

MY STREAM WITHOUT A NAME

An Autobiography

by

Rebecca Dial

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Rebecca Dial

Dedicated
to
Grace Jordan
*Former Director of The Congressional Club's
Creative Writing Workshop*
and to
Past and Present Workshop Members



Top: Grace Jordan, former director of the Congressional Club's Creative Writing Workshop, and Rebecca Dial.

Bottom: Workshop members at work and picnicking at Havenwood.

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REBECCA DIAL — Author of:

Biographies:

True to His Colors—A Story of South Carolina's Senator Nathaniel Barksdale Dial—a factual novel, published in 1975.

My Stream Without a Name—an autobiography, published in 1976.

Prize-Winning Plays:

No Dogs Allowed—A three-act fantasy.

The Pillar of Cloud—A three-act drama with Negro spirituals and an all-Negro cast.

Undertow—a three-act drama with an all-woman cast.

Lifting the Veil—a one-act drama.

A Social Success—a one-act comedy.

Other Plays:*

Fetters, Wishes, and Quenchless—three-act comedies.

The Voices, Air, Juice, The Left Wing, and Horseshoes—one-act plays.

Swamp Dwellers, Neighbors Next Door, and John Brown's Body—radio plays.

The Little Mermaid and The Well of the Star—radio adaptations.

Plays for Children and Young People:

Christmas Eve in Bethlehem, The Voice of South Carolina, and The Spirit of Christmas.

A TV Serial:

Fun With Books—A summer program with and for children, Station WMAL, Washington, D. C.

A Film Treatment:*

A Southern Senator, True to His Colors—A dramatization of the biography, *True to His Colors.*

For Special Occasions:

Mirrors of Washington—a number written and produced in collaboration with Mrs. James Cantrill of Kentucky for the Congressional Club's annual First Lady's breakfast in 1922, honoring Mrs. Warren Gamaliel Harding.

Various monologues, articles, speeches, poems, and sketches.

A Published Play:

Sand—a three-act comedy, written and produced for the benefit of the Opportunity School, for underprivileged adults, Columbia, S. C.

* Have not been produced to date.

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Foreword

At a time of life when a retiree normally dreams of leisure and relaxation, I began a new venture—development of a haven for friends to come for refreshment of mind and spirit. “Havenwood,” the home I purchased on an overgrown wooded Virginia acre, seemed to be the perfect answer.

This story deals with the many problems I encountered, especially about the little stream traversing it, at times its very existence threatened. Although it had no name, its pristine beauty was the magnet drawing me to the spot. To me it was the heart of Havenwood. With faltering faith and resources sorely taxed, I went through a long struggle to preserve both the stream’s treasured charm and the wellsprings of my own spirit.

Grateful for God’s guidance, sustaining power, and vast enrichment, I commend my story told in *My Stream without a Name* as testimony of assurance to questing fellow-travelers.

In God, ever-present, let us trust.

(To prevent possible embarrassment, in a few cases fictitious names are used.)

Chapter I

Will the Bargain Be Sealed?

Excited as a school girl rather than an old-maid school teacher, nearing retirement, I moved from room to room in the first home of my very own, repeating, “Is this mine? Is this mine?”

From every window of my newly purchased Cape Cod in a Northern Virginia suburb, almost within sight of the nation’s capital, I had vistas of woodland. I was most thrilled by having a stream border my property. In fact, that was my reason for buying it.

Can you imagine deciding to buy before you see inside the house or even know the price? That’s what happened to me. Out driving on a lovely spring day with Mabel and Susie Lane, friends who lived near us in Washington, I first spied the house with its woodland setting and a “For Sale” sign that seemed to flag me down. Immediately, I called for Mabel to stop.

“What for?” she asked as she put on the brakes.

“I want to get out and look around,” I explained as I stepped from the car.

“The house isn’t open,” Susie said.

“It isn’t the house that I want to see.” Glancing at the newly built mauve brick Cape Cod, I hurried across the lawn toward the forest.

Quickly I went through the builder’s debris, across a thicket that was beginning its spring growth, and on into the woods until I came to the stream which somehow I knew must be there. Such a spot so near a city! Those leafy branches outstretched as if in benediction over the fern-covered banks of a clear-as-crystal stream.

Instantly I knew I had found the place for the retreat I planned to have. I would call it “Havenwood.” As Mabel and Susie kept calling, I stood still, feeling that I never wanted to move.

On my way back to the car I walked around the house, which

seemed to be substantial and fairly roomy, with an upstairs and a basement. It looked as though it would suit my needs.

When I stopped to note the number on the sign, Susie asked, "What are you doing that for?"

"I'm going to buy it," I answered as I got into the car.

