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“By Some Chance, Here They Are, All on This Earth”

Ancestors, 1818–1909

His three names are biblical. James was the name of a brother of Jesus and of two of the twelve apostles. Rufus was the son of Simon the Cyrene whom Roman soldiers compelled to carry the cross of Christ. And long forgotten, buried deep in the Old Testament, was a Hararite—or mountain dweller—named Agee. Yet James Rufus Agee easily traced his names to both sides of his family.¹

His paternal ancestors, he wrote, “were a blend of back-country British Isles . . . stock, Hessian mercenary, and Huguenot (the name Agee is a simplification of a French name I don’t know).” The noble Huguenots, whose Protestant beliefs were considered heretical by the Catholic monarchy, were driven from France and migrated in large numbers to the English colonies of North America. One of them, Mathieu Agee, settled in Virginia in 1690, married, and had four children—including two sons, James and Anthony, whose wives gave Mathieu a total of twenty-four grandchildren. “James Agee” had survived as a name in the family tree for more than 180 years by the time James Rufus Agee was born. He was given the middle name of his father, Hugh James Agee, who was named after *his* grandfather, James Harris Agee, who was named after *his* father, James Agee, and so on.²

The name Rufus came from his mother’s side, from her grandfather Tyler. Agee wrote of his great-grandfather: “My mother’s father’s father, whom she revered and of whom she has told me; I think well of him, and was burdened by his name, but I never knew him; I doubt I shall ever have occasion to tell my children of him; with this generation he vanishes from the memory of the human race.” The young Agee endured much teasing on account of that

name. Much later, when the writer re-created such childhood scenes for his novel, *A Death in the Family*, he imagined his mother soothing the insults with reassuring words: “It’s a very fine old name. Some colored people take it too but that’s perfectly all right and nothing for them to be ashamed of or for white people to be ashamed of who take it. You were given that name because it was your great-grandfather Tyler’s name, and it’s a name to be proud of.” By the summer before his sixteenth birthday, Agee was apparently self-conscious enough about that name—about being a southern kid named Rufus about to enter a New England prep school—that he dropped it.³

So even though James Rufus Agee never knew his great-grandfathers Agee and Tyler, their names drew him into the distant past. As a writer attempting to describe and make sense of his own life, he could not help but reach “backwards beyond remembrance” to his mother’s ancestors who came from Michigan, and New England before that, and his father’s ancestors who came out of Tennessee’s hills, and Virginia before that—back to strangers from faraway villages and times, whose faces and lives he could only imagine, as expressed in this autobiographical fragment:

O my ancestral land, my tired old friends, my veterans:
How little light there is, in so much darkness.

You lived, as hungrily as I live now, and grew tired, or sorrowful, or Darkness suddenly grew tired of seeing you in the light; and where are you now.

There are records of most, traditions and legends of many, genealogies for some; where are you now. . . .

It is possible to imagine those of you who were contemporaries of Charlemagne and of Shakespeare, to imagine you in the hovels and the strange ways of dressing which are hardly more than archaeology, than theatrical property, to me, but were your homes, the clothes you put on when you got up in the morning. One of yours is said to have been Wat Tyler. One of you was Archbishop of Canterbury under Elizabeth. . . .

Some of you were among the Huguenots who took refuge in Virginia and in the mountains below Virginia. It is possible to imagine you, it is possible to realize that every one of you existed, as fully as I exist, as fully as all those of whom I will try to write; but that is all that is possible, and where are you now?⁴

THE TYLERS: OHIO AND NEW YORK

Rufus A. Tyler, one of the great-grandfathers, came from New England. He was born in Essex, Vermont, on April 18, 1818. When he was fifteen, his

family moved to Granville, Ohio, one of the larger townships of Licking County. He finished his education there.⁵

