

# TO LIVE FOREVER

AN AFTERLIFE  
JOURNEY OF  
MERIWETHER LEWIS

ANDRA WATKINS

TO LIVE FOREVER:  
AN AFTERLIFE JOURNEY OF MERIWETHER LEWIS

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*To Live Forever: An Afterlife Journey of Meriwether Lewis* is a work of historical fantasy. Apart from the well-known actual people, events and places that figure into the story, all names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to current events or locales, or to living persons, is entirely coincidental.

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FOR MTM



## Explorer Meriwether Lewis Dead at 35

The Natchez Trace, south of Nashville, Tennessee.

Meriwether Lewis, renowned co-captain of the Lewis and Clark expedition to the Pacific and territorial governor of Upper Louisiana, died Wednesday, October 11, 1809. He was thirty-five.

Accounts suggest his death was a suicide, though murder is still being investigated. He was found with gunshot wounds to the head and abdomen. No one witnessed the incident.

Meriwether Lewis was born on August 18, 1774 near Charlottesville, Virginia. After a successful military career, he served as personal secretary to Thomas Jefferson, third President of the United States. Jefferson selected him to lead the Corps of Discovery, an expedition to find the Northwest Passage to the Pacific. Along with William Clark, Lewis guided the thirty-three person team through thousands of miles of unexplored wilderness.

Upon his triumphant return in 1806, Lewis was appointed governor of the Upper Louisiana Territory, succeeding James Wilkinson. While he accepted the appointment with great promise, colleagues noted that he struggled in the position throughout his tenure. A source said he was more outdoorsman than administrator, more scientist than politician.

In September 1809, he embarked for Washington DC, both to explain his gubernatorial affairs to James Madison's administration and to publish his prized expedition journals. No one knows why he diverted from his planned water route through New Orleans to the notorious Natchez Trace in Tennessee, where he died.

Authorities are still evaluating the circumstances of his death. Lost in mystery, may his spirit rest in peace.

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EMMALINE

A New Orleans Courtroom

Thursday

March 24, 1977

A drop of sweat hung from the end of my nose. I watched it build, cross-eyed, before I shook my head and made it fall. It left wet circles on the front of my dress.

“Emmaline. Be still, Child.” Aunt Bertie fanned her face and neck with a paper fan, the one with the popsicle stick handle.

A popsicle would be so good.

The waiting room of the court in New Orleans was full. People were everywhere I looked.

Reporters in stripey suits talked with some of Daddy’s musician friends. I loved to watch their fingers play imaginary guitars or pound out chords on their legs. Once or twice, Daddy’s band members came over to squeeze my arm or pat my head. “In spite of what they’s saying in that courtroom, we all love your daddy, Kid.”

Everybody loved Daddy. Well, everybody except Mommy.

My nose burned when I breathed, because the whole room stank like

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sweaty feet. My face was steamy when I touched it, and my lace tights scratched when I kicked my legs to push along the wooden bench. I left a puddle when I moved.

I snuggled closer to the dark folds and softness of Aunt Bertie. She turned her black eyes down at me and sighed before pushing me away with her dimpled hand. "Too hot, Child. When this is done, I'll hold you as long as you want."

I slid back to my wet spot on the bench. The wood made a hard pillow when I leaned my head against it and closed my eyes. Wishes still worked for nine-year-old girls, didn't they?

I thought and thought. If I wanted it enough, maybe I could shrink myself smaller. It was hard to be outside the courtroom, imagining what was going on inside. Behind the heavy doors, Mommy and Daddy probably shouted mean things at each other, like they used to at home. Both of them said they wanted me, if they had to fight until they were dead.

I watched Mommy's lady friends go into the courtroom: Miss Roberta in her drapery dress with flowers, Miss Chantelle all in white against the black of her skin, and Miss Emilie in a red skirt and coat that tied at her waist in a pretty bow. They all went in and came out, and they always looked at me. Miss Roberta even left a red lipstick kiss on my cheek, but I don't like her, so I rubbed it off.