"Not in this jumping-off place!" Mabel remonstrated. Then with added force, "A dead end!"

Glancing up the street at the unpretentious but well-kept homes, set in roomy lawns colorful with May flowering, I said, "It's secluded and ideal for my retreat."

Mabel replied coldly, "I don't know what you mean, but I think it's idiotic. You must be joking."

"I've already named it. How do you like the sound of 'Havenwood'?"

On the way home Mabel lectured, "Rebecca, you have always been a sensible woman, a teacher. You're not young now and to go off on a crazy idea like this! Imagine leaving your comfortable home with your mother, where you even have a servant to care for the house and do the cooking. You're no cook! And miles from town."

"It can't be over ten, Mabel."

"So what? The last house on a dead end street, in a dinky neighborhood. What would your father, the Senator, say? And your mother? How can you leave her?"

"And your friends? You would lose touch with everything," Susie chimed in. "You would have to give up your job, too, wouldn't you?"

She was right about the job. Mabel was right about some things, too. To live any distance from the city without a car was something to think about. And leaving Mother would be hard.

Just the same, I lost no time calling the number on the sign and arranging with Mr. Trapp, the owner-builder, for an appointment the following week. Mr. Trapp was a dumpy individual, blond and bland. However, he had little occasion to use his talents in selling me his property. After one trip to the house with him, I put up the money for the option, which gave a month for settlement.

I wanted to make cash payment and arranged with my Washington bank to finance it for me. By sacrificing some stocks, I raised over half of the amount I needed and agreed to four and one half percent

interest on a loan for the balance. This would amount to \$40.00 quarterly. Since the bank would allow me to pay off the principal at my own convenience, I didn't run the risk of being caught in a jam before my retreat was established. Mr. Trapp agreed to my plan although he had to pay for cancelling his commitments to the company which financed his construction costs.

Mr. Bishop, a friend of my father's in real estate, drew up our contract. In it he listed a number of things for Mr. Trapp to finish before settlement. Alley easements shown on the plat of the Rixey Estates troubled my agent. One, thirty feet wide down the side of my property, joined another one of twenty feet across the back. The twenty-foot strip ran behind all the houses on my side of the street up to Lee Highway, two blocks away. Mr. Trapp explained that since the highway departments weren't making alleys any more, Fairfax County permitted the adjoining property owners to use the easements as if the land belonged to them. Many owners had already fenced the areas in. That settled any misgivings I might have had. It was also good news because the stream wound through the thirty-foot strip in places. Mr. Bishop seemed satisfied and I knew no better than to accept Mr. Trapp's statement.

The last month at home was a hectic one for me, sorting, eliminating, and packing. I came through the ordeal with thirty boxes of books and papers and several more containing household articles.

The strain of packing was slight compared to meeting objections by friends who said, "Prices are too high," "You'd better wait," "You might find something you like better if you looked around," "You will need a lot of servants," "Virginia is a long way off," and as if they considered it a crime, "You are too old."

One friend, as a possible decoy, tried to inject the idea of matrimony into my mind.

Like the wise old owl, I answered her with, "Who? Who?"

I was glad my mother didn't try to dissuade me. I found that she already planned to give up our home, now that our family had dwindled to just the two of us. The close bond between Mother and me had begun when she first married my father. Her presence in our home then brought a spirit of cheer that warmed my young heart after the hushed atmosphere during my own mother's long illness before her death. My stepmother's fine influence continued through

the years, and it wasn't easy to make a break now. However, both of us realized the time had come for a change, she to go into an apartment near other members of the family and convenient for her social activities, and I to be about my retreat. I was relieved to know I wouldn't be leaving her alone in that big house for long. In the meantime, she had faithful Julia living-in for protection.

Early on settlement day, July 9, 1949, with my check for payment in full, I waited for Mr. Trapp at my new home. He had given me the key the night before at Mother's. Our family's long-time friend, Dave Tyler, had brought me out before he went to work. We had with us a cot and a few things that I would need at once, and Dave would return with others that evening. Mr. Trapp was to meet me here, give me a chance to check the items he had agreed to complete, then take me to the title company office in Arlington, where Mr. Gantry would have our papers ready.

With a feeling of wonderment as if I might be dreaming, I kept asking, "Is it mine? Is it mine?"

As soon as we signed the papers it would be. I tried not to let Mr. Trapp's failure to complete the items listed in our contract disturb me too much. He had at least put up the porch banisters, although the broken pane in the living room window and several other items hadn't been touched. He'd had a month in which to complete them, too! Certainly he would come in time to do them today.