His mother, Prudence, transferred her church membership from Vermont to the local Congregational body, one of several houses of worship in Granville. His father, Judson, did not join the church, unwittingly setting a precedent that would repeat often through the Tyler line. When it came to spiritual matters, the women of the family would lead. Prudence was reportedly “a most excellent and Christian lady,” and Rufus—like his twentieth-century namesake—was influenced by his mother’s convictions. Rufus Tyler joined the church himself through baptism at age nineteen.⁶ But his mother was not well. Some type of madness had eroded her mind, and in July 1838, at age forty-five, Prudence drowned herself. She was subsequently branded a “deranged” woman in the church records, which over the next few years also noted Rufus’s absences from communion and his eventual suspension for “neglect of gospel ordinances.” He had taught school in Granville during that interval, but by 1842 had moved several miles west to Alexandria.⁷

Shortly after relocating, Rufus helped get a bill passed in the state legislature to establish the Alexandria Literary Society. His motivation must have been more than civic, as his future descendants were endowed with an interest in literature: his daughter, son, and grandchildren would all share a love of books and learning; and his great-grandson would emerge from a classical education to become a gifted writer.⁸

In the early 1850s, New England was calling Rufus Tyler back, and he took off for unknown reasons to Clinton County, New York. There he met a woman, Sarah Potter, a native of the county and daughter of a cabinetmaker. Rufus and Sarah married in 1852 at Keeseville. Three years later, Sarah gave birth to a daughter, Jessie Potter Tyler, on March 8, 1855, at the nearby town of Black Brook. Another child came along the following year, but did not survive birth. On August 26, 1857, the Tylers were living in Au Sable Forks, a small village along the river, when the last-born member was added to the family—a son, Joel Claverly Tyler.⁹

The circumstances that drove Rufus and family back and forth across the Northeast are not known. By 1870 he had moved at least five or six times, about once a decade, from one northern hamlet to another. That July, the federal census found the family in Wilmington, Illinois, where fifty-two-year-old Rufus worked as a hardware machinist. But by the end of the year, he would make one last move, finally settling in a town where he would leave a legacy.¹⁰

THE TYLERS: MICHIGAN

When the Tylers arrived in Kalamazoo, Michigan, the place must have looked like a metropolis to them, as the town was about five times more populated than Wilmington. With all the industrial opportunities it offered, Rufus quickly partnered into one of three local lumber dealers, the one on the corner of Park and Water streets that was rebranded Tyler & Turner. While keeping busy in civic affairs, as an honorary member of the Kalamazoo Light Guard and later a trustee of Mountain Home Cemetery, Rufus also built the family a large house in 1872 that still stands at 1030 West Main Street, near Kalamazoo College. The two-and-a-half-story home, which was recommended for the *National Register*, is notable for Italianate details that include paired cornice brackets and tall, arched windows.¹¹

Jessie and Joel attended Central High School, and in 1875 both received diplomas as the only graduates of their class. In September of the following year, they enrolled at Kalamazoo College and both traveled to Philadelphia to attend the Centennial Exposition—the first “world’s fair” in the United States. After two years at the college, Jessie taught in St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1881. Meanwhile, Joel attended the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor



The Rufus Tyler home at 1030 West Main Street, Kalamazoo, Michigan.
Photo by and courtesy of Leigh Ann Theisen.

from 1877 to 1880, graduating with a master of arts degree. After college, he began teaching in St. Clair, Michigan. There he met an ambitious woman named Mary Emma Farrand.¹²

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The Farrands had lived in Port Huron, Michigan, on ten acres of what used to be the grounds of Fort Gratiot Military Reserve, near the mouth of the St. Clair River. The family's two-story, three-thousand-square-foot house, built facing north to offer a grand view of Lake Huron, was one of the largest in the area. Bethuel Farrand, a prominent attorney, and wife Laura Whitman Farrand had owned the house since 1847. Mary Emma Farrand, their second daughter, was born at the house on June 29, 1849. She would be called by her middle name.¹³

Emma was two when her mother died in 1852. Two years later, her father remarried and sold the property to Samuel Edison, whose son, Thomas, was seven years old at the time. During the family's decade in the house Thomas Edison's scientific experiments in the cellar laid the foundation for his famous, inventive life.¹⁴

