

Follow Your Dreams is the fictional inspirational story of an African-American protagonist who rises from poverty to become Kentucky's most successful female entrepreneur and leading philanthropist. She's persuaded to write a book about the journals she's kept throughout her life, and those journals comprise a book-within-a-book at the end.

Follow Your Dreams

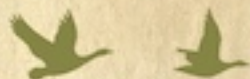
By Larry B. Gildersleeve

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*Follow
Your
Dreams*

a novel



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Prologue

*All the flowers of all the tomorrows
are in the seeds of today.
--Indian Proverb*

Marla Taylor regarded Josephine Gilpin as the most remarkable woman she'd ever met. The challenge for Marla had been to translate her feelings into words as she prepared to be the main speaker at a ceremony honoring Jo. Hundreds of millions of dollars, and Jo's entrepreneurial leadership and her generosity, would be discussed in front of at least two thousand people on a beautiful spring day near Lexington, Kentucky in April 2017.

Jo Gilpin had directly impacted the lives of thousands of people, and many in the audience had known the woman they were honoring for decades. Despite their closeness in age, growing up in the same small town in Kentucky, Marla had known Jo for only a matter of months. And they had been drawn together for a different reason.

The two women discovered they had much in common, including their Christian faith and the life challenges each had endured that tested the strength of their beliefs. But in so many ways, they couldn't have been less alike. They had been born in different hemispheres and into vastly different circumstances. One had been risk-adverse, personally and professionally; the other had taken risks all her life. But when they finally met, they developed a shared desire to accomplish something they believed could positively affect the lives of countless women. And they had a limited time to accomplish their task.

As Marla nervously approached the podium, and gazed out at the crowd overflowing the venue, her mind turned back to how it all began -- with a meeting in the office of her husband Ben.

August 9, 2016

“May I interrupt for a few minutes?”
Ben Taylor was working in his office when he looked up and saw Jennings standing in the doorway. Despite the heat outside, Jennings wore his suit coat as he did every day in every season. Although workplace fashion had evolved to informality almost everywhere else, “coat and tie” was still their executive dress code, with jackets worn at the office when meeting with guests, and for business events away from the office. Ben’s navy blazer was hanging on the coat rack in the corner next to the bookcase. Even though he didn’t participate, Jennings had years ago introduced casual Friday, which only meant ties were left at home.

“Of course,” Ben answered, standing.

The truth is, Ben cherished every moment spent with Jennings Eldridge. His soft-spoken voice and courtly mannerisms personified all that one thinks of as a true Southern Gentleman. Snow white hair and brilliant blue eyes set against a summer tan on a ramrod straight five-foot ten-inch slender frame made for quite an impression. Especially for his greatest admirer, Lucy Mae, his wife of fifty-five years and the mother of their three children. Many who knew them felt theirs was a love story that could be a Southern romantic novel.

Once a world traveler, Jennings’ advancing age and declining health now meant he seldom ventured away from Bowling Green, Kentucky, where he lived and worked. He

was the patriarch of one of the South's most successful multi-generation, family-owned enterprises, with companies in a variety of industries in several southern states. While not a family member, Ben was one of the company's senior executives and, as Jennings had told him, and others, his most trusted financial advisor.

"Ben," Jennings continued, "I'm helping the founder of Adelaide Holdings. Are you familiar with Adelaide?"

"Since Marla was born there, I know it's a coastal town in Australia west of Melbourne. I didn't know we were involved with any international companies."

"We're not. Adelaide is the name of a holding company located in Kentucky. The founder chose the name just because of the way it sounded."

When Jennings clarified by giving the company's public name, Ben made the connection.

"They're in manufacturing, aren't they? Cosmetics mainly, and other things."

"Correct."

Jennings went on to describe the privately-held company as one of the South's largest manufacturers of environmentally-sensitive cleaning products, as well as the country's premier maker of cosmetics for African American women.

"How are you involved?" Ben asked.

"Estate-planning for the founder that will coincide with divestiture of ownership."

Jennings could easily say in one short sentence what it would take others a paragraph to convey. It was an ability Ben's father also possessed, and one Ben envied. Jennings wasn't just Ben's employer and someone he admired. Despite Ben's age and years of "big city" corporate experience, he regarded the older man as his mentor.

Jennings was also Ben's father's best friend since they were young boys, and together they helped rebuild Ben's life after he lost everything, materially and spiritually, in the Great Recession that began in late 2008. It was Ben's father who re-introduced him to Jennings, and it was the resulting job offer that gave Ben a much-needed lifeline and brought him back to Bowling Green from Chicago five years ago.

"How will the divesture happen? Outright sale? Or maybe a public offering?"

