

Truly: A Story in Three Parts

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Part One

by [James Como](#) (March 2023)



Starry Night, Matthew Wong, 2019

Those raindrops, all seeming the same but different in their being, wander down a windowpane bordering the dark of

night—drops that are us along the transparency of time. Transparent, but never fully clear, for time, like any glass, has its crazings and its different colors, lovely and beguiling.

Truly was six years old when she first intuited this truth about time.

Eventually she noticed the difference between day noises and what she heard at night. She thought, At night I don't hear noise, I hear more definite sounds, sharper, like in an empty theater, still at the edge, clear in the middle. Sometimes footsteps, but mostly voices, people a great distance apart from each other, maybe in the sky, or inside the brick walls, not shouting, never hurried, crystal clean. A car or a bus moving like push toys. She thinks, Night is its own place.

Truly was eight years old when she first grasped this truth about space.

She decided she would leave her room in the middle of the night to sneak down to the street, go up to the talkers. But when she was ready, her younger brother, Col, six years old, was awake. His name was Colin, but Truly called him Cauliflower and sometimes Collapsible. "Take me with you," he said, and when Truly said she could not, he woke their parents. "Back to bed," her father said softly, and they all went back to their beds.

The next day he was going to take all of them to Coney Island on his bus. It needed day maintenance, so they'd be able to ride back in it. Just the family! To Truly, the bus shone like a cool sun moving through the Milky Way.

When she was ten years old, gazing at the drops on the window on a certain rainy night, it came into her head that there might be many time transparencies. Tubes, for instance, within other tubes, each different in length and color, some close to another, some farther apart, still others very far away.

"I might be on one of them right now," she thought. The idea was thrilling.

When Truly was twelve she made up her mind. Col and her father, Eddie, were gone camping, and on their second night out she heard three voices.

As she ever so gently went down the steps to the front door—her mother, Adelaide, was a very light sleeper—she thought of how her brother would tease her. "You're so skinny you have to run around in the rain just to get wet." "All legs," her mother said, adding, "but so pretty."

She liked that, so she brushed her hair every night, because short hair is easy to brush and because she thought it made the dull brown color shine.

When she stepped onto the sidewalk she felt her favorite rain, light and refreshing, and fun too. And there they were across the street—that street she knew all her life as though it were another room in her house—three people conversing in a pool of light, but no rain.

A tall young man, maybe eighteen, next to him a shorter woman, maybe the most beautiful Truly had ever seen, and then a fat man of ordinary height but with plenty of muscle.

They did not seem to notice Truly, but Truly thought that somehow they did not belong together, by their manner of dressing, of standing. When she walked into the light the three stared at her in silence.

"Hello, my name is Truly. I live across the street."

"There is no street." The young man seemed angry.

"What do you want?" asked the fat man.

"You really don't belong here, sweetie," the beautiful woman said softly.

Truly stared, not with fear but with concentration, fixed, like her mother when she sewed a cross-stitch. Then she turned a full circle. She saw that the world beyond the light had disappeared, not into darkness but into a drab gray. That did not scare her, but the confusion did.

It seemed that everything and everyone had been drained—drained of character, feeling, thought, belief, loyalty, love, spirit, meaning. All was scaffolding holding up—nothing, as though this place, this small pool of light, had no time or space, or life. Worst of all, she could feel herself being drained.

With the quickness of that jaguar she saw on National Geographic last week, Truly darted out of the light—and there was her street, her building. Once at the door, again in the rain, she turned and saw the three conversing within the beam of light, paying no attention to anything beyond, as though there was no beyond. Then she climbed the three steps of her stoop and went inside.

Two days later, her father and Col back home and still excited about their adventure, the family was together eating breakfast. Mother had scrambled a dozen eggs, made French toast, and fried up some sausages. Father and son were talking nonstop. Everybody was laughing and having fun. Truly's father said, "it's so important to build memories, like saving up money in the bank. But memories are better. You can use them but, unlike money, you don't use them up!"

"It's like visiting the past," Truly said.

"Not quite," her father answered. "Memories are a record of the past, not the past itself. We can't confuse the past with our memories of it. And especially—now here is the important part—we can't let *them* control *us*."

"Like my memories of being in the movies," said her mother, "I'm happier to be here but happy, too, to have those

memories—not that they are a big deal, ‘cause they’re not!”

“These sausages are controlling me right now, and I hope they never stop!” Col was drooling syrup down his chin.

Truly pointed at her brother and laughed, but he didn’t stop eating.

“You know, poppa,” Truly said so casually, “there’s no such thing as time.”

