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The County

Ellen Scheible

Right before Christmas I flew home to visit my parents in a rural town called Ridge, in southern Maryland, on the western shore, where they have both lived since they were children. My parents' house sits on a plot of land adjacent to the property where my mother was born, in an old post office and general store that my great-great-grandparents once owned. If you walk out of my parents' front door, stand in the middle of Wynne Road, and look about a quarter of a mile down to your left, you can see the house where my father was raised. That house was where I grew up and where my parents lived until just a few years ago. My parents have lived within a quarter of a mile of each other for their entire lives and many members of our extended family live within a stone's throw of them on that same road, in that same county. St. Mary's County. Or just "the county."

The county is situated on a peninsula at the very tip of the western shore of Maryland, where the Potomac River meets the Chesapeake Bay, and my parents live at the end of that tip. The southernmost part of the county hosts Point Lookout, an old Civil War prison camp turned state park. Wynne Road is about seven miles north of Point Lookout and, if you travel the full two miles of Wynne, you will pass farms that have traded hands between only two or three different families in the last 200 years. At the end, you will hit the gravel driveway where the home-made, hand-painted sign for Scheible's Fishing Center still sits, even though the center itself is no longer there.

In its heyday, my parents' business was a flourishing testament to bootstrap, American capitalism and what many believed was the strength of Reaganomics in the 1980s. My parents

will still tell you that Ronald Reagan was the greatest president who ever lived (and that Jimmy Carter was the worst). It wasn't until recently that I realized how connected their political

benefit, a communal law that protects the isolated communities of St. Mary's County that fall south of the Patuxent River Naval Air Station from overdevelopment. I used to lament the fact that our isolated house could never have cable television and resent it that pizza delivery services wouldn't come down that far. Now an exiled academic attuned to close reading and unearthing once-hidden truths, I find its remoteness fascinating, like some place in a William Faulkner short story. The most rural parts of the county seem preserved like towns in southern gothic fiction, where crossing one street leads you to an entirely different way of living, foreign to us only because it is part of a distant past that exceeds what is possible to know in memory.

★ ★ ★

Scheible's Fishing Center began as a tiny, recreational charter boat operation, founded in 1946 by my grandfather after my father's family moved to southern Maryland from Washington, D.C. Over the years, the center expanded to include an eight-room, single-story motel (built by hand) and Scheible's Crab Pot, a seafood restaurant. When I was born into the family in 1977, we owned six wooden charter boats, almost all named after women in my family, including my mother,

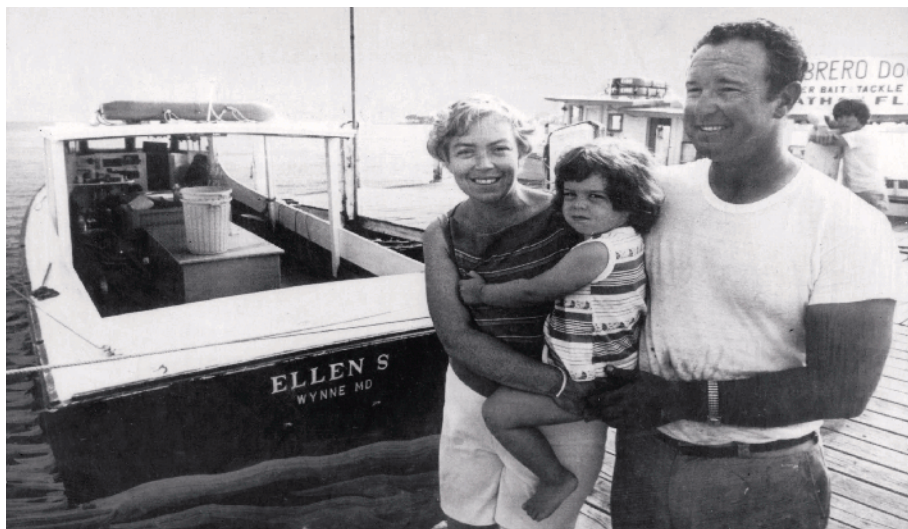
Families drove from
Washington D.C., Baltimore,
and all over the region, to go
fishing and eat seafood at
Scheible's Fishing Center.

views are to their intimate experience with small-business success in a rural, farm town that corporate industry had neglected. Today, that neglect has developed into an unanticipated