"Neither. The lawyers are creating an Employee Stock Ownership Plan. There'll be a leveraged buy-out by the employees." Jennings continued to explain that if it had been an outright sale, his rough, back-of-the-envelope estimate was that the company's founder and sole shareholder, Jo Gilpin, would have netted over two hundred and fifty million dollars. After taxes."

"Big number," Ben said, stating the obvious. "Have I ever met Joe Gilpin?"

"I don't think so. Certainly not through me."

"So, are you telling me this because you need my help with Mr. Gilpin?"

Ben noticed a smile forming on Jennings' face, something Ben knew almost always foretold an interesting story. If not immediately, then eventually.

"Ben, Gilpin has been funding programs for years to benefit disadvantaged children in Kentucky. I thought the Lauren Minor Taylor Foundation might be a natural fit."

The mention of his late wife's name instantly brought back painful memories. Lauren hadn't survived a stroke when she was only thirty-five. She had successfully beaten cervical cancer earlier, which meant she and Ben couldn't have children. In her memory, Ben had created a foundation to benefit under-privileged children, funded with every dollar of

the significant on-going flow of royalties from the popular children's books that had made her a household name.

Ben realized Jennings was looking at him, waiting for his reaction. Embarrassed, Ben asked him to repeat what he'd just said.

Hearing again about Gilpin's potential interest in Lauren's foundation, especially given the amount of money Jennings had mentioned, Ben made no attempt to hide his enthusiasm. "That would be wonderful! If it happens, of course. What should I do?"

"Call Beverly and ask her to join us," Jennings said, gesturing to the phone on the desk. A few minutes later, Beverly Wingate arrived, shorthand pad in hand. She'd been Jennings' administrative assistant for over forty years.

Beverly wore a flowery summer dress appropriate for a conservative office environment. Despite her beautifully styled gray hair, upon first meeting her, no one would believe she was almost seventy and a grandmother of six. The years had been exceedingly kind to her, and Beverly had assisted with a lifetime commitment to health and fitness. Her husband Jesse hadn't shared that commitment, and no one enjoyed the region's comfort food and world-renowned bourbon more than he. Beverly had been a widow for seven years.

Jennings politely gestured for Beverly to take a guest chair in front of Ben's desk, then settled into the matching one next to her. Ben's office was on the top floor of a restored three-story historic building on the town square. When Ben's wife Marla first saw it, she described the décor as "elegantly appointed" with antique Southern furniture and oil paintings of landscapes and horses. Ben changed nothing when Jennings hired him – it was perfect just the way it was, from the vaulted ceilings, to the exposed brick walls and floor-to-ceiling windows, down to the beautiful red and gold wool carpet resting on polished nineteenth century hard-wood floors.

“Beverly, Jo Gilpin is expecting to hear from us. Please send one of those email things and introduce Ben so they can arrange a meeting. I don’t need to be involved.”

That was a real departure for Jennings, Ben thought. Normally, he would have just picked up the phone since, to Ben’s knowledge, he’d never used email himself. When Ben first mentioned getting something online soon after joining the company in the summer of 2009, Jennings jokingly asked if there was a fish at the other end.

Jennings asked Beverly to assist with a few other matters pertaining to Adelaide Holdings before she departed. Her desk was outside Jennings’ office at the opposite end of the long hallway lined with more Southern-themed paintings. In Ben’s former business life, the décor of offices in Chicago were often indistinguishable from those in Miami, New York or Los Angeles. No such confusion about where in the country he now resided. Ben felt his Bowling Green office was infinitely preferable to the one he had at Lehman Brothers in Chicago. As was his life now, compared to those years that seemed so long ago.

Later in the day, BTaylor@ and JGilpin@ exchanged brief emails, and they agreed to meet the next morning at the company’s headquarters in Versailles, near Lexington. Unlike the city in France, in Kentucky it’s pronounced ver-SALES.

That evening, over dinner, Ben replayed for Marla the afternoon conversation with Jennings, and told her of the next day’s trip. After helping her clear the table, he withdrew to their shared home office and began Internet research on Adelaide Holdings. Ben was surprised to find its web site listed several executive profiles, but no mention of a founder, chairman or CEO. And there was nothing in the site’s press section about Gilpin.

Even though the company was private, the Internet opened doors to all kinds of research on virtually anyone and

anything. Still, Ben couldn't find a single item on a Joseph Gilpin in connection with the company, or anyone prominent by that name living in the Versailles area. He kept trying to dig deeper, but his sleuthing came to an end when his month-old daughter Danielle awakened crying loudly. It was his turn at late-night parenting, so he tended to her needs by changing her and rocking her back to sleep with her last bottle of the evening.

Looking down at the angelic face of their daughter, who came as a complete surprise to her parents given their ages, a persistent memory entered Ben's mind – his obsession with having a son. An obsession that caused so much pain for him, but even worse, for others who loved him. It wasn't that he didn't have a son. He did. But he'd never seen him, and most likely, never would. Ben shook off the sorrow that always accompanied these thoughts and abandoned his research. It was late. He fell asleep knowing all would become clearer in a matter of hours.