“There she goes,” Col garbled as he munched. “Skipped a grade, knows it all.”

Truly’s mother shook her head, smiling all along, but her father said, “now what could that mean, my One and Truly?”

“Well, I don’t mean there’s no such thing, exactly. What I mean is that there’s more than one time. So, what I mean is that there’s no such thing as a time, a single time. There are times. Plural. Like tubes, or maybe intersecting planes. I think people on different planes sometimes bump into each other.”

“Like sausages!” Col blurted out.

“Yeah, something like that. Like sausages on a plate, some straight, some slanted, others on top of each other. Like that. I still have to work it out. For now I can only say that there are different regions of reality, since, you know, time and space go together. Einstein taught us that.”

Truly’s mother, who had seemed distracted but was actually listening, put down her knife and fork and looked hard at her daughter. There was absolute silence. Even Col stopped chewing.

“Truly, sweetheart, you’re prettier than any idea there ever was, and I love you more than all of them put together. But I want you to promise me that you will never, ever stop

thinking. Do you promise me that?"

Her mother's gaze was steady, beaming from a face more still than Truly had ever seen. And she gazed back, her eyes big, her smile bigger, and said, "I promise mother. Thank you."

After a short wait, Truly's father said, in his usual voice, "now children let *us* clear the table and do the dishes. It's a workday and I have to get that bus moving. Lots of busy people depending on me."

On a typical day at the Silvercup Studios in Long Island City, under the Queensboro Bridge, three or four movies were being shot on different stages at the same time. But the lunch bell rang for all at noon. The extras would hurry to the catering tent. When the Silvercup bread company still baked there the smell was from Heaven. Not so much now. At the buffet table everything was good but there was no kitchen so nothing smelled fresh.

People who knew each other, even if from different sound stages, not only hung together but wouldn't allow intruders into their tidy little group. Today was no different. Tall Paul, Pretty Betty, and Fat Nat sat huddled, all chewy business until the first few bites had been swallowed.

"Betty, you know, I've been having this strange dream—"

Nat interrupted. "Me too."

"Really? Me three." And Betty described the dream. This scrawny girl walked up to the coffee stand out of nowhere, as though she belonged. She seemed completely nuts so they straightened her out. When she walked away she just-disappeared. Betty felt bad because she thought they'd scared her.

They talked about coincidence, and how maybe it was the movie they were in as extras, but in spite of the connections—there

was a scrawny teenage ingénue who was the talk of the studio—that was a stretch.

The dreams stopped, and they forgot all about it. Weeks later when Betty brought it up the two men didn't know what she was talking about. Eventually even Betty forgot about the dream.

Truly noticed that the night sound never changed. Oh, the *particular* sounds did, but the *way* they sounded didn't. She knew that the night changed space, but how? She needed more evidence, which meant more experience.

Many times she would sneak out at night, rainy or not, but nothing special happened. The sound remained night sound, and space didn't change. The few people she saw just kept walking, or nodded to her, and the world remained what she knew it to be. Her street and building were right there. Nothing special.

Then she turned fourteen.

That night—she knew she became fourteen at 2a.m., so she waited until 2:30—she went out the window to the fire escape and down to the street, where she saw—no one. But the voices were clear. People were somewhere. It was the middle of the night, after all. But obvious: voices, some laughter. And not just a few people. She could hear that there was more than one conversation. Where are they? she thought.

So she strolled along the street to the corner. What a lovely spring night. She turned the corner and felt a breeze, felt her night dress rippling against her skin. Her hair being lifted.

Yikes, she thought, if I do meet someone what must I look like? She turned to the store window to see herself, and that's when she found them. Individually and in small groups, stationary, strolling, conversing. Not in the store beyond the pane but *inside* the pane itself.

She knew that store. It sold second hand clothes. She got closer to the glass and saw that her view went deep into ... into what? There could be no streets or intersections or buildings inside the store.

She stepped up to the glass, her face a few inches away. Now she could see along the pane, further along the—avenue. If she placed one eye right next to the glass she thought she could see even further. To not lose her balance she spread the palms of her hands on the glass.

And she was among them and their broad streets and old-fashioned buildings and horse-drawn carriages and old-fashioned clothes. Mountains in the distance, cold air.

“Excuse me, ma’am,” and the woman turned to her.

“Yes young lady?”

“I seem to be lost. Can you tell me how to get to East Eighty-Seventh Street?”

The woman chuckles. “Ah, a New Yorker. Well, miss, you have very far to go.”

So Truly walked about, finally concluding that she was maybe a hundred years ago. Then the ground shook, and she turned. She walked towards a store and into its window and she was home.