Sarah, and women I didn't know, like Mary Lou and Patsy. Our restaurant was small with no air conditioning and, instead of a wall, the backside of a row of industrial refrigerators and freezers

separated the kitchen from the dining room. We served mostly fried food, but all homemade: crab cakes, fish sandwiches, and my parents' signature dish: crabbettes (miniature, spicy crab cakes). At some point in the 1980s, the restaurant expanded and, by about 1988, the business was at its peak. Fifteen charter boats operated from my parents' pier, nine of which were owned by my father. I remember throngs of people on the pier, on picnic tables, drinking beer,

they matured. Most of us lived on the property together; my parents and I on one side of the restaurant and my grandmother, uncle and cousin on the other, in separate homes. My parents managed the business mostly on their own for the last 30 years of its operation and I'm convinced that their separate roles—one in the public exterior as a fishing captain, and one in the domestic interior as a restaurant owner—kept them sane and, better yet, married.



The author and her parents, summer 1980, the year the Ellen S was built. The family's head boat, the Bay King, can be glimpsed in the background. (Baltimore Sun photograph)

filleting fish, and taking in the picturesque view of the water. The business was so successful that it attracted attention in newspapers and magazines that had national readership: *The Washington Post*, *SaltWater Sportsman*, and *The Fisherman* magazine. Families drove from Washington D.C., Baltimore, and all over the region, to go fishing and eat seafood at Scheible's Fishing Center. Second-tier celebrities, such as pro basketballer Karl Malone and crooner Harry Connick Jr., snuck down to the county whenever they were in D.C. to experience the rural aesthetic of fishing and eating on the Chesapeake Bay.

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My father is the youngest of three brothers, each of whom was given a separate role in the fishing business as

But, as the 1990s progressed and the societal roles that shaped nuclear American life started to morph into gray space, fishing changed completely. Environmental moratoria on commercial and recreational fishing in the Chesapeake Bay became increasingly stringent and took their toll. By the early 2000s, few fishing families had the disposable incomes they enjoyed in the 1980s. At the same time, what America knew to be a family changed. And my parents were tired. Shortly after I left for California and graduate school in fall of '99, the once-bright future of Scheible's Fishing Center fogged over with uncertainty.

When you mix a liberal graduate program in the Humanities with an upbringing in rural American

consumer capitalism, you get a special cocktail of self-recognition. When I left home, the underbelly of my adolescence revealed itself to me and I suddenly realized two essential things that were dialectically connected: first, I am an only child; second, I am not a man. In my experience, women don't inherit fishing businesses. What's more, women who don't have brothers often watch their family histories fade. We might call this modernity, one of the predictable stages of empire that historians, Enlightenment philosophers, and nineteenth-century landscape artists observed. My family's business, in this way, was not really all that different from Thomas Cole's five-part series of paintings, *The Course of Empire*—when civilizations no longer advance, they must surely decline. And for Scheible's, the want of a male heir all but guaranteed that. Still, even as the scholar in me can stretch to rationalize this sad chapter in objective terms, that exercise can never capture things completely. It feels intimate and personal when it is your own family and their land and their history. And it stings more painfully when it is your own patrimony. I have spent almost two decades realizing, critiquing, and compartmentalizing something I already knew and still cannot resolve: if I was born male, my parents would probably die knowing that their business, a monument to their hard work, was still inscribed on the landscape of the county.

★ ★ ★

When my parents tell the story of my birth, there's never a dry eye in the room. My mother, the oldest of four girls, marries my father, the youngest of three boys. They grow up together, are dance partners in high school, become best friends, and fall in love. They inherit a growing business and decide to raise a family. A year passes. Five years pass. After doctors' visits and the birth of several nieces and nephews, they are told that they cannot have children. They learn to live in the

present. They build a small business into a booming success and make good money doing it. Then, almost ten years after they get married, my mother gets a bad flu. She's sick for three months before a doctor finally decides to take a pregnancy test. She calls to get the results and she and my father cry together, believing that such a miracle must be destiny. The gift of a child has completed their lives so tremendously that they can only feel humbled and mesmerized with gratitude and love.

