

*Divergence: A Southern Short Story*

By

Jennifer Sienes

The air was so heavy and humid, it felt to Maddie as if she was breathing through a wet rag. Or maybe it was the pain of betrayal that lay so heavy on her heart, it was a crushing weight on her chest. Clear thought was as fleeting as the blink of the lightning bugs she'd observed only a few nights ago when she was still naïve to the truth of her marriage. A truth that no amount of running would change.

“You can try to escape your problems, child,” her mama once told her. “But you take yourself with you.”

If only Mama were still alive, Maddie would have retreated into her loving arms. Instead, she wandered through the historic district of Savannah, Georgia as if immersing herself in the past could bring clarity to the present. The plane ride from Knoxville was a blur, as was the Uber from Hilton Head Airport. She didn't even remember packing the small carry-on bag she now dragged along the uneven walkway. Her mind had been plagued with Eric's pleas for forgiveness and her desperate need for escape.

She wandered through Forsyth Park under the canopy of Spanish moss dangling from the thick branches of oak trees that might have been here when General James Oglethorpe himself walked these grounds. What had life been like nearly three hundred years ago? Probably wouldn't have been a whole lot of sympathy for a wife whose husband had strayed. Women were merely chattel in those days, not unlike slaves. Worse than slaves since Oglethorpe had mandated that Georgia would not take part in that despicable practice.

As day gave way to dusk, Maddie found herself on Bull Street. With each couple she passed walking hand-in-hand, her throat tightened with tears she'd thought were spent. How many times had she urged Eric to come away to Savannah with her? He'd been more interested in hunting trips with the guys or playing golf in his spare time than taking romantic trips with her. He didn't care much about history or architecture or art. Or her, apparently. Wasn't his affair proof of that?

Rain started to fall as she approached the Mercer-Williams House, a place where music and literature juxtaposed years apart in its bizarre history. Johnny Mercer of “Moon River” fame and, more recently, Jim Williams who killed his lover in this very house years after Mercer was dead and gone. That event gave birth to *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. Johnny Mercer, just like Eric, wasn't a faithful husband. He'd

had an affair with a young Judy Garland. Was every story steeped with disappointment and infidelity? Were there no happy endings?

Maddie swiped at the rain that dripped from the end of her blond bangs and continued her trek down Bull Street until she arrived at the Six Pence Pub. Another reminder of an unfaithful husband. It was getting dark, and she had no clue where she'd spend the night. It was the height of the tourist season, and she didn't relish the idea of sleeping on a park bench. She'd have to think about her next move, but not before she had something to fill her belly. When had she last eaten?

Once inside the pub, Maddie spotted an empty stool at the bar. She shivered when the air-conditioned cold raised goosebumps along her damp arms. Why hadn't she thought to bring a sweatshirt? After tucking her carry-on in front of the stool, she hiked herself into the tall chair between an older man who appeared to be alone and a woman who was glued to her companion.

"What can I get for you?" The tall, lanky bartender loomed over Maddie as he swiped the bar with one hand and slipped a paper coaster in front of her with the other.

"Can I order food here?"

"Sure." He reached under the bar and produced a menu then moved away.

"You look cold." The older man's observation cut into Maddie's perusal of the menu.

Her gaze flicked over him only long enough for politeness' sake. He appeared harmless, although Maddie had been fooled before. He wore a wide-brimmed tan hat with a black band over curly blond-gray hair pulled back into a ponytail. His full beard and mustache were the only salvation of his otherwise effeminate appearance.

"It's the air conditioning," Maddie mumbled before focusing again on the menu.

"Doesn't help that you're dripping wet," the man said. Could he not take a hint? "Got caught in the rain, did you?"

She swallowed a sigh. "Yes. I should've known to carry an umbrella." That would have required her to think clear enough to bring one along with the forgotten sweatshirt.

"Name's Paul." He tipped his hat and offered a smile that peeked through the blond-gray facial hair.

“Maddie.” She pushed the menu aside. Unless she was rude, there seemed to be no way to deter him.

The bartender reappeared. “You decide yet?”

“Shepard’s pie,” she told him. “And sweet tea.”

“You got it.” He turned to her new acquaintance. “You want another Sazerac, Paul?”

“Appreciate it, Aaron.” He glanced at Maddie. “Can I buy you a drink?”

She choked back a laugh at the preposterous notion that Paul might be flirting with her. With her hair plastered to her head and mascara smudged beneath her puffy, red-rimmed eyes, he most likely felt sorry for her. “That’s kind of you, but no thanks. I’ll stick to tea.”

