

WISE CHILD



Dee West



An "Adult Tv" Novel



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Wise Child

By Dee West

Chapter 1

For the longest time the only thing about my dad I thought I could grab hold of was a faded old photo of a sailor, duffel bag slung over a shoulder, turning to look backwards for a moment before continuing to hurry down Granby Street in Norfolk to catch his ship. His face is blurred, perhaps because the camera caught him as he glanced back, or perhaps because the picture-taker's hand was shaking. I think the photo is from sometime in '44 or '45, and he was headed across the Atlantic. There's something, maybe in what I think I can see in the set of his mouth or the tense way his shoulders twist, that always made me sure he wasn't headed for his first

convoy run through the U-boat packs. No one would ever tell me if it was taken as he set off on his last.

He's so young in the photo, younger than I am now. He almost seems lost inside his pea coat. The duffel bag slung over his shoulder nearly dwarfs him.

I used to say I wanted to be like him when I grew up, and be a sailor on the sea.

I have a picture of my mom from somewhere back then, but it's also hard for me to read. Actually, it's a photo of a crowd of young women, in those close-cut skirts and nipped-at-the-waist jackets of the time, elaborately curled hair flying as they stride to the shipyard, smiling and eager to do their bit for the war effort. I think she's the third from the left, in the second or third rank of the group. It's hard to tell, though. Like all the girls in photo, and like my dad, she was very young, too. I'm guessing she was just 18 and that it's the spring or summer of '44, since there's no sign that she's pregnant yet, though I suppose it would be hard to read in such a small photo. And if that is indeed her, third from the left.

These days, when from time to time I turn down Granby Street on my way back to the office and the pile of typing waiting there for me, or when I happen to drive past the shipyard where my mother worked during the war years, I cannot spot where the photos were taken. I know that they were there only because of the penciled notes on the back of the photos. My mom never shared stories from those days, nor did my grandparents. Though other kids in the town

where I grew up knew stories about fathers or uncles who died during the war, and told them to each other as we waited on the bench at Little League, or played a soldier in the cornfields before they built the shopping mall, all I had was silence.

It was as if my family's loss was somehow deeper, as if something even worse had happened and that the only way to cope was simply to draw a thick soundproof curtain. The little I thought I knew for many years came in briefly-overheard but soon cut-short conversation between the grown-ups, tense silences at family gatherings, and obscure hints. From them, I wove a story together. Not the right one, as it happens, though so far everything I've said so far about them is pretty much exactly so. I'll have to fudge a few things just a bit going forward here, but eventually it will all come clear. Sitting here before the mirror, brushing my hair my 100 before-bedtime strokes, that little fellow in the baseball cap and jeans wondering over a couple of photographs seems so far away. I'd like to tell you about the path from there to here. It involves all kinds of new understandings, but you do need to go slow. I did.

I grew up in the same town as my dad and mom, far from the sea. My mom didn't want to stay in Norfolk after he disappeared. So, after we lost him, she headed home and my grandparents took us in for a time. When the new subdivisions went up on the edge of town, we moved in to the place Uncle Jack bought and where he lived with us for a time. Jack wasn't really my uncle. He was, instead, the kind of

friend who kids are told to call 'uncle'. In my family, we didn't do a lot of talking about that, either, though apparently there was plenty enough whispered elsewhere.

We lived like everybody else there, in a small house that looked like all the others on its curving street, and all the others on the next street over and the next. Those were days, after the war, when people wanted nothing more than to hurry back to what they thought was the way things had been, the way they ought to be. They wanted traditional ways and to be with other people who, like them, clung to traditional ways. My mom busied herself with the house, the cooking, with fussing over me. Jack worked downtown, leaving early, coming back late, slumping in the big overstuffed armchair reserved for him as if the sheer physical work of being the breadwinner that day had been like running a marathon or bench-pressing 500 pounds. He worked in an office, like I do now. I don't act like that.