Marla and Ben tried to follow Beverly's health and fitness example, and that of Ben's father, so breakfast for him the next morning was Greek yogurt and walnuts, chased with a protein drink. After kissing both Marla and Danielle good-bye, he took the elevator down to the enclosed garage on the ground level with a travel mug of coffee in one hand, briefcase in the other. Less than ten minutes later, he'd driven the distance from their downtown home to the on-ramp of I-65 North.

Versailles is about a hundred fifty miles from Bowling Green, mostly interstate, so it took him two and a half hours to reach his destination. As he approached the address he'd been given, he saw a large manufacturing facility sprawling over several acres behind a five-story office building he guessed to be about fifty-thousand square feet. Both buildings, and the tree-lined open areas separating and surrounding them, were

as carefully maintained and landscaped as if they were home to an expensive private college.

He parked in one of the spaces designated for guests, locked his silver Lexus hybrid sedan, and checked his reflection in the driver's side window -- blue suit, white shirt, muted tie. He gave a slight nervous adjustment to the tie's knot, picked up his black leather Ghurka briefcase, and walked toward the main entrance of a striking red brick and white stone colonial-styled building.

The centerpiece of the lobby caught his eye -- an impressive round rug about twelve feet in diameter. He was told later the company's owner selected blue and gold to be consistent with the official colors of the state. For a company headquarters of its size, Ben thought it was odd there were only two chairs in the reception area to accommodate visitors. He then noticed there were no other guests waiting mid-morning on a weekday.

He approached the receptionist, who was dressed in a manner befitting a company executive, even though she couldn't have been much more than twenty-five. He handed her his business card and told her he was twenty minutes early for an appointment with Joe Gilpin. She welcomed him, telling him her name was Mary Ann. After quietly calling someone to announce his arrival, she offered him a choice of coffee or bottled water. He declined both and selected one of the two maroon leather guest chairs.

Between the switchboard calls Mary Ann answered, Ben shared his surprise at the limited seating.

"Oh, that's because our owner insists that none of our guests are kept waiting." With a smile, she added, "Even when they're early."

Since he *was* early, Ben looked for a magazine or newspaper to occupy himself. There were none. He realized

they would be counter to the “don’t keep our guests waiting” culture.

A few minutes later, a tall, slender, strikingly beautiful and impeccably dressed African American woman entered the lobby. As she walked toward him, Ben guessed she was in her early to mid-forties. He assumed she was Joe Gilpin’s personal assistant sent to greet and fetch him.

“Good morning, Ben. I’m Josephine Gilpin. Please call me Jo. Thank you for coming.”

Two

“You look surprised, Ben.”
“I am,” he admitted, knowing it probably showed on his face and in his demeanor.

Jo had escorted Ben to a modest first-floor interior office located about halfway between the reception area and the windows at the far end of the building. The hallway wall of the office was entirely glass, affording no visual privacy. With no executive desk and chair, the furniture and its arrangement conveyed the look and feel of a residential parlor or living room. It was not a conference room, and not like any executive office he’d ever seen, so Ben concluded their meeting didn’t rise to the level of a discussion in the CEO’s corner office.

His host motioned for him to sit on the small sofa and, sitting in one of two facing chairs, she began pouring coffee from the carafe on the table between them. Looking around, it slowly dawned on Ben that this might actually *be* her office.

Ben decided to break his self-imposed nutrition rules and accepted Jo’s offer of enticing breakfast scones on the tray next to the carafe. His selection was one with caramel icing and, when asked, he answered that he took his coffee as brewed. He sat upright at the edge of the sofa as the cup and saucer were handed to him. He’d never been in such a business setting before, and his discomfort was obvious as his host poured coffee for herself. Like her guest, she didn’t add cream or sugar.

“Ben, let me begin with a confession, and then an apology. I’m certain you were expecting *Mr.* Gilpin. Or Joe, with an ‘e’. And I went along with the ruse. I apologize for surprising you, maybe even embarrassing you.”

"Well, I was surprised, but I wasn't embarrassed." He *was* embarrassed but wasn't going to admit it.

"I'm glad. Jennings delights in playing this trick on unsuspecting victims, and I've been a reluctant co-conspirator. Most of his other victims over the years have threatened some form of payback, but I doubt any ever followed through."

"That was my first thought," Ben said, relaxing a bit as he thought back to Jennings' use of email for the introduction, which cleverly enabled the surprise.

"I hope you'll look back on this moment with great fondness and share it with others as part of the lore of Jennings Eldridge."

He nodded and added, "Although I may have unique standing with him to contemplate a get-even of some kind."