Paul nodded and waved Aaron away. “You from around here?”

She shook her head. “Knoxville.”

“Ahh.” His mustache twitched. “I lived there for a short time. Right after my first wife and I got divorced. Are you on vacation or something?”

Maddie watched as Aaron approached with her sweet tea. “Or something.” She smiled her thanks to Aaron and unwrapped the straw he set down beside her glass.

“Do you like movies?”

Paul’s question came so out of right field, Maddie merely raised her eyebrows at him.

“This here restaurant is well known for a movie that came out ’bout twenty-five years ago.”

“1995,” Maddie confirmed. “*Something to Talk About*. Julia Roberts and Dennis Quaid.” She tilted her head toward the front window. “She was driving down Bull Street and caught him sitting at the front table with another woman. They had quite a row right there in front of everyone.” Maddie could relate. Hadn’t she all but taken off Eric’s head with her own accusations?

“Ahh.” Paul smiled. “So, you are into movies.”

She stirred her tea with the straw and tried a smile of her own. It felt stiff as if the muscles had atrophied. “Not so much into movies as I am into Savannah.”

His gaze narrowed. “You married, Maddie?”

She sighed. “Yes, for the moment.” She drew a sip through the straw while Aaron traded Paul’s near-empty glass for a full one then slipped away again. He moved from patron to patron with the ease that came from familiarity. Maybe she should become a bartender. She could lose herself in the lives of others, like Billy Joel in “The Piano Man.”

“For the moment, huh? That sounds cryptic.” He shifted in his seat and raised his glass to his lips.

“Let’s just say I’m weighing my options.” She wasn’t comfortable being the focus of their conversation. “You said your first wife.”

His blond brows shot up and disappeared beneath the band of his hat. “Huh?”

“Earlier.” She waved a hand in the air. “When you were talking about living in Knoxville.”

“Ahh.” He nodded. “Yes. Janice was her name.”

“Are you married now?”

He grimaced and shook his head. “Twice married and twice divorced.” He raised his index finger. “Gained enough knowledge to know what makes a marriage work, though.”

Maddie bit the inside of her cheek to keep from asking if he knew so much, why he was divorced. “Do tell,” she said instead.

“You gotta invest in each other’s lives. Take me for instance.” He paused to take a sip of the Sazerac then wiped his mustache with a slender finger. “Janice and I never did march to the beat of some drummer That’s all well and good in the beginning, but eventually...” He saluted her with his drink. “You got to have common ground. Do you and your husband do things together?”

Maddie frowned and shook her head. “We used to.” Their focus had shifted over time to the kids’ extracurricular activities. Sports, music lessons, school projects. Little by little, those things had taken precedence over their lives while their marriage eroded. The busyness overwhelmed everything, including their relationship with God. When was

the last time they'd attended church? When they first married, they'd vowed to make Jesus the center of their lives, and now He received the smallest sliver of their time, if any at all.

Eric might have betrayed her, but they both betrayed the Lord, leaving the door wide open for the enemy to slip in and do some damage. She ran a shaky hand down her face. *What have we done, Father? Is there any way back to You?* The words that rushed through her mind took flight to the heavens.

“Maddie?”

It took a moment for Maddie to realize someone was talking to her, and it wasn't Paul. She whipped around to see Eric standing behind her, water dripping off his dark hair and down his face. How had he found her? Could it be the Lord hadn't given up on them after all?

In all their years together, Maddie had experienced an array of emotions—joy, desire, frustration, anger...the list was endless. Shock was not one of them. Until now.

“What are you doing here?” She squinted at his rain-drenched form. “And how in the world did you find me?” Her mind spun a quick scenario. Did he have her followed? Maybe he hired himself a private detective. *Get a grip, girl. You've been watching too many cop shows.* Besides, she'd barely been gone long enough for him to notice.

Eric held up a hand revealing his iPhone. “Find my phone.” He shrugged and gave her a sheepish smile. “Can't believe it actually worked.”

Maddie couldn't believe he even knew the app existed. It took nearly a year to teach him how to attach a Word doc to his email.

“Ma'am, here's your food.” Maddie craned her neck to acknowledge Aaron. “Careful. The plate's hot. Can I get you anything else?”

*What do I do now?* Paul sat on one side watching the interaction like they were a live reality TV show. The couple on her other side hadn't yet come up for air, and her husband stood behind her like an abandoned puppy. Ten minutes before, she'd been starving. Now the smell of the shepherd's pie had her stomach knotted and churning.