Aunt Bertie took her turn inside the courtroom, leaving me to sit with a reporter. He watched me from behind thick black glasses, and he asked me all kinds of questions about Daddy and Mommy. I didn't understand much. I knew Daddy was famous, at least in New Orleans, but I didn't understand what the word "allegations" meant.

My daddy was Lee Cagney. People called him "The Virtuoso of Dixieland Jazz." He played the upright bass, and when he sang, his voice made women act silly in the middle of Bourbon Street. They cried and screamed. Some of them even tore their clothes.

I understood why women loved Daddy. I adored him, too. But some grown women sure did act dumb.

Anyway.

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None of the lawyers asked me who I wanted to be with.

The Judge said I was too little to understand, and Mommy agreed. But if they asked me, I would shout it all the way to Heaven: I wanted to be with Daddy.

When he sang *Ragtime Lullaby*, the sound of his voice put me to sleep. He always splashed in the fountain with me in front of the Cathedral and gave me pennies to throw in the water. Thursday afternoons before his gigs, he sat with me at Café du Monde, sharing beignets with as much powdered sugar as I wanted. He didn't even mind my sticky fingers when he held my hand. He wasn't always there when I had nightmares, but he came to see me first thing in the morning.

People around me whispered about Daddy's "adulterous proclivities." I didn't understand what that meant, but it had something to do with his loving other women besides Mommy. No matter what they said, Daddy didn't do anything wrong. When he wasn't playing music, he was always with me.

Wasn't he?

A skinny reporter held the courtroom door open. "The Judge's ruling." He whispered, but his voice was loud enough for everyone waiting to hear. He kept the door open, and I saw my chance.

I struggled through all the legs to the door. Mommy's red lips curled in a smile as the Judge addressed Daddy. The Judge's face was loose, like the bulldog that lived in the house around the corner, and his voice boomed in my chest. When he stood and leaned over his desk, his hairy hands gripped the gavel.

"In the case of Cagney v. Cagney, I am charged with finding the best outcome for a little girl. For rendering a verdict that will shape the whole of her life. The welfare of the child is paramount, regardless of how it will impact the adults involved."

The Judge stopped and cleared his throat. I held my breath when his baggy eyes fell on me. I counted ten heartbeats before he talked again. "Mr. Cagney, I simply cannot ignore the fact that you had carnal relations with your then-wife's lady friends repeatedly, both under your shared roof and

in broad daylight. The photographic evidence coupled with the testimonies of these poor women damns you, regardless of your expressed love for your daughter. From everything I've seen and heard in this courtroom, the evidence does not support your claim that you were set up. Justice demands that your nine-year-old daughter be delivered into the arms of the person who has demonstrated that she has the capability to be a responsible parent."

He looked around the room and sat up straight in his chair. "I am granting sole custody of Emmaline Cagney to her mother, Nadine Cagney, and I hereby approve her request to block Lee Cagney from any and all contact with his daughter until she reaches the age of eighteen. Mr. Cagney, should you violate this directive, you will be found in contempt of this court, an offense that may be punishable by imprisonment of up to 120 days and a fine of no more than \$500 per occurrence. This court is adjourned."

He pounded a wooden stick on his desk, and everyone swarmed like bees. Daddy stood up and shook his fist. He shouted at the Judge over all the other noise. "Lies! Set out to ruin my reputation—my memory—in the eyes of my daughter! I'll appeal, if I have to spend every dime of my money. I'll—"

The Judge banged his stick again, lots of times, while my eyes met Daddy's. I ran from the doorway. The room was like the obstacle course on the playground, only with people who reached for me while the Judge boomed, "Order! Order! I will have order in my court!"

Daddy's lawyer held him and whispered something in his ear. It was my chance. I ran toward Daddy and his crying blue eyes. They matched mine, because I was crying, too.

Daddy elbowed his lawyer into the railing and reached out his hand. "Come to me, Baby."