"I think we'll both put that in the highly unlikely category. Ben, is there something else?"

"Please forgive my asking, but is this your office?"

Not only was it small without any exterior windows, it didn't have the "I love me" wall usually found in CEO offices where diplomas, bestowed honors and pictures of the executive with celebrities were framed and prominently displayed. Ben knew there was almost always a direct correlation between such mementos and substantial financial contributions, so he was seldom impressed. But in this instance, his curiosity got the better of him.

Jo finished a long sip of coffee, and said, "Yes, this is my office. My guess is you were expecting one many times larger, in a corner, with windows offering the best outside view the building has to offer." Embarrassed once again, Ben could only nod in reply. "I understand that's what everyone expects, but it's something I never aspired to. I've never been a corner-office gal, so to speak. I've always wanted to be in the thick of things, to have my office as close as possible to the people

responsible for our success. And I want to be accessible to them without barriers.”

“Is that why you don’t have a desk?”

“Yes. It can be dysfunctional, at times, but I believe not having one removes an impediment to communication. And I’ve never had a door.”

There was no way he couldn’t look, and sure enough, no door to her office. Not that it was just standing open. It wasn’t there.

“That certainly gives new meaning to an *open-door policy*,” he said, thinking about how this compared to most executives merely saying the words. “Do your other executives have doors to their offices?”

“They don’t have offices. They have cubicles. We believe it enhances communication by not creating physical statements of position or authority. And allows everyone to see the outdoors while working indoors.”

“Do any of your employees work remotely, say from home?”

“Yes, and it’s always the employees’ choice if their work makes that feasible. But we ask them to act at home as if they were here.”

“No working in pajamas?”

Laughing, Jo replied, “No, we don’t care about that. What we *do* care about is an appropriate work-life balance. End their workday at home just as if they were walking out the door here. Don’t answer emails or phone calls after hours. It can all wait until the next day.”

Ben took it all in, assuming Jo had patiently given these explanations countless times before.

“Different, I know. Ben, I’m not saying what we do here, the business practices we embrace, will work everywhere. But you’ve seen our financials. I’ll put our results, the quality of

our service to both our employees and our customers, up against anyone. In any industry.”

Instead of correcting her that he hadn’t seen her company’s financial information, he asked, “What do you mean by service to our employees?”

“Let’s leave that for another, and longer, conversation, if you want. Let me just say our management team is deeply committed to servant leadership. It has a Biblical foundation. I’m paraphrasing here, but it says greatness is not measured by the number of servants you have, rather the number of people you serve.”

“It’s obviously working for you, and your company. I just haven’t heard of it before.”

“Oh, I think you have. Perhaps it was just stated differently. You know, something like ‘Take care of your employees, and they’ll take care of your customers.’ We didn’t invent it. We discovered it. And we work hard every day to be the best at it we can be.”

While Ben was thinking that what he’d just heard might be book-worthy, or perhaps a *Harvard Business Review* article, he saw there was *one* framed certificate on display. Her Kentucky Colonel commission. She noticed him looking, and when their eyes once again met, she asked, “Does it represent a common bond between us?”

“It does,” he answered, “although I have no idea where my certificate is. Or if I even still have it.”

“My appointment was back in the ‘80s,” she said, “when Martha Layne Collins was Kentucky’s only-ever woman governor. Now that we Colonels have a woman as our commanding general, and a woman as executive director, I felt moved to display mine. Changing times. And good ones, don’t you think?”

“I do. By the way, my wife’s full name is Marla Jo – same spelling as yours.”

"What a lovely coincidence," Jo said, with warmth in both her voice and her expression. A few seconds of silence signaled a transition from getting acquainted to getting down to business. Or so he thought.

"Ben, I like to begin meetings like this by asking my guests to tell me their story. Will you be so kind as to tell me yours?"

In his twenty-five years in business, especially the two decades in the upper reaches of the country's financial sector, he'd never had a meeting begin this way. The request was as disarming as Jo was charming, and he didn't think to ask what she might already know from Jennings.

"Okay, where would you like me to start?" he asked, feeling sufficiently relaxed to sit a little farther back on the sofa.

"Wherever you like. It's your story."

"I don't remember my birth," he replied, in an effort to be clever while gathering his thoughts, "but it occurred while my father was in law school at the University of Virginia. He and my mother moved back to his hometown when he graduated. My mother died when she was young, and my father never remarried."

If people in Kentucky made the name connection with Ben's well-known father, that was fine with him. But he was never the first to mention it.

"After graduating from Western (Ben knew she would know that was Western Kentucky University), I went to Chicago and worked in the financial markets for many years. I was president of a Lehman Brothers subsidiary there when the company imploded at the beginning of the Recession."

"Pardon the interruption," Jo said, "but do you know Christine Lagarde?"