I have felt nothing but absolute love and support from my parents my entire life. They have never stopped me from accomplishing anything and their pride in me has always been my first and main source of motivation. But they have never intimidated, suggested, implied or hoped that I would take over

Scheible's Fishing Center has retired, now found only in the historical archives of St. Mary's County life, and a certain kind of American idealism that no longer reigns supreme has fallen off of its pedestal.

that my parents' business was in decline. My father sold most of his boats and my parents leased the restaurant, hoping to sell. 2008 destroyed that hope. When they finally did sell it to a man who used to fish with my father when he was younger, they underestimated the

life, and a certain kind of American idealism that no longer reigns supreme has fallen off of its pedestal.

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My father still owns and maintains one boat, the *Ellen S*, built three years after I was born. He still runs fishing parties between the months of April and October. He is now 71 years old. About ten years ago, my father had bypass surgery and has had to provide special paperwork to the U.S. Coast Guard to renew his Captain's license every couple of years. 2012 was one of those years.

I arrived home for the Christmas holiday about one week before my father's stress test and cardiogram that were going to support his license renewal. We decided to combine our errands—shopping for my mother's Christmas presents and visiting my cousin's grave—with his doctor's appointment. We'd hit the doctor's first and then the gravesite, and finally do our shopping at the end. The appointment was supposed to last around two hours, and I brought a giant stack of student papers to grade in the waiting room. When the doctor's assistant opened the door and called my father's name, the assistant asked me if I wanted to come in to be in the room for the stress test. After years of feeling like parts of my father were inaccessible to me, like I was eternally infantilized by both my parents' business and my gender, I saw this as divine intervention. I could be there for an important



Girl boats at dock: The Sarah S, named after the author's mother, and the Alice T, named after her grandmother, docked at their winter home, fall 2005. (Author's photograph)

Scheible's Fishing Center. It was never on the table, so I never had to decline the offer. This act of love protected me through my 20s, while I lived 3,000 miles away from them and finished my education. At the same time, my county contemporaries married their neighbors and had children. When I turned 30, though, the veil lifted and I realized

difficulty of divorcing themselves from something that glares at them, from a quarter of a mile down the road, like an abandoned lover. And no owner will ever love the land, the property, or the business the way my parents did. Slowly and steadily, Scheible's Fishing Center has retired, now found only in the historical archives of St. Mary's County

moment and we could form another layer to a familial bond that I was still learning to understand. I joined them for the stress test and watched as the nurses connected my father to a series of wires and suction cups and he proceeded to walk on a treadmill, facing a blank wall. His breathing increased, he panted and lost the ability to speak clearly. The doctor finally stopped the treadmill after he asked my father if he was okay and received no reply.

My father failed the stress test. While we were putting Christmas flowers on my dead cousin's grave, I cried over my father's health. He reassured me, telling me maybe it was time for this to happen. I spent the next week mourning the death of his fishing license and the blow to his masculinity. The intense guilt that has plagued me for such a long time led me to believe that I somehow caused this failure. My presence in the room while he was on the treadmill *must* have created the stress that undermined his health and ended his ability to maintain the only way of life he's



The Ellen S, the only remaining boat owned by the author's father. This year is the vessel's 33rd year in operation. (Author's photograph)

could have ever imagined. He'll get his Captain's license with no obstacles and he'll run the *Ellen S* for another chapter in her charter boat life.

More important to the preservation of my fragile academic ego, I didn't cause him to fail. And I'm not the reason

first-generation college graduate who will never inherit the family business. And, finally, it allowed me to witness directly the kind of historical, social, and economic change that most of the novels I teach struggle to articulate. The county will always be written into my academic pursuits and onto my physical, gendered body, providing a hybridity that underscores my middle-class American experience. My dissertation director used to often tell me that most scholars spend their academic lives rewriting their first books. I think I will spend my life rewriting, reliving, and renegotiating the personal history that led me to academia in the first place.

My family history allowed me to witness directly the kind of historical, social, and economic change that most of the novels I teach struggle to articulate.

ever known. I was the reason he would no longer fish. I was the reason he'd feel severed from his past. I was the reason he'd die early.

It turned out that the stress-test machine malfunctioned. After another doctor's visit, this time two hours away in D.C. at a major medical facility, and an invasive procedure, we were told that my father's heart is in fantastic condition. He is healthier than we

anything risked failure whether it was the business, my parents' sometimes rocky marriage, or the future of recreational fishing in St. Mary's County, Maryland. But, my family history is the reason I have succeeded. It drives my interests and research in literature, economics, and gender studies. It makes me a better teacher, one who knows what it's like to commute to a state college in a small town and be that



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