From age four, Emma was raised by her stepmother, Helen Wheaton. Port Huron did not yet have a primary school, so Emma completed her early education at home before entering the public high school. Her love of literature was nurtured by Helen, who helped found the Ladies' Library Association of Port Huron in January 1866 and was appointed its first president. Emma served as financial secretary and librarian, and was part of the large audience that heard Frederick Douglass speak in February 1868 as the association's guest lecturer.¹⁵

In 1872, Emma taught music while living with her parents on the northwest corner of Eighth and Union. Later, Emma graduated from the University of Michigan with a bachelor of philosophy in 1877 and a master of philosophy in 1878. The next year, she taught English at the State Normal School in Whitewater, Wisconsin. Her sister, Laura Caroline Farrand Balentine, had founded and was president of the Somerville School in St. Clair and in 1880 brought Emma on as principal of the literary department, English literature and history. Emma met Joel Tyler, the man recently hired to head ancient languages and mathematics.¹⁶

At thirty-one, Emma was eight years older than Joel, but they were both single and intellectually compatible—and each with a parent who had helped establish a literary association. A relationship gradually developed. Joel “was

reading medicine and going abroad to do some more of it,” intending to become a doctor, as his daughter Laura recalled: “My father, you see, was getting ready to be a doctor, and he would’ve made a good one. And he met my mother and wanted very much to marry her right away. And grandfather Tyler was very generous about that. He said, ‘If that’s what you want, I’ll take you into the business right now . . . and you will have your share of my estate now instead of at my death,’ which was a lot for him to do. And so Papa went into that.”¹⁷

In 1882, after two years in St. Clair, Joel abandoned his plans to practice medicine, and went to Kalamazoo, where he temporarily moved in with his parents on West Main and accepted a job in his father’s lumber business. Paula Tyler, Laura’s sister, later believed that their father sold himself short: “He was extremely intellectual, [had] a very fine mind, wonderful sense of humor. Unfortunately, he had a factory. He wanted to be a doctor until he got engaged . . . and then he had to get work. But he wasn’t terribly interested in business.”¹⁸

Emma stayed in Port Huron, teaching another year at Somerville, but remained in contact with Joel. They married on the afternoon of August 30, 1883, at the home of Emma’s parents. Shortly after the new couple settled in Kalamazoo, Emma conceived; and on May 22, 1884, she gave birth to twins. She named the girl Laura Whitman, after the birth mother she barely knew. The boy, Hugh Claverly, shared his father’s middle name.¹⁹

Rufus Tyler turned sixty-eight in April 1886. His former partner, Frank Turner, had retired in February, and Joel was now helping run the business, which had been renamed R. & J. C. Tyler & Company. Rufus was about a month away from seeing his only grandchildren turn two years old. But even though Laura would later tell her son about her grandfather, in truth she had no firsthand memories of the man who, in a family picture, “had gray whiskers along the edges of his cheeks and little corners on his collar” and “did not look very happy.” On May 6 Rufus felt poorly all afternoon and by 9:00 p.m. complained of pain in his left side and arm. His visiting brother-in-law, Dr. Ira Fisk, told him there was no cause for alarm. When Fisk returned an hour later, Rufus Tyler was dead of “paralysis of the heart.” A private funeral was held three nights later at Mr. Tyler’s home, which he had built the previous year on the corner of Cedar and Park, former site of the Plymouth Congregational Church—the same denomination that had “suspended” him in 1847 for “neglect of gospel ordinances.”²⁰

Joel Tyler continued to run the lumber business with help from his uncle Ira. But Joel was increasingly plagued by illness during Michigan’s harsh

winters; and with his father no longer living, he began considering a move south to a milder climate, likely at Ira's suggestion. "And that was because the climate in Michigan was just killing our father," said Laura, who called his condition "grippe" and claimed he got it "every winter, very badly, and couldn't stand the snow and the damp." Although the archaic term usually referred to influenza, Laura may have been describing a recurring cold or other respiratory ailment.²¹