"I know who she is. She's the current head of the International Monetary Fund. Before that, I think she was a lawyer. Why?"

"As a businesswoman, I pay close attention to what prominent women say. And do. Back in 2008, at the beginning of the recession, she was widely quoted as saying that if Lehman Brothers had been Lehman Sisters, things would have been very different. Sorry, Ben, I couldn't resist."

"Having been there, been a part of it, lived through it, I can't say I disagree," he said, returning her infectious smile.

"What then?" Jo asked, setting her cup and saucer back on the table. It was then Ben noticed the absence of a wedding ring. Or any rings. Her only jewelry was a simple gold cross on a thin necklace.

Ben decided not to mention his first wife Carol, who was pregnant with their first child when she was killed in a traffic accident in Chicago. But it was what began his downward spiral years ago.

"Tough times," he continued. "Actually, really tough times. But all of my own making. I was highly leveraged and lost everything. Financially and personally. Honestly, I was in rather desperate straits. But thankfully, two close friends in Chicago stepped in to help, and got me back on track."

"And that track led to Bowling Green?"

"It did. My father and Jennings are old friends, and Dad arranged a job interview that led to my position with Jennings' company."

Jo looked away, and Ben sensed she was now gathering *her* thoughts. When she looked back, she said, "From Jennings I already know quite a bit about the Lauren Miner Taylor Foundation. And about Lauren. Ben, I am so sorry."

This time he took the initiative to pour more coffee, first for Jo, then for himself, to purposely avoid a potentially awkward response, something she sensed. What he didn't know at that moment, but would learn over time, was that her life's challenges had at least been equal to his, though she'd been a much stronger person. A few quiet seconds passed.

"Thank you," she said, as he finished pouring and sat back. "Ben, this is a very big decision for me. The foundation, I mean. And I thought it was important for us to meet, to get to know one another. I hope you're not offended by my questions."

"Not at all. So, a few years after Lauren's death, I married Marla, a professor at Western. We were recently blessed with our first child. A daughter. A surprise, maybe even a bit of a miracle, given our ages."

"That's wonderful! What's her name?"

"Danielle."

"A beautiful name. And a beautiful child, no doubt."

"Well, I'm biased, but Jennings and her grandfather certainly think so. Thankfully, she favors her mother." Hoping for an opportunity for closure, he asked, "Jo, have I given you what want? About me, that is."

"Yes, you have. Thank you."

She *did* say they were meeting to get to know each other, so he took the initiative, and asked, "I know I'm your guest, but would it be impolite for me to ask you to tell me *your* story? I tried to research you yesterday, but I wasn't a match for Jennings' name game."

Jo's acknowledging smile turned to a more serious look when she answered. "Ben, I realize my answer is going to sound unfair, and perhaps even rude, but not today. I get very tired this time of day. But I'd be happy to have some of my story shared with you by others who've known me all my life."

"Jo," he said, hesitating, "I understood Jennings to say you don't have any family."

"That's partially correct. I have no living blood relatives. But there are two who are as close to me as if we were. And they're waiting to speak with you, if you want."

"That's sounds mysterious. How will I find them? And when do you want me to contact them?"

"The *when* would be anytime convenient for Jennings. And your father."

"You know my father?" he asked, completely surprised.

"Ben, your father and Jennings have been in my life since the day I was born. They've been my advisors and mentors, and they remain to this day my dearest friends."

Jennings left *that* out of their pre-meeting meeting, Ben thought, while making certain he'd set up the Joe, not Jo, expectation. He couldn't help wondering what else this journey of discovery had in store for him.

Jo stood, signaling the meeting was ending. As he rose, Ben asked if there was anything else he could tell her, about himself or the foundation.

"Nothing occurs to me now," she answered. "You have my promise I'll carefully consider your foundation in my future planning and give you an answer very soon." After pausing for a brief moment, she added as she extended her hand, "It was a genuine pleasure meeting you."

The salesman in Ben kicked in, wanting this to not be their only meeting. "I enjoyed meeting you, as well. Perhaps the next time, Marla can come with me. I'd like for you to meet her."

"Ben, I'd love to meet with you, and Marla, but there would be one condition."

Mission accomplished, he told himself. "Of course. Anything. What would we need to do?"

"Bring Danielle with you."

He smiled as much at the thought of his baby daughter as Jo's request. As he was escorted back down the hallway to the lobby, he asked the "next steps" question he was certain she was expecting.

"You can anticipate my decision very soon," was her reply.

From decades of experience, Ben considered himself astute at reading body language, as well as interpreting voice tone and inflection, to give him an indication of probable outcomes. With Jo Gilpin, he gleaned nothing of the sort. She smiled warmly as she shook his hand and thanked him yet again for coming. And she remained in the lobby until he departed, a gesture that meant she didn't once turn her back on her guest.