Maddie fumbled in her wallet for a twenty and set it on the counter then glanced at Paul. “It's all yours if you're hungry.” She slipped the handle of her purse over her shoulder and wrestled her roller bag from between the stool and bar. Only the good Lord knew where this confrontation would lead, but she wasn't about to let it take place in a crowded restaurant.

“Let’s go,” She threw at Eric as she passed him.

Once outside, she closed her eyes and drew in a deep, cleansing breath. *Now what?* The rain had stopped, but the humidity had spiked to a near intolerable level. Sweat trickled down her temples and the back of her neck.

“Can we talk?” Eric’s shoulder brushed hers as his hand rested on the low of her back. “I came all this way—”

She held up a hand. “Don’t.” It was both a command and a plea. She kept her eyes averted, unable to look at him. “Where are the kids?”

“I left them with my parents.”

*Great.* Now her in-laws would have a front row seat to her humiliation. Wasn’t that just perfect?

“Don’t worry. I told them I was surprising you with a weekend getaway.” At least he’d had the foresight to cover for her. Or was it for him? “Where are you staying?”

Maddie shrugged. “I haven’t the foggiest? You?”

“The only reservation I booked was my flight out here.” He stepped around her, so they were face-to-face. “Look at me, Maddie. Please.”

A couple walked past them, and Maddie could feel their curious stares. She glanced at Eric in the waning light, and her eyes welled. “How did we get here?”

He thumbed a tear from under her cheek. “I messed up. Big time. I don’t want to lose you, Mads. I’ll do anything if you’ll just give me another chance.” He hitched the strap of his bag higher onto his shoulder. “Can we at least talk?”

She hesitated. If they’d done that months ago, they might not be here now. “Forsyth Park is about four blocks from here. Plenty of benches.” As she crossed the street, Eric took the roller-bag from her, leaving her hands free. Chivalry wasn’t dead, even if it was too little too late.

“The trees here are incredible.” Eric tilted his head back to glimpse at the ancient live oaks. “Is that Spanish moss hanging from them?”

“Uh, huh.” Did he really care about the Savannah foliage or was it an attempt to soften her? If this was a romantic weekend, which it wasn’t, she would have pointed out

the Mercer-Williams House when they reached Monterey Square and reminded him of the famous trial of Jim Williams.

The canopy of trees overhead thrummed with katydids while the gardens that bordered the walkway through the square were lush with ferns, and the vibrant blooms of liriopé, azaleas, and hydrangeas. Maddie loved this town with its Victorian district and the antebellum homes. Even though she knew the horse drawn carriages were only there to accommodate tourists, she could almost believe she was living in a different time. Suspended reality. But trying to escape real life would lead to more disappointment. Eventually, she'd have to go back.

Eric interrupted her reflection. "Would you live here if you could?"

"Savannah?" She shook her head. "My life is in Knoxville with the kids."

"And what about me?" The question was tentative. Vulnerability wasn't generally in his wheelhouse.

"That's something I guess we'll have to figure out." If they could. Although she'd realized before he showed up at the pub that his affair was more of a symptom than the cause of their marital problems, forgiveness seemed an impossible feat.

They crossed into Forsyth Park which was teeming with people both young and old. The wide concrete walkway was lined with park benches and old-fashioned streetlights. Live oaks dripping with moss towered above. Not far from the entrance, surrounded by moat-like water, sat the extravagant fountain erected in 1858.

"Well, that's quite a structure, isn't it?" Eric leaned against the three-foot tall wrought iron fence that enclosed the fountain along with lush caladium.

"Why'd you do it, Eric?"

He tilted his head toward an empty bench then led the way. Slipping their bags beneath it, he sat with a sigh. "I don't have an excuse that'll get me off the hook, so there's no point in giving one."

Dampness from the recent rain seeped into Maddie's jeans. Her skin was sticky and warm, but her hands were cold. Nerves? She tucked them between her thighs as she crossed her legs. "I still need to hear it." Even if it hurt. "If you can't be honest with me about that, then we haven't got a chance."

Eric shifted so he was facing her and folded his arms. "It's not like I was looking for it, Maddie. In fact, I think I was as shocked as you that it happened."

Maddie's throat closed. "I doubt that." She waved dismissively. "And that doesn't answer my question."

He ran a hand through his damp, curly hair. "It feels like we've become disconnected. There's no...no passion. We don't do things together anymore like we used to."

Her mouth dropped open. "How many times have I asked you to come here with me? Or spend some time together on the weekends?"