While waiting for him, I was enjoying my first hours alone in my home. Its arrangement and decoration pleased me. The living room and kitchen looked out into the woods bordering the stream. The blue linoleum in the kitchen contrasted nicely with a set of yellow dishes I already had. The walls were an off-white and the cabinets spotlessly white.

I especially liked the wallpaper in the front bedroom, with its pink dogwood sprays on a soft, moss-green background. I would furnish the room with a bedroom suite from our South Carolina home. After my father's election to the United States Senate, our family had lived in Washington and for a number of years had returned to South Carolina only for the summer months. Relatives now living in our former home would send my things as soon as I wanted them. I could hardly wait to begin antiquing the old bedroom set.

In the living room indefinite gray paper with a fleck of rose was

just right for the subdued rose rug I had selected. I was delighted to have a fireplace, and already I could picture congenial gatherings around it. A friend had given me several pairs of turquoise faille silk draperies, and these I planned to make over to fit the windows in the living room and in my bedroom, the small one at the back with a view of the wilderness.

From a side window in my room I looked out on another house built by Mr. Trapp, very much like mine, except the grounds had fewer trees and only a tiny brooklet that trickled on through my yard until it joined the larger stream. The small stream I planned to enlarge into a water lily pond.

Naturally, the basement wasn't as light and airy as the rest of the house, although it had seven windows above ground. Its greatest fault was the lack of an outside entrance.

Inadequate closet space on the first floor was also a drawback. This I would try to remedy in my plans for the second floor, where I wanted to finish two bedrooms and a bath.

Everywhere there was work for me, but I expected to have fun doing it. I should begin getting estimates for the necessary improvements. If only I had a telephone!

The time passed quickly, but what had happened to Trapp? Sitting on the back porch steps eating the sandwich and apple I had brought, I imagined I heard the ripple of the stream. How I wanted to get to it, but the spring undergrowth, now a briery wall higher than my head, looked impassable.

What could be keeping Trapp so long? Without even a book to read, I had nothing to do. There was only one straight chair on which to sit. Fagged from a late hour packing the night before, I decided to stretch out on the cot in my room. It was good to relax there, looking out at the trees. I pictured myself strolling over the grounds to the parts I hadn't yet seen, and I would do this as soon as I could cut some paths.

* * * * *

Suddenly I was sitting upright on the cot. What had happened? Where was I? Then I remembered. I had been waiting for Trapp. How long had I slept? Four-twenty and the office closed at five! I'd never make it by bus. If only I had a telephone! On this day of days

I had slept. And now to be marooned without a telephone, transportation, or friends! Trapp's negligence made no difference to me now. All I wanted was to get to Mr. Gantry's office. If I didn't appear, I supposed I would forfeit everything, even my chance of buying the house. That was it. Trapp wasn't coming at all! He had planned it this way. My world tumbled around me. I felt sick all over.

At that moment, sweeter than carillon bells sounded the rattle of Trapp's ancient Nash as he drove down the hill and pulled up in front of the house. Before he had time to turn off the ignition, I was seated beside him.

Showing surprise, he said, "I thought you would have left."

"Why are you so late?"

"I got held up."

"Unless you go faster, we'll never make it."

"You wouldn't want me to get arrested for speeding, would you?" he asked as we crept along.

"Please hurry. We must get there in time!"

In a tone tinged with disappointment, he said, "Then you are going through with it?"

Neither of us had much more to say until we reached the title company building. As we entered the reception room, a young couple came toward us.

When Trapp stopped to speak to them, I said, "I'll go on into Mr. Gantry's office."

Mr. Gantry had our papers ready but had about given us up. This tall, dignified man, with his dark hair graying around the temples, put me at ease with his quiet, businesslike manner. I was glad to sign as he requested and to hand over my check.

When Trapp joined us a few minutes later, I hoped nothing was wrong. Looking curiously disgruntled, he sat fumbling with the paper Mr. Gantry handed him.

Mr. Gantry explained, "The papers are in order and we have a cashier's check for Miss Dial's full payment."

"She's got to release me," Trapp burst out.

"Why?" Mr. Gantry asked in surprise.

"She's gypped me! My house is worth more than she is paying for it."

"She's paying the amount specified in your contract, isn't she?"

Trapp nodded, "Yes, but. . ."

"Her check is for the amount in the contract both of you signed."

"That was a month ago. Miss Dial, I will return your \$500.00 with interest if you will cancel the whole thing."

"Not so fast, Mr. Trapp. Cancelling an option isn't that easy unless both parties wish it. How do you feel about it, Miss Dial?"

"I won't consider it. Mr. Trapp, I have kept my part of the bargain, and I expect you to keep yours."

"So that is it, sir," Gantry said, "Will you please let us have your signature without further delay?"

Muttering something about "being swindled by a shrewd woman," Trapp signed.