As he pulled out onto the Blue Grass Parkway to begin the drive back to Bowling Green, he began reflecting on his brief time with this intriguing woman. He was struck by many things, but one in particular was confusing. He placed a call, using the voice-activated dialing feature on his Bluetooth-enabled cell phone.

He wanted answers, and Jo had told him where he could get them.

Three

Jo returned to her office and, sitting on the sofa, poured a final cup of morning coffee. She usually arrived at her office before eight when she wasn't traveling, and her tightly-scheduled days were taken up with meetings with both executives and staff, conference calls with current and prospective customers, and the myriad of other activities usually found only in the in-box of the company's CEO. There was no executive dining room, and Jo made it a point to have an unhurried lunch every day among her employees in the company-subsidized cafeteria. She usually called for her driver around six for the half-hour drive to her home in Bardstown, and often worked for a couple of hours before going to bed.

Jo's practice was to clear her emails only twice each day -- at ten and at four. She found this discipline enabled her to keep from disrupting the day she'd already planned, and to prepare for the next. The meeting with Ben had delayed her this morning, and when finished, she relaxed and reflected on Jennings Eldridge, the catalyst for the meeting, and on her life's journey -- because one would not have been possible without the other.

She often wondered, and lately with increasing frequency, if there *was* such a thing as a normal childhood? The time and place for hers was the largely segregated South of the early 1960's. And she knew her family life would never fit anyone's definition of "normal."

Jo had been inquisitive from a very early age, constantly asking questions about her mother's upbringing and often being distressed by the candid answers she was given.

Cynthia Dara Gilpin had been an orphan, passed around from one family member to another. Even though she was very intelligent, Cynthia couldn't afford an education beyond high school. But Jo became excited when her mother told her that after a series of menial jobs in her hometown in Mississippi, she was inspired by, and drawn to, the Civil Rights Movement. Still in her late teens, Cynthia became active in the non-violent movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King, a prominent Southern Baptist minister who eventually won the Nobel Peace Prize.

Jo often recalled with a sense of pride that her father, who she'd never met, was a Freedom Rider. He had traveled with brave men and women, black and white, young and old, from northern cities to join organized acts of civil disobedience in an attempt to end segregation of southern bus terminals involved in interstate commerce. On May 20, 1961, her mother and father, two young idealists who were both only eighteen at the time, met at a rally at a church in Montgomery, Alabama.

Later that evening, they became intimate, swept up in the energy of The Movement. Jo's mother saw no future in that one-time passionate coupling and didn't ask for his address or phone number. All she knew was that he was from Detroit, and that he returned to his New England college campus on a bus late the next day.

When Jo became an adult, she pieced together bits of information and learned her father's identity. Like her, and her mother, he was an only child. He had accepted a three-year army commitment in order to finance his college education, but died in combat in Vietnam in 1966, just three months shy of fulfilling that obligation.

Despite Jo's assurances to the contrary, her mother felt deeply embarrassed about the circumstances of Jo's conception, as well as the fact Jo grew up in a home without a

father. Jo longed to tell her mother what she'd learned about her father, but was so uncertain about her mother's reaction she decided against it. She also thought about contacting her father's parents, but concluded she couldn't do that and not tell her mother. So, she kept quiet. But each time she traveled to Washington, D.C., she visited the Vietnam War Memorial, and she cherished the pencil tracing of his name she'd made on her first visit.

While pregnant, Cynthia gathered her courage and took a bus from Alabama to Bowling Green, Kentucky, the home of two of the young white Freedom Riders who'd been especially kind to her. She remembered their names and hometown, but knew nothing else except that they'd looked and sounded prosperous. With no one else to turn to, she hoped one of them could give her a job, any job, or help her find one.

One of the men, Jennings Eldridge, turned out to be the son of a successful businessman, and Cynthia was offered a kitchen job in one of their restaurants. And when Jo was born, her mother was surprised to learn the hospital expenses were anonymously paid in full, although she was certain she knew the identity of her benefactor. When she was able to return to work, a job at a nursing home also owned by the Eldridge family allowed her to bring the baby with her. Jo's mother delighted in telling her more than once over the years what a source of amusement and entertainment Jo was for the residents until she was old enough to begin school.

With only a high school diploma and a small child to care for, Cynthia struggled, but was always able to provide for the two of them. Despite her limited formal education, Cynthia encouraged her daughter in her studies, and helped when it was needed. Because of her mother, Jo developed a lifelong love of learning, and excelled academically. Just as her mother could have, had circumstances been different.