One year later, in the middle of the night when the simple sound was crystal clear, Truly went downstairs to the sidewalk and waited. This night she would board the late bus, as a sort of experiment.

When it turned the corner the sound was exactly as she expected, a toy somehow being pushed. When she boarded the bus, though, things changed, just as she expected. Inside were people of all sorts, young and old but very much like the people she saw all the time. Outside was daylight.

A man was reading a newspaper with a really startling date. Tomorrow's! *Now* Truly got scared. We cannot know the future, she thought. It's not allowed. She jumped off at the next stop, only it wasn't the next stop. It was the same stop, she was right in front of her building and it was night.

Back inside she went up the stairs and back to bed. But before she fell asleep she thought, Time is not a series of tubes but of panes of transparencies and they do intersect, and each pane comes with its own place, its own space.

So she and her whole world, along with its history, were in another pane. But what about the rain, and the light, and the night? She decided to keep her ideas and adventures to herself.

Truly heard the night sound often, with or without rain, and it never scared her. In fact it comforted her, coddled her. Right there, behind the darkness, were other people, other times and places. She wondered if anyone in any of those places could hear her as she could them. Did they also wonder about *her* space, her time?

She thought of the nighttime worlds beyond her window as the Invisible Realm.

And then a big thought came to her, like a beam of blue light right into her brain. A pane of glass has length and breadth, but she had moved *into* it, as though the pane were thick, even though she knew it wasn't, or not nearly enough. Somehow, then, there was space, say back and forth along the length, and time, say up and down along the width, and some third direction, or dimension, a thickness. But of what?

"Truly dear." It was her father's turn at Monopoly. The whole family played it together every Friday night after the supper dishes were done. Usually Truly won, unless she let her brother win. Lately he was paying more attention and so her charity was dawning on him. She'd have to be more subtle.

"It's your roll, poppa."

"I know sweetheart, but I have no money left."

"Nor do I," said Truly's mother.

"That's because I have most of it!" Col shouted.

Truly said, "I don't have enough. You win again, Col."

"Did you let me?"

"Not this time, little brother. And never again. But now" –in a sing-songy voice– "you have to put the game away."

"Truly, let's take a walk." Her father was casual, in fact too casual.

"You mean outside, in the dark?"

"Well, it is nighttime, so, yes, in the dark. C'mon, it's cool now. Keep your old dad company while I smoke a bowl." He meant his pipe, an aroma Truly loved.

Once at the street they turned right, toward the park. Even though it was early the street was almost empty. Whatever noise there was Truly heard as just noise, not the special night sound.

After a while her father stopped to light his pipe and asked, "Truly, where have you been going on those nights when you sneak out?"

Truly would never lie, let alone to her father, and somehow she was not surprised. He knew stuff, like when he mailed Col his report card with his real signature above Col's forgery.

She smiled. "Poppa, I'm exploring."

"In the middle of the night?"

"Yes."

"May I ask why?"

"I wish you wouldn't, poppa."

"I see. But then you know I will worry, very much."

"Maybe if I tell you you'll only worry more."

The father puffed away then said, "maybe I can give you some advice."

"Maybe. I mean, you probably could. So how about I not tell you now but—soon?"

"When would that be, sweetheart?"

"How about when I'm sixteen? You know what? Since I'm graduating early I'll tell you after the ceremony."

"Okay then. For now I'll just have to worry. I'm not going to be a prison guard. But you must be careful."

"Careful of what, poppa?"

Here father held Truly's shoulders and looked deep into her eyes. "You're an unusual person, Truly. In many ways. For example, you are unusually good, and attentive, and thoughtful, and especially curious. Just know that not everyone is as good as you. I don't mean ordinary bad people and accidental dangers. There is real evil, too. Evils. Some we see, most we do not. Many are in disguise."

"Is there good in disguise too?"

"I think so, sweetheart. I hope so. But I'm not sure. Sometimes we're on our own."

Truly had never heard her father this serious. "Thanks poppa. Don't be afraid. I'm always careful."

But her father did not move. "One more thing, my lovely

sweetheart. Your name is no accident."

"Well, no. I'm sure you and mother chose it. I mean, I'm sure you didn't pick it out of a hat, right?"

"I mean one night, when you were well on the way, I heard it on a rainy night, from the street. Like an instruction."

Truly could only stare. After a very deep breath, she almost whispered, "I understand. Thank you, poppa. I love you poppa."

That night Truly thought of how her father knew even more stuff than she had guessed and promised herself that she would think it all out soon but not ask him