I kicked at pants legs and stomped on shiny shoes. At the front, I stuck my hand through the bars and stretched as far as I could. My fingers almost reached his when my head jerked like I was snagged at the end of a fishing pole.

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Mommy had the ties at the back of my white pinafore. Her glossy red lips fake-smiled. "I'm taking Emmaline now, Lee. Good luck to you."

She squeezed my hand. Her red fingernails dug into my skin.

"Ow, Mommy. You're hurting me."

Her high heels clack-clack-clacked as she dragged me through the chairs and down the aisle toward the waiting room. I planted my heels and tried to get one last look, my mind taking a picture of Daddy. Before we got through the door, I saw his shoulders shake. Three policemen held him back and kept him from following me. The world was blurry like the time I swam to the bottom of a pool and opened my eyes underwater.

Mommy picked me up and cradled me in her arms. Her blood-tipped fingers stroked my hair, but her lips whispered a different story, one the crowd couldn't hear. "Stop crying, Emmaline. You know this is for the best." She shifted me to the ground and adjusted the wide sash of her floor-length dress. Its sleeves fanned out as she pushed the bar on the door. I wished she'd take off and fly away.

Summer heat turned my tears to steam, and my eyes ached. Mommy struggled to pull me along through the reporters that blocked the path to the car. They shouted questions, but I didn't hear them. All I heard were Daddy's words. "Come to me, Baby."

Mommy smiled and pressed our bodies through the people. She kept her gaze glued on the car.

Aunt Bertie waited behind the wheel of Mommy's fancy red Cadillac Eldorado. Mommy always said the whole name with a funny accent. The engine was running. "There's Bertie. In you go, Emmaline. I'm ready to be done with this madness."

My legs squeaked across the hot back seat. Mommy ran her fingers under my eyes to wipe away my tears, but they kept coming. "Please. You're upsetting my daughter." She shouted over her shoulder.

The door slammed, and it was like a clock stopped. Like I would never be older than that moment. Everything would always be "Before Daddy" and "After Daddy."

Daddy.

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His face appeared in the slice of back window. I put down the glass, trying to slip through, but Mommy ran around the car. She screamed and hit him, over and over. "You stay away from her, Lee! You heard what the Judge said!"

Her black hair fell out of its bun as she pounded him with her fists. He tried to move away from her. Toward me. He reached his hand through the window and touched my face. His mouth opened to speak to me, but a policeman came up behind him and dragged him away from the car.

"I'll write you, Emmaline! Every day. I promise," he shouted. "I'll prove these things aren't true! I'll give up everything to be with you!" The policeman pushed him through the courthouse door, and he was gone.

"I'll write you, too, Daddy." I whispered it, soft so nobody but God or my guardian angel could hear. "Somehow, I'll make us be together again."

## THE JUDGE

*I leaned my weight against an upstairs window, the ruckus of her daddy's court still unfolding on the other side of a bolted door. Breath ragged. White film on glass. Wet tracks trailed from my fingers, the record of my need.*

*My craving.*

*Had I waited too long to see her again? I used to watch her. How she played hopscotch on a broken slab of sidewalk. Colored chalk and creamy skin and sing-song. I stood in the shadows until I was sure. Until I knew it was her.*

*My little beauty. It was my name for her. Before. In another life.*

*She never saw me. All those times, I hid. I waited. I scribbled letters in cipher, that code we always used, but I never mailed them. Patience would yield to my desire. For as long as I could remember, all I had to do was wait for weakness to reveal the path.*

*That was before I saw her today.*

*Eye contact was electricity. It surged through my limbs and soared around my heart. She looked at me, and she knew me. I could see her there, behind those sea-like eyes. It was almost like telepathy when I heard her voice in my head.*

*What took you so long? She said.*

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MERRY

*Thursday. March 24, 1977. New Orleans, Louisiana.*

I always came to in the same New Orleans drinking place, my journal adrift in a puddle of stale booze. I couldn't recall what happened on those pages. A record of another failed assignment, the words faded before I could capture them. Fleeting images on stained paper, encased in leather. I colored in a few words here and there, before they vanished. Became nothing. A palimpsest of another job already forgotten.