Anyway, that's what he did until he started staying over in town from time to time, then for days at a time, and, after a while, only coming by to take me to a ball game or for a visit to his place in town. My mom was all flounces, flowers, light brushes of fingers, delicate tweaking of stray strands of hair and collars gone askew. Jack always seemed gruff and growling. Where she lightly nudged anything out-of-place back to where it belonged, he yanked, or shoved or simply said the hell with it. He led, she followed, at least as long as he was around. He, always direct and to the point; she almost seeming to enjoy to dither, laugh-

ing at how easily she was distracted. Always picture perfect in her heels and flowery dress, you'd never guess she'd been up for nights to make the outfit that she couldn't afford, patient with the yards and yards of fabric that the styles of the day demanded.

In the '60s, when the T.V. and the picture magazines showed us the long hair and tight-cut clothes just coming into fashion, I was among the first in high school to follow, as if wearing what famous musicians wore would make me a better one myself. It didn't. Also, of course, to dress like the Beats and Rockers on the coast was a kind of gesture to a town and to a way of life I had already sensed wasn't for me.

My provocation only made her sigh, and barely that. She'd hint from time to time that girls found a neat trim quite attractive, or how handsome this classmate of mine or that looked in his chinos or new Sunday suit. I'd never rise to the bait, either form. She was never one for engaging in a test of wills, and so she'd sigh and let her searching eyes peer into mine for a bit before simply leaving the matter lie. Jack, in our increasingly infrequent visits, was much blunter: "You look like a nancy-boy," he snapped, starting an argument that ranged from how I ought to join the Navy so it could make a man of me, to angry shouts and a barely-withheld blow when I asked him why he abandoned us.

As for the neighbors, the murmurings – "well, what would you expect?" — would only start to dawn on me several years later.

Well, to be precise, at the funeral. The wake was at my grandparents', old country style. I'd come in that morning from the distant city where I was living when my mother passed away. The woman I had always been told to call my Aunt Amelia, after a careful instruction that she really was a cousin of the once- or twice-removed variety, had flown in the day before, and was at our home making the arrangements. She'd picked me up at the airport, held me tightly for the longest time, with an unexpected intensity that I didn't then understand.

Amelia kept the service private, but my grandparents apparently had said if there would be no visitation at the funeral home, we had at least to let people pay their respects afterwards.

And so, in their way, our neighbors did.

"Poor dear," a woman whose name escaped me told me, cornering me in dining room, where my grandmother had set out some sandwiches and soft drinks. "Still, peace at last."

Puzzled, I didn't ask her why on earth she thought my mother's tranquil life had not brought peace.

"Such a lovely person," interjected another, whose tone suggested that she didn't mean a word.

I mumbled answers to questions about where I lived, and what I did and had I married yet, and really, are you still in school? Smug little nods and tight lips told me, after an hour or so, that low expecta-

tions were confirmed. A question or two about Jack, with knowing sidewise glances, as husbands glared at my ponytail.

My grandparents sat, shrunken and devastated, in the dark, familiar parlor, as the murmured condolences and the sickly smell of lilies filled the air. Amelia stood behind them, probably where I should have, her hands laid gently on their shoulders.

The overheated room, the whisperings, the smell of lilies, were dizzying. My suit, the one I used to have to wear for church, was too tight; I had not bothered with anything like that for several years — no one did in the college town I hid myself away in or library where I worked daytime shelving books and nights on a thesis that never seemed to jell.

I stayed as long as I could bear, but snuck off well before the last well-wishers finally left.

I drove my rent-a-car through well-remembered streets, past remembered saplings now grown to trees, past my old grade school, back to the house.

Nothing much had changed. The old piano, still in tune, the sentimental Tin Pan Alley music still piled neatly on the bench. The serious stuff — the Bach, Beethoven and Debussy that she used to say she always meant to get back to — was, as always, still buried at the bottom of the stack. The porcelain animals and figurines were still lined up neatly on the mantle, the crocheted antimacassars were still precisely centered on the sofa and the chairs. I felt, again, that air

of prim reserve, of slightly too many frills and flounces to fuss over, as if what she chose to decorate her space, just like the airy, somewhat distant way she had of talking, was meant to keep any man at a distance. Yet it wasn't completely uncomfortable for me. I, too, tended to keep others at a distance.