THE TYLERS: TENNESSEE

Around that time, Joel "and two or three other men up there heard about the wonderful uncut timber in the mountains of East Tennessee, and how cheap it could be bought," according to Laura. Except for small, local logging operations, Smoky Mountain timber had been largely untapped, partly due to the absence of any efficient method of transporting logs. "And they made them a party and went down into the mountains below Sevierville, and bought quite a number of thousands of acres down there, somewhere near Townsend, and all that part of the country," said Laura.²²

Between July 1888 and June 1889, Joel invested in 2,200 acres of Smoky Mountain timberland in Sevier County, Tennessee, not far from Gatlinburg. One corner of the tract, which was deeded to R. & J. C. Tyler & Company, was located near the summit of Round Top mountain, roughly two and a half miles due north from Mount Le Conte. Another corner touched Roaring Fork Creek. "Wonderful timber," said Laura. "And Papa was the judge of timber. He'd learned to go through the woods and estimate it, and all that." Joel had heard of a new train line that was to be cut through the area, which was necessary for hauling timber. "So they bought with the assurance that there was going to be a railroad put through there, just right away, which would've made it very profitable." Joel held onto the acreage, expecting to hear updates about the railroad project. "And years went by, and years went by. No railroad," Laura said.²³

As it turned out, the railroad did not go through as expected, and Joel held on to the land in vain for a decade before selling it ("for about what they'd paid for it," according to Laura) in 1899—just a year before a Pennsylvania man established the Little River Logging Company several miles to the east, starting his own railroad a few years later.²⁴

Although Laura was only four years old at the time of her father's timber expedition, she later recalled the stories he told after returning home—tales that painted East Tennessee and its people as strange and "wild":

I remember when Papa came back to Kalamazoo from that trip. We were little things and didn't understand where he'd been . . . But he came in. I think Mama was dressing us in the morning. He was telling different things about it, how different it was down there. And they'd been invited to sleep in a cabin with a family who were being hospitable to them, but it was perfectly impossible, these three men and the whole family all in one room, and no air to breathe. So they went out and slept in their tent. And Papa drew a thing out of his satchel, a lump of something brown. And he said, "What do you think that is?" I said, "It's a rock." He said, "No, it is corn pone. They eat it down there." And then he told about some girl . . . she was eating green apple parings. And her mother said, "Don't eat no more of them apple parings, they'll make you sick." That struck me as a very peculiar thing. I got some funny impressions of the place. It was very wild, of course, in those days.²⁵

With his sights already on the region, Joel somehow learned of a machine company, Knoxville Mill Supply, owned by William Savage, which would soon be in need of a new partner. "He'd met this Mr. Savage, W. J. Savage, an Englishman," Laura remembered. "And he was already in it in a small way, this flourmill machinery. And they went in together and built it up." William Savage, like Joel Tyler, was the son of a lumber dealer. Savage had left England for Canada and worked his way down to Knoxville in 1884, where he installed mill machinery at J. Allen Smith's White Lily Flour plant—the building of which still stands on East Depot Avenue. Younger brother Arthur Savage, though not as civically outgoing as William, was a talented millwright himself and later built a well-known rock garden in Fountain City.²⁶

In early November 1891, the Tylers moved to Knoxville. Eleven years earlier, the city had trailed Kalamazoo's population by about 2,200. However, the 1890 census revealed that Knoxville's citizenry had increased by 132 percent in a decade—from roughly 9,700 to about 22,500—while Kalamazoo gained only about 6,000 persons during the same period. The Tylers' home at 2309 Magnolia Avenue was located a couple miles east of downtown, in a suburb whose street was "one hundred feet wide and well graded its whole length" and judged to be "one of the handsomest thorough-fares in the city." The streetcar track ran down the center of the avenue, "leaving a wide road on either side for carriage drives, and both sides . . . set out in shade trees." However, road maintenance in the city center had not kept up with the traffic increase. More than a year after the Tylers arrived, Knoxville leaders were still deciding between brick and asphalt paving to replace downtown's macadam, or crushed rock, roads, which "during a wet spell" looked less like "credible city street[s]" and more like "fields recently plowed for spring corn planting."²⁷