But I always remembered my life.

Two shots should have finished me.

One through the head. The other in my gut.

Some folks said I killed myself in the early morning hours of October 11, 1809. Others were sure I was murdered. I couldn't remember what happened. Someone tore out those pages. Erased those images. Took the final moments that might have given my soul peace.

But the sensational nature of my death did more than destroy my life. It took my chance to finish my journals, to spin my own story, to ensure that Americans remembered me the way I wished to be. Death blocked my view of how people thought of me.

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If they thought of me. I didn't know.

I feared my reputation was buried with my remains. As far as I knew, my rotted carcass was shoved into an unmarked grave in Tennessee.

Death led me to Nowhere, a place for shattered souls to perform a good deed for the living, to erase the negative impact of the end of my life and its potential consequences on my immortal reputation.

Could one good deed help me be remembered the way I wished to be?

But my Nowhere was a continuation of my downward spiral, the misunderstandings that haunted the end of my life. I couldn't salvage my name, but failure didn't destroy the urge to try again.

And again.

Until I just wanted Nowhere to end. I craved Nothing.

I blinked. Centuries of embers caught in my nostrils, and fuzzy outlines shifted in the dark. Like every time before, he was waiting on me.

I couldn't recall where I'd been, but I always remembered the Bartender.

"Merry. Knew I'd see you again. What'll you have?"

He showed me his back before I could reply. Me, I rattled the exits, one by one. My sweaty hands slipped off the door handles. Perspiration burned in my eyes. That's what I told myself it was. Tough men, real leaders, we didn't cry.

Just outside, the crowd swayed beyond the cracks in the shutters. Random glimpses of life mingled with my reflection in the wavy glass. Voices drunk with booze and the promise of mayhem. I shouted, but my voice dissolved in the heavy air on my side of the divide.

The Bartender rattled his fingers on the counter. "You know them doors won't open, Merry."

I rested my forehead on blackened stucco. Why did I always fail? Time after time after time? What was next for me? A man with my skills ought to be able to see the way through Nowhere.

How I craved the end.

Resigned, I dragged my fingers across the fog on the window and stumbled back to my seat. It was always mine. Every time.

The Bartender, he stayed in his spot in the back corner. The muscles in

his arms worked as he poured the dregs of others down the crusty sink. I squinted into the murk of the place, hoping for some company, some other lost spirit to let me know I wasn't the only one stuck here, the only fool who made this choice.

Glass clinked on glass. "You just missed my last guest. She drank up my top shelf Scotch. Hope you weren't thirsty for that."

"Give me a beer. Draft is fine."

He stopped dumping wet remainders down the drain. Set his amber eyes on me. "Sure you don't want something stronger?"

I scanned the glittering rows of glass bottles on the shelf behind the bar. What mixture might dull the edges of another failure? Whiskey was reckless. Vodka was for the drinker who wanted to disappear into his surroundings. Gin fellows possessed a snooty sophistication I found repellent. Wine-drinking boys were prissy. Draft beer was Every Man.

Every Man wanted to be remembered.

I closed my eyes and imagined myself as an Every Man, not a Nowhere Man.

"Beer's powerful enough."

He made casual work of pulling a foamy pint.

"You want food?" Bubbles frothed onto the sticky wood in front of me as he slid the beer my way. They turned liquid, puddled around the bottom of the glass. I studied my drink and made him wait. Weakness meant letting the Bartender guess what I was thinking.