I ambled through the house, put away the dishes on the drying rack where she had left them, glanced into my old room with the bed so neatly made, familiar storybooks still lined up on my shelves. Only one of my posters, not racing cars or football team ones Jack had given me, but the Renoir print of a happy couple dancing, still stuck to the wall.

In her room, too, everything was just as neatly put away as ever. She was proud of her housekeeping, of the clothes that she made for herself — as stylish as anything in those downtown stores, she sometimes would relax enough to say. Not too often, though. She was too poised, or else preoccupied too much with this or that little thing, to talk about herself or what she wanted or what she dreamed. If I asked, she'd just laugh in that silvery and distant way of hers and said not to worry about her.

Who were you really, Mom? I asked myself, peering round her room.

I found no clues in the little bottles of perfume and cosmetics lined up on her dressing table. There was one picture of me on the night stand, no others photos there or on her dresser. Her dresses almost filled one half of her closet, skirts and blouses the other. I

riffled my hands through, spotted one familiar flowered pattern I remembered from so many years back.

I lifted it out, held it up against the window light, as if that might help me recall her presence.

The light was fading. It had been a long day. I yawned, then couldn't stop yawning. I slumped into the small, overstuffed armchair where she used to sit and gaze out beyond the houses to the fields beyond, perhaps even to the far-off sea.

Her dress fell across me, like a blanket, as I dozed.

I slept uneasily, in that half-awake, half-day-dreaming state you sometimes find yourself when the need to simply rest is overwhelming, and from which a memory, a dream-image, or a small sound will startle you back awake. Startled so, I saw I was no longer alone.

"Hi," I heard a deep and almost familiar voice say, "I saw the car, thought I'd check if you were OK."

I felt a heavy hand rest on my shoulder

"Don't get up, I didn't mean to bother you," as recognition dawned and I realized it was an old friend from school, who I had not seen for many years. I'll call him Andrew.

It had been years since I had seen him, or, to be honest, thought much about the days when we'd wait together at the bus stop, headed off to school. He

was a year or two ahead of me, so we didn't have classes in common, but those years of shared morning waits and idle chat made for what we both likely would call a sort-of friendship. We didn't hang around together after school or in the summers, but we'd stop and spend a minute to ask how things were going when our paths crossed. I think the fact that that would happen kept me from getting some of the grief that longhairs in the day often suffered — Andrew was a football player, and that was kind of a big deal at our school.

Feeling his hand on my shoulder now, the weight of it suddenly recalled one odd and long-forgotten moment. His big triumph, his senior year: the long pass wobbling, high and apparently out of reach, an oddly graceful leap that captured it, against all expectation, the long run to the goal. Then, as our cheerleaders danced and classmates' shouted glee swelled to fill the air, he stood for a long moment, stunned as if only then realizing that he'd finally lived every second-stringer's dream, before trotting back to the bench. But before he reached it though, he paused by me, where I stood on the sideline with the school band. He laid his hand on my shoulder and for a moment, I thought he was going to grab me, and swing me to the sky in triumph. Just then, though, his teammates surrounded him with their congratulations, and swept him away.

"Sorry I missed you at the wake," he said now. "Sorry for your loss."

His hand still lay there on my shoulder. He seemed to loom over me, from where I slipped while dozing deeper into the chair, my mother's dress still lying along my body. Lying there, I felt almost trapped by his sympathetic gaze, the pity of an almost-stranger. Embarrassed too, as if caught out at something secret, because my mother's dress lay over me, as if I'd tried it on.

He leaned closer.

"Are you OK?" he asked. "Can I do anything?"

I shook my head.

He peered into my eyes for another endless moment, lifted his hand as if to pat my shoulder.

Then, so naturally that I barely realized, he touched the top of my head.

