Mom’s blue eyes.

“Did it hurt?”

“Did what hurt?”

“Did it hurt when you fell from heaven?”

That was it. She was his.

“I know we haven’t known each other long. I can’t explain what your smile does to me. You make me feel like settling down. Will you wear my class ring?”

“Stop it now. What about Miriam?”

“Miriam is just a friend, and she knows that a Coonass always goes his own way.”

Mom was too caught up in the moment to realize the long-lasting impact that this philosophy would have on their lives. She had never met a man as dashing and handsome as Puff, with those flashing blue eyes that lit up the night.

She took his class ring right there on the spot and, later, the wedding ring he had purchased for \$500 at City Jewelers on Main Street. They got married in the summer of 1959 after Mom graduated from high school, and honeymooned in New Orleans on a limited budget. She was soon pregnant with my brother, Bryan William Lourd; nineteen months after Bryan’s birth came me; and fifteen months later we were joined by my little brother, Harvey Hopkins Lourd III, whom we called Tutu. I don’t really know the exact definition of Irish twins, but I think we were the Cajun version—in triplicate.

I was an energetic boy, and even as an infant, I valued my personal freedom. My mother tells me there was no crib that could hold me. At five months old I would climb out of the crib and often fall on my head. By six months I could scale the side of the crib, and by the time I was one, I would vault off the side rails of the crib and hit the ground running. Oftentimes, I would hurtle out in the middle of the night, and she’d catch me at the back door of the house trying to “escape.”

“Where are you going, Blaine . . . ?” she would ask as she picked me up in her nightgown. “Out . . .” I would mumble in baby-speak. She’d walk me back to the room, put me back in the crib, and I would scream for a while until she patted me to sleep.

Bryan, from the time he could talk, had responsibility. Mom and Dad treated him like an adult very early on because he was mature and could be trusted. He generally apprehended the rights and rules in a situation and made things work. When Mom had to go out to run errands and her mother, Maw Brice, wasn’t around, we all went with her—Bryan was second in command. Whenever we went to the grocery store on Trotter Street, Deborah, who came along five years after Tutu, would be on Mom’s right hip; Tutu would be snapped into the grocery cart, and Bryan would be holding my hand tightly so I couldn’t run away.

My older brother had his hands full with me as I had a penchant for being in the wrong place at the wrong

time. I had personality, because when you are the second of four, you have to find ways to be seen and heard, even if, in the end, you got your butt spanked for it. I got my butt spanked a lot.

Bryan, on the other hand, was observant and measured in his movements and actions. As the first son, the big brother, his maturation from infant to little man was quick, and over time his responsibilities grew. In fact, by the time he was thirty, he just about fully supported everyone in my family but me.

Tutu didn't talk at all until he was three, and to this day is laconic. Harvey H. Lourd III got the nickname Tutu because he and I would sit in front of the television watching cartoons, and there was this one cartoon called "Touché Turtle," about a turtle with brown legs, a green shell, and a bald head. Tutu was bald until he was five years old, and I thought he looked like Touché, so I'd point at the TV, then point at him and say, "Tuuuuuuuuu." And it stuck.

In addition to being bald and blond, Tutu was smaller than me. He had a discerning palate and would eat only pasta and sugar until he was in his teens. Despite this fact, he was rangy and thin. By the time he was twelve every tooth in his mouth had a filling in it. He liked Icees and peanut M&M's like a Viking craves grog and roasted meats, and he'd eat and drink them at will without concern for his quarterly trips to the dentist, which sometimes took two to three hours.

Tutu wasn't much into hunting and fishing, but he and Dad shared a love of baseball, and were both pretty good at it. Often after work in the mid- to late seventies, Dad would park his Lincoln behind the center field fence at American Legion, where Tutu practiced. Quietly he'd get out, hop onto the hood, and rest his back on the windshield; then he'd crack open a cold one and watch. Dad loved the ballpark—coaches hitting infield, outfielders taking fly balls, bats cracking and leather gloves popping as players kicked up dirt. After a few beers, Dad would get restless, like men do, and drive off; sometimes Tu would see him, and sometimes he wouldn't. Baseball is said to be the "thinking man's sport," which is probably why Tutu was good at it—he was a thinker. He was consistently the best math student in his class, and frugal with his words. In fact, he rarely spoke at all unless he had to.

I always looked very different from my brothers. I was just bigger, despite the fact that I was allergic to corn products and, hence, could never eat sweets. From the time he was six years old and I was four, I remained the same size as Bryan, who, like Tutu, was blond and lean. Our family diet was regular: Mondays Mom would cook pinto beans, on Tuesdays we'd have all-you-can-eat Pizza Hut, on Wednesdays it was pinto beans again, and on Thursdays, Hamburger Helper. Fridays were our big night out, and usually we'd eat crawfish or shrimp po'boys, or Dad would take us to Duck's Drive-In for cheeseburgers, malts, and fries.

And for a long time, it was as simple as that.

Users Review

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