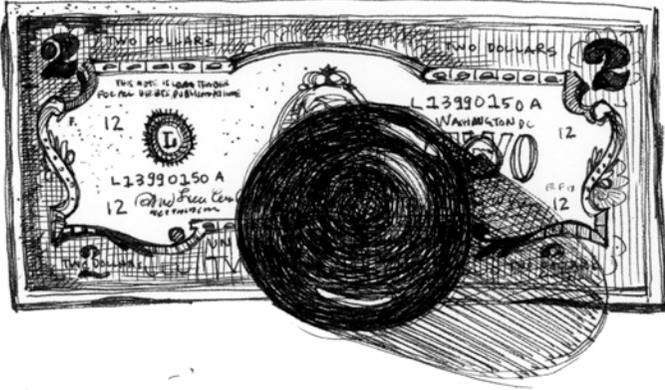
I picked up the slick glass and downed it in one long draught. Foam sloshed in the bottom when I set it down in a sloppy ring. "I think I'll just get right to my next job. You know I can't abide it here."

Firelight flickered behind his eyes.

"Suit yourself. You got any money left this time?"

I rooted around in my damp jeans, my shirt pockets. In the front slot of my black leather jacket, I found a single note. Crisp. Clean.

I unfolded it slow. Tasted bile. Thomas Jefferson studied me from the face of a two dollar bill. I stared back into those familiar eyes while the Bartender laughed.



“I got new tricks, too. You ain’t the only one can change things up.”

Glasses crashed into the flagstone floor as I leaped over the bar. When I grabbed him, the front of his shirt was soft in my fingers. “Why is it always goddamn Jefferson? You know he abandoned me, right? At the end? He was happy to let everyone think I killed myself. Never even sent anyone to try and suss out the truth. I worshipped him like a father, and he let me go down in history as the ultimate prodigal son.” My voice caught in my throat.

He shook free of me and stepped back, his boots crunching through shards of glass. “I don’t make the rules here, Merry.”

“Rules. I’ll never figure out the rules in this place.”

“Hey, don’t blame me for your predicament.”

My nostrils flared against the stench of spilled alcohol and smoke. Even as I balled up my fist to hit him, I knew he had me cornered. Boxed in. It wasn’t his fault I couldn’t get things right.

His eyes softened. “You seem to be in a hurry, and I didn’t want you to run off without your two. That thing is supposed to be your good luck charm.”

“These scraps of funny money haven’t made any difference the last seven or eight assignments.”

“A dozen, Merry. You’re up to an even dozen.”

I slumped onto my stool. Thumbed through the pages of my journal. A word here. A scrap of letters there. No hidden message to guide me past the obstacles of Nowhere. To help me avoid the same mistakes. Every Nowhere appearance was new. I couldn’t remember them once I failed. Who I met. What I saw. No matter how I arranged what I managed to save from my other outings in Nowhere, I couldn’t make sense of the remnants of twelve times tried.

Twelve times failed.

“So, this is number thirteen. Can I just go ahead and skip this one? Have another drink?”

“You been around long enough to know that ain’t how it works.”

“Goddammit. I know how Nowhere works. I just can’t seem to make it work for me.”

I closed my eyes and relived the moment Nowhere found me, when I looked into my own dead eyes being covered over with the dirt of a hole that was too shallow to hold me. It was a pauper’s burial. An unmarked grave. I was barely cold.

That was when I saw it: a chunk of black leather. It stuck out of the ground at the head of my grave. I pulled it from the dirt, and when I opened it, I read these words:

*Remembrance is immortality.*

*Make people remember your story your way.*

*Come to Nowhere.*

My story was already in tatters. Newspapers trumpeted the supposed details of my apparent suicide. Two men who knew me best—William Clark and Thomas Jefferson—supported that tawdry version of events. Faced with a sensational story, no one cared about the truth.

With one muttered *yes*, I stepped through a portal. Woke up in a New Orleans bar.

The clink of ice teased me back. The Bartender stirred a sulfur-tinged cocktail and pushed it my way. “Seconds aren’t allowed, but I’m feeling charitable today.”

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Liquid heat lit up my nostrils. “What is it?”

“A Thunderclapper. Of all my customers, I thought you might appreciate it.”