Then, I felt him start to stroke my too-long hair.

Felt him lean still closer.

Felt his lips touch my forehead.

Brush my lips.

Press.

And kiss me.

Chapter 2

Before I could do anything, or even think of what to do, we heard the front door open and Amelia's voice calling out for me.

By the time I managed a reply, and pushed Andrew off, she had started up the stairs. I was just hanging my mother's dress back up, Andrew standing close behind me, when she entered the room.

"Everything OK?" she asked,

I flushed.

I saw her eyes dart from my face to his, and down then back to me. Her eyebrow arched.

Andrew backed away, moving behind the arm-chair.

"Let me know if there's anything you need," he said. "I'm right nearby."

"Oh?" Amelia asked.

"Just down the street," he said, then turning to me, "Back with my folks. After the divorce, you know. Just til I'm back on my feet. Anyway, just ask."

He sidled out, eyes on Amelia.

"I'm an old friend," he said. "From high school, you know."

“Ah,” she said, drawing a half-question, the barest hint of skepticism, or of laughter, in her tone.

“Yes. A close friend?”

“I’ll see myself out,” Andrew said. “You must have lots to talk about.”

“Yes,” Amelia drawled. “Lots to catch up on. Though perhaps you two do as well?”

She turned to me.

“I’ve the impression that you haven’t been back all that much,” she said. “At least, that’s what I gathered from your mother — but you know mothers, no visit’s long enough when the nestlings leave.”

She smiled.

“I’d really better go now,” Andrew said.

“Yes,” she nodded. “Yes, perhaps you’d better.”

And then to me: “You should hang that up, now. It was one of her favorites, you know. A little out-of-fashion now, that big full skirt, those flowers. Still, she always loved that style. It was so her.”

I pushed the dress into the mass of fabric in her closet, groping blindly for the rod to hook the hanger on. Tsking, she stepped over, gently smoothed the dress, touched the others into place, and closed the closet door.

“Come downstairs,” she said. “I’ll make us tea.”

We sat at the small table on the back porch, one of my mother’s favorite spots, where surrounded by her potted flowers, she could look beyond the two apple trees in our tiny yard and see the next street over, and the next, the rows of neat houses, just washed clothing dancing on the lines, the distant shouts of playing children, the reassuring domesticity of getting on with living, because that’s what the living have to do.

That was the view I had since Amelia sat me in my mom’s usual spot. She sat across from me, sipped her tea and peered at me, appraisingly, for long minutes that began to feel a bit uncomfortable..

“You look so alike,” she said.

“Alike?”

“I see your parents in you,” she said. “It’s very clear, to me.”

No one had ever told me that before. No one in our family liked to talk about the past. It made me wonder, sometimes, when I heard others talk — so many tales, about generations on a farm, or landings at Ellis Island, about camping with their fathers, or crowds of cousins at family reunions.

“Did you know my father very well?” I asked

She nodded.

“Very well,” she said, with just the slightest emphasis on the “very.”

“And my mom?”

For a moment, it seemed to me as if a memory or memories clouded her eyes.

“We were very close,” she said, at last. “As close as sisters. Maybe closer.”

It seemed the kind of thing you say at moments like that, an easy sentiment of connection when the subject is now gone forever, with all regrets and hurts and unrequited love never to be resolved. I felt as if I’d heard an awful lot of that the past few days, but still had lots of that stew of unsettled feelings roiling away in side. Impatience made me rude.

“I never saw that much of you,” I said.

“Ah?” she said. “Well, perhaps. I saw you. But after all, when you are little, what’s another adult visitor to you? And when your mother tucks you into bed, how could you know who might be downstairs, talking late into the night?”

“You?” I said.

She nodded.

“Yes, me. When I could. And when I couldn’t, there were letters — lots and lots of letters, especially at first,” she said. “I know the day you took your first

steps, what your first word was. When I could make it back, I baby-sat. Later, when it wasn't so easy for me to make it back here, I had the letters and the calls. I think I knew about every recital, each time you made the honor roll. I knew everything about you that made her proud. Everything that worried her."