When Jo was nine years old, she saw a replay on television of the *I Have a Dream* speech delivered by Dr. King on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963. She was so mesmerized that at first she didn't see her mother watching her from the doorway. Then she heard her crying softly. When Jo turned in her direction, her mother wiped her tears and sat silently on the floor next to her daughter, holding her hand. Jo came to realize the tears were because of many things. Because her mother had *been* there. Because she actually *knew* him. Because of what could have been for Cynthia, if it hadn't been for the pregnancy. But Jo recalled her mother never expressed any regrets, only unselfish and unconditional love for her daughter.

That evening, at dinner, Jo told her mother how much seeing that speech had inspired her. For the first time, Cynthia told her daughter details of her brief involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, and showed her the only picture she had of Jo's father. There he was, with Cynthia, standing alongside the man who gave that inspired speech.

About a week later, Jo came home from school and found a package on the kitchen table, with a note that simply said, *To Mary, From Jennings*. (Deeply religious, her mother had named her only child Mary Josephine after Mary and Joseph, but it wasn't until after Jo graduated from college that she began going by Josephine.) Her mother had mentioned to Jennings that Jo had been inspired by the speech, and he saw to it something special happened for the little girl of one of his father's employees.

When Jo unwrapped it, she discovered a tape player and a recording of the speech. She played it over and over until she'd memorized it, then recited it in her mind until she fell asleep each night after saying her prayers. Jo became fixated on dreams, and their realization. One evening, as Jo and her mother sat side by side on the sofa in the living room of their

small, two-bedroom home, she asked her mother if it was wrong for her to be so consumed with dreaming about her future, especially since she would have to travel so far to fulfill her dreams.

Cynthia took both of Jo's hands in hers, and with tears brimming in her eyes, said, "Honey, dreams never come true for those who never dream. You must follow yours, wherever they take you."

And Jo did.

Four

“Mysterious, I’ll grant you,” Marla said, setting her wine glass down. Ben had just finished telling her about his Versailles meeting as they were having dinner that same evening.

Their home on Park Row occupied the entire top floor of an historic building Ben and his father had converted on the street across the town square from the building that housed the Main Street offices of Ben’s employer. All buildings on The Square abutted each other and none exceeded three stories.

Marla listened intently, thinking to herself how handsome her husband was. He was approaching his fifty-fifth birthday, what he called “the double nickel,” but most people would guess him to be much younger. He was six-one, same as his father, but with brown eyes instead of blue. He carried his 190 pounds in a manner reflecting his commitment to working out with a Pilate’s trainer several times a week. Topping it off, literally, was a full head of beautiful brown hair that was graying ever so slightly.

“Jo certainly sounds like an interesting woman,” Marla added. “What’s got me really curious is the connection to your father and Jennings. Must be a real story there.”

“I’m having lunch with both of them tomorrow,” Ben said, “so I know what you and I’ll be talking about over dinner tomorrow night.”

“I can’t wait. Do you think she’ll become involved with the foundation?”

“I was thinking about that on the drive home – how we never got around to discussing the purpose of our meeting.”

"Perhaps *her* purpose was only to get to know you. She may have already learned all she needed to know about the foundation from Jennings."

"She did say something about getting to know each other. So, you think it was just personal, not business?"

"Ben, where women and business are concerned, *personal* counts – often as much, or more, than what men may value. If she doesn't like you, and respect you, then I doubt the foundation's mission statement or balance sheet will matter."

Ben then recounted Jo's *Lehman Sisters* comment.

"See?" When he didn't respond, she changed the subject, and asked, "How are things at the office?"

"The succession planning is rather overwhelming," Ben said, "but we're getting our arms around it. Jennings has been all-in, given he knows it all centers around preparing for what happens after he dies."

Ben preferred to leave work behind at the office, usually only talking in generalities about where he spent most of his weekday waking hours. What he *had* shared with Marla recently was that his focus had been almost entirely on helping Jennings facilitate leadership succession of his far-flung, privately held business empire soon to enter a virtually unheard-of fourth generation of family ownership and management. He told her Jennings had agreed to electronic cataloging and storage of voluminous records and documents accumulated over almost six decades in business.

"Something interesting happened a few days ago," Ben continued, "and I'd like to get your opinion."

Marla had begun clearing the dinner dishes from the table, but she sat back down, saying, "Always happy to give my opinion. Are we talking personal or professional?"

"Actually, it involves *your* profession. And my new-found passion. Besides you, of course."

"Interesting. And do you have your passions properly prioritized?"

"Nice alliteration," Ben acknowledged. "You first, of course. And Danielle. Work. And then my desire to continue writing. Anonymously, that is."

"Well said. Now, back to my opinion. What's up?"

"In cataloging Jennings' private papers, one of the lawyers found a box containing a collection of personal journals. I told her to put them in my office, and when I looked in the box a few hours later, I found two neatly organized rows of notebooks of various sizes and colors, each held together with a rubber band. Tempted as I was, I decided to leave them untouched."

"And?"