An homage to the pills members of the Corps of Discovery took for every conceivable ailment. We called them ‘thunderclappers’ because they gave us the runs. Clark was always partial to them. I had to smile at the memory of him, running off to empty his bowels behind a rock. Afraid he wasn’t going to make it.

I raised the glass and sucked the mixture down. Fire ripped through my gullet. Erupted behind my eyes.

The Bartender smirked while I coughed up smoke. “Think of it as a cleansing fire. Erases what’s come before.” He paused. Leaned his burly frame over the counter and touched my sleeve. “You know this is your last shot, right?”

“Thirteen is my last chance?”

“Yep. You fail this time, you get to be a bartender. Your life will be erased from human history. Nobody will remember you, and what’s worse, you won’t remember you, either. You get to live forever, though. Slinging booze you can’t drink in a room you can never leave.”

I looked at his weathered face and wondered who he’d been. What was his story?

How would it feel to forget oneself? To never again close my eyes and see the sun set over the Missouri? To fail to hear Clark’s laugh whisper through the trees? To be Nobody?

I wiped my brow with the back of my hand. Whispered my plea. “Tell me. Tell me how to finish this. Please.”

He pushed a button on the cash register, and the drawer popped open, a fat wad of bills on one end. He picked it up and tossed it from hand to hand. “I had my own failures, Merry. That don’t mean I can remember them. I’m just here to do my good deed. To lubricate your ego a little and send you out again.” He stopped and slid the cash across the bar. “This ought to be enough to see you to the end.”

“Five hundred? That’s too much.”

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He flicked his eyes to the door. A rattle crescendoed through wood and glass. “Not in 1977, it ain’t.” He swabbed the bar with a stained towel. “Look, Merry. I got another customer coming. Don’t keep making the same damn mistake, all right?”

I grabbed his grimy t-shirt. “What mistake? Tell me.”

But instead, he shook free of me. Leaned over and took something out from under the counter. “Here. You lost your hat, and you’ll be needing another one.”

I looked from it to the two dollars crumpled in my other hand. Jefferson’s stare launched me into the streets, patrolling like a lunatic. Searching, seeking the unknown someone who could save me. Rewrite my story. Release me from Nowhere to find whatever was next for a broken soul like me.

And so it began.

Again.

SO AMAZING...IT'S SUCH FUN  
TO FIND A BOOK THAT'S TRULY ORIGINAL.

- HANK PHILLIPPI RYAN

A COMPELLING READ.  
COURAGEOUS AND WONDERFULLY TOLD.

- PORTLAND BOOK REVIEW

A THOROUGHLY ENJOYABLE READING ADVENTURE  
UNLIKE ANY OTHER. GIVE IT A TRY— I DARE YOU!

- CASSANDRA KING, NY TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

EXPLORER MERIWETHER LEWIS HAS BEEN STUCK IN NOWHERE SINCE HIS MYSTERIOUS DEATH NEARLY TWO CENTURIES AGO. HIS LAST HOPE FOR REDEMPTION IS HELPING NINE-YEAR-OLD EMMALINE CAGNEY FLEE HER MADAME MOTHER IN NEW ORLEANS AND FIND HER FATHER IN NASHVILLE. TO GET THERE, MERRY MUST CROSS HIS OWN GRAVE ALONG THE NATCHEZ TRACE, WHERE HE DUELS THE CORRUPT JUDGE, AN OLD FOE WHO HAS HIS OWN DESPICABLE PLANS FOR EM.



ANDRA WATKINS IS THE FIRST LIVING PERSON TO WALK THE ENTIRE 444-MILE NATCHEZ TRACE AS THE PIONEERS DID PRIOR TO THE RISE OF STEAM POWER IN THE 1820'S. A CELEBRATION OF THE 2014 RELEASE OF *TO LIVE FOREVER: AN AFTERLIFE JOURNEY OF MERIWETHER LEWIS*, THIS AMAZING ADVENTURE HAS ALSO INSPIRED HER UPCOMING MEMOIR, *NOT WITHOUT MY FATHER*.