"Sometimes, she seemed so very much alone," I said. "I never realized."

"Sometimes," she said, "She was."

She sighed.

"Not the easiest path, the way she chose," she said. "A very brave one, very loving one, though."

I thought: more funeral talk, more sentiment. She must have seen in it my eyes.

"Oh yes," she said. "Beneath the fluff and flounce, someone very brave. Braver than me, at any rate. She stayed, after all."

"You didn't? You're from here, too?" I asked.

She nodded.

"Born and bred," she said. "I left not long after you were born."

"I couldn't wait to leave," I said.

"I know," she said. "I heard all about it."

I thought we were heading into deeper waters now. Maybe deeper than I cared to go. My mother had never complained out loud when I left home — she rarely did anything out loud — but I had always felt a sour tendril of guilt over leaving. Impatient with her too, since there seemed so little tying her there. She didn't spend that much time with my grandparents for all they lived so close. There was a strain, unvoiced, that I sensed but could not explain. I never had the feeling she had many friends, and there were fewer and fewer children coming for piano lessons. I'd ask, only half-joking, why she didn't move — the college town I lived in was pleasant enough, or there was always Florida. When I would ask, she'd just answer with her usual: "Oh I don't know." And leave the guilt with me.

"You knew my dad?" I asked, to change the subject.

"Oh yes," she said.

I waited.

"I knew your parents very well," she said. "We couldn't have been closer, really."

"Nobody ever talks about him," I said.

"Yes," she said. "Nobody ever does."

She poured another cup of tea. Stalling, I thought.

"I'd like to know," I said.

“Of course,” she answered. “Natural enough, really. Did you ask?”

“Many times.”

“And?”

“You know my mother. Ever try to pin her down?”

She laughed at that.

After a moment, I did too. My mother could drift off to vagueness, an almost cartoon-like empty-headedness, that she could switch on whenever she wanted to get her way. It could be maddening at times, it could be charming, and often ended with her laughing at herself and making you laugh with her as the memory now made me laugh, for the first time in days.

“Well, you know,” she said, “Like Homer said, it’s a wise child who knows its father. But I’ve always thought it was an even wiser man who knows his mother.”

“I don’t think I ever came close to that,” I said.

“No,” she said. “I don’t think you ever did.”

I flushed, seeing her half-mocking, half-tender smile, a hint of pity in her eyes. I wondered if that smile was comment about me and my mother; then, because it wasn’t only tender, if she’d seen or sensed something when she’d come in. I worried that she

somehow caught a glimpse of Andrew's lips on mine. Wondered, too, about exactly how long that moment before I could do anything about Andrew's weight trapping me beneath my mother's dress had really lasted. And wondering about what it was I meant to do, before I didn't do it. .

"Maybe I can help," she said.

She reached down to her bag, pulled out a manila folder, and laid it on the table. Inside, was one of those ancient white on black photostats. A birth certificate.

"Before you look," she said. "Remember this: we're only human, all of us. You understand? If what we've done seems wrong, or like a mistake, remember that nobody's perfect. OK? Nobody wants to hurt anyone here. You understand me ? You believe me?"

"I believe you," I replied.

"OK, then," she said. "Why don't you take a look."

It was my birth certificate. Or sort of mine. My name there, on the top line. My birthday, but the year was off. It made me younger than I'd thought, put me at the right age for high school, instead of off by the year I'd been told was due to the scarlet fever that left me smaller and frailer than other boys. It was issued by Virginia, in Norfolk, not the state we lived in and the place I had always thought was where I was born. My mother's name was there, including a middle name I'd never known she had.

“Amelia, it’s a family name,” my aunt said, seeing my eyes stop there.

The next box over was for the father.

It was blank.

Stunned, I shot a glance at her.

“No,” she said, “It’s not that simple.”