"When I asked Jennings later that afternoon, he explained his habit of writing down the thoughts and phrases of others he heard or read that were impactful to him at the time. Over the decades, he would constantly re-read those notebooks. 'Going back to the well' he called it. He'd never mentioned them before, and I've been working closely with him for several years. Impulse got the better of me, and I asked if I could read them. I immediately regretted asking, but he told me to go ahead."

"And have you read them?" Marla asked, refilling her wine glass and gesturing invitingly with the bottle. He declined by placing his hand over his glass and continued.

"Not all of them. I haven't had time. But that's what I wanted to talk to you about. I think some, actually most, of the material in the journals could be converted into an inspirational book that could make an impact on the lives of others. Honestly, Marla, I was moved by what I read, and I think it would be a shame for this material not to be shared."

"Have you talked to Jennings? And by the way, I saw that."

"Saw what?" Ben asked, trying and failing at achieving innocence in either his voice or expression.

"Slipping her scraps from the table. Ben, we had an understanding. If you keep that up, Madison will set a weight record for Cavalier King Charles spaniels."

"Okay," he said, looking down at the dog at his feet. "Sorry girl." He patted her on the head and continued. "Yes, I talked with Jennings. He said it's not something he's ever contemplated. And he doesn't share my enthusiasm for a book. Not at all."

"Did he tell you why?"

"Although he complimented me for the idea, and said the journals served him well, he doesn't want any publicity for himself. What I think *did* catch his attention was the idea of helping others."

"All that makes Jennings, well, Jennings," Marla offered. "So, despite his reaction, are you going to pursue it with him?" When Ben nodded, she added, "How do you see a book like this coming together?"

"Not certain. I have lots of thoughts about how to approach it, but I need my thinking much more advanced before talking with him again."

"That's smart. Now, if it happens, do you see yourself as the author?"

"Yes," Ben answered, hesitantly, sensing where Marla was going. "And Jennings would insist upon it."

"Then what about the sequel you've been planning?" Ben had already invested substantial time, with Marla's assistance, outlining a sequel to his novel, *Southern Longings*.

"Given Jennings' age, if he agreed, mine would simply have to wait."

Ben and Marla had met three years earlier when he was referred to her for help with his debut novel. She'd published three books of her own, and her university teaching position

allowed her the freedom to freelance as a professional writing coach and editor. She had a stable of successful author clients who had provided a constant flow of referrals, but her dream to be a successful author had thus far eluded her. Her books went virtually unnoticed while Ben's became a bestseller.

"You're *that* passionate about this journals-to-book project?" Marla asked.

"Yes, almost more than I can describe."

"All right, what else?" she asked, taking her last sip of wine.

"We know Jennings doesn't want to be identified in any way with the book, and since I work for him, me as the author would compromise that."

"Looking for ideas?"

"Anything. Everything."

"Well, without seeing the journals, or having any idea what you're thinking, why not write it in the voice of a fictionalized character, which protects Jennings' identity? And repeat what you did with your own book. Use a *nom de plume*."

Looking relieved, Ben asked, "Marla, does it ever trouble you to point out the painfully obvious to me in my times of need?"

"Not so far, and likely not in the future," she answered, with a mischievous grin beginning to light up her face. "And in repayment, how about you taking Danielle duty for the rest of the evening?"

"How about an IOU? You know the Cubs are on TV tonight."

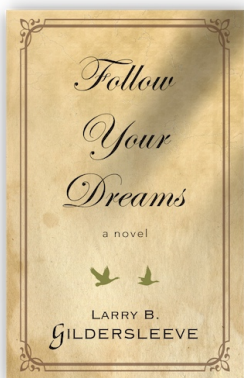
"No time like the present to introduce our daughter to America's pastime."

They had just begun clearing the dishes when, with a smile and a tilt of her head in the direction of the cries of the newest Cubs fan, Marla said, "Game time!"

As she finished the kitchen chores, Marla reflected on their dinner conversation. She could tell Ben was enthralled with his idea, but she knew his enthusiasm would soon give way to the realization his days were already fully consumed with his duties at the company, and his evenings and weekends as a husband and father. But in just his brief description, she saw a possible extension of his idea that would be *her* idea. And involve her.

Before falling asleep, Marla had wistful thoughts, remembering what it was like for her not so long ago to also have interesting meetings, away from home -- and with adults. She loved her life as a new mother, but was struggling with feelings of envy for all Ben had going in his life. She regretted that hers had narrowed so dramatically in the year since she became pregnant.

She was determined things would change. And soon.



Follow Your Dreams is the fictional inspirational story of an African-American protagonist who rises from poverty to become Kentucky's most successful female entrepreneur and leading philanthropist. She's persuaded to write a book about the journals she's kept throughout her life, and those journals comprise a book-within-a-book at the end.

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