"Spend time on the weekends?" He barked out a humorless laugh. "When are we supposed to find time between the chores and the kids' endless events?"

Maddie's cheeks heated. Was he really blaming her for this? "You certainly find plenty of time to golf with your friends. You have no problem leaving me to clean the house and do the shopping while you go out and have fun."

A muscle flexed in his jaw. "I've tried to help, Maddie, but no matter what I do, it's not good enough."

She opened her mouth to argue then snapped it shut. The truth of that pricked her conscious. Didn't she just remake the bed the other morning when he'd already done it? She didn't even bother to wait until he was gone. Nothing he did was up to her standards. Still...was that a reason to cheat on her?

Eric reached out and touched her leg. "I'm not blaming you, Maddie. This was totally my fault."

"It's your fault that you don't love me anymore?" Tears bit at the back of her eyes. She could be hard to live with, always wanting things to be just so. Was she driving the kids away, too?

"That's not true, babe. I never stopped loving you. And I should have never gotten casual about our relationship, either."

"How long have you been unhappy, Eric?"

"I'm *not* unhappy. I'm just..." He stared in the distance as if seeking the right word. "Bored." He winced. "That sounds worse when I say it out loud. It's so petty and immature."



Maddie had been bored, too, but she didn't go out and have a fling to make things more exciting. They'd gotten so far from where they started. "So, where do we go from here?"

"I don't know, but I'll do anything if you'll just give me another chance." Was it a trick of the dim light coming from the old-fashioned street lamps or were his eyes as sorrowful as they appeared?

Maddie sighed. "Do you remember when we were first married? Or even before we got married?"

He frowned. "What about it?"

"Right before you walked into the pub, I was thinking how different it was back then. We were so committed to putting Jesus at the center of our lives. We went to church every Sunday and did couple's Bible studies. You were even teaching a men's study one evening a week."

A slight smile lifted his lips. "Remember that old guy, Joe something."

"Stewart. Joe Stewart." Maddie held onto the memory for a moment. "Sweet man." Always smelling a little of moth balls and old clothes. "He was so wise."

"He used to tell us guys that there were two rules we should always follow." Eric held up a finger. "Never, under any circumstances, be alone with a woman other than your spouse or immediate family." He put another finger up. "And always put your wife first, no matter what."

Maddie shook her head. "There you go. I suppose if you'd followed those rules, we wouldn't be here right now."

"Is it too late, Mads?" Eric took her hand. "Do you think it's possible for us to find our way back again?"

"I don't know." Maddie fought the urge to pull away from him. "This isn't a blip on the radar, Eric. You broke our marriage vows." God hated divorce, but infidelity gave her a pass, didn't it? She could leave him and justify it. But to what end?

Eric squeezed her fingers. "What're you thinking?"

"I'm angry, and hurt, and scared." She blew out a breath. The thought of walking away, starting over... "But I don't want to have regrets later. And it wouldn't be fair to the kids, either. If we get divorced, they'll be the ones to ultimately suffer."

“Okay.” He drew the word out slowly. “So, you’re going to give me a chance then?”

Maddie closed her eyes. *Help me here, Lord. I’ve gone astray, but I desperately want to find my way back to you.* A sense of peace filled her soul, and she basked in it for a time. “Three conditions,” she finally said.

“Name them.” The intensity of his eyes held hers.

“First, you will never *ever* see that woman again. If I even get a hint that—”

“Already done.” He combed his hand through his hair. “I knew the minute it happened, it was a colossal mistake. You have free access to my phone, computer, and anything else you might need to check on me.”

She folded her hands on her lap. “And we need to go back to church. We can’t do this on our own, Eric. We were foolish to ever think we could.”

His shoulders sagged. “I agree. What’s the third condition?”

“We get us some marriage counseling.” Emotion clogged her throat, and she had to swallow it down before she could continue. “I’m angry. Really, truly, spit-in-your-face angry.”

He rubbed his eyes. “I know, Mads. If it takes the rest of our lives, I’m going make this up to you. I promise.” He slipped his hand into hers and rubbed her knuckles with a thumb. “Are you tired?”

She didn’t realize how much until he asked. “Exhausted.” Her stomach rumbled. “But I’m hungrier.”

“How about we find some dinner and a place to stay for the night?”

Maddie bit her lower lip. “And then what?”

“Tomorrow’s Sunday. How ’bout we’ll find us a church to attend and take that first crucial step. What d’you think?”

Maddie nodded. It was a baby step, but they needed to start somewhere. Could be the Lord needed to allow something drastic to get their attention back where it belonged.

The End