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Amelia said she found the birth certificate in some papers in my mother’s room. That wasn’t quite the case, as things turned out, and I really should have guessed it from the first. It was the house I grew up in, after all. I knew every inch of it. It was a small house. There wasn’t much to know, really. But then, it turns out there’s always much to know that we don’t understand at first. Or won’t admit.

Anyway, here’s where I suppose things could feel a little awkward. I knew my mom’s room as well as any other. I had explored every corner, peered into every drawer. I knew the view out of her windows, the way her dresses filled her closet and seemed to fluff out, expanding cloud-like, when I opened the closet door. I knew the neat little lines of shoes set out next to her bedroom door, perfume and lipsticks by the mirror on her dresser. I knew the dressmaker’s dummy where her latest project hung — one there even now,



never to be completed, I guessed. I'd searched the night stand drawer where I had found those old photos of my parents. I knew, but didn't really know anything.

So, the birth certificate in hand, I left Amelia sipping tea, and went back to my mother's room. I sat on her bed, just thinking — trying to think — for a time. Downstairs, the front door creaked. I heard the murmuring of conversation, but couldn't make out the words. Didn't really care.

As I looked around the room, the dress pinned to the dummy caught my eye again. It looked more finished that I'd thought at first. It was black with a simpler, easier cut than my mother favored, with none of the pleats or folds or trimming that showed off the skills she had so patiently acquired over the years. The skirt was shorter than she liked. I stood and stepped closer for a better look. Suddenly, I realized the dress wasn't for her. Something about the proportions — the bust, maybe? the length of the waist?, I couldn't tell — made clear it was meant for someone else. I laid a hand on it, feeling the soft jersey, wondering. I lifted it gently from the dummy, watched the cloth of the skirt sway as I did.

On the dresser, to my left, I spotted another manila folder. Still holding the dress, I bent to look.

Inside, I found a photo: a snapshot, browning into sepia, the way that photos from the 40s turn. A couple, teenagers really, stood before a porch that could have been my grandparents', or any of a hundred dif-

ferent houses in the town, or any town. The boy looked the way my father would have if that other photo weren't blurred. He was the same height, same slight build, though smiling easily here. In focus now, I saw how much we looked alike. The girl next to him was Amelia.

On the back, in fading ink, the date, 1943 and a simple note: "Recital."

My father wore a white shirt and bow-tie. He'd tucked a sheaf of music under an arm. Amelia wore what looked like her Sunday best, a ribbon in her hair, a violin cradled against her chest.

I stared for quite a while at the photo, trying, I guess, to reach back across the years and understand. When I laid it back onto the dresser, I saw some other bits of paper in the folder.

One was a brittle newspaper clipping, a brief report from a school concert. Someone had written a date in 1943. Skimming, I spotted Amelia's name.

In a small envelope was a letter. Addressed to Amelia at a boarding house in Norfolk, a smeared postmark showed it was mailed in 1944. The stamp was Canadian.

"Made it back again," the letter said. "A rough time this trip, don't tell the folks. I think we're going to form up another convoy here in Halifax. I keep hoping it will end soon, then I think that's awfully bad luck to think that way. I ship with Jack again, and

he's good luck for me. I seem to lean on him a lot, and I'm glad that when you met, you liked him, too."

A telegram flimsy, addressed to my grandparents. "A boy. All well. Taking train home 16th." Sent from Norfolk, dated in June, 1947.

I read them through once, then again. They felt like hints I couldn't put together, pointing to something I didn't think I wanted to know about my mother, my father, and Jack. My Uncle Jack? I set the papers down and thought perhaps I'd put my mother's last project away.

I had just eased it off the dummy when I heard the clump of heavy steps on the stairs.

"Jack!" my aunt's voice called.

"I don't understand what the hell you think you're doing, Amelia," he shouted back, just as he pushed the door open and the shock of seeing him made me clutch the dress tightly to my chest.

"No!" he bellowed, when he saw me.

I heard my aunt clattering up the stairs now.

"Jack," she called. "Not now, this isn't the time."

"It's never the time," he shouted. "Never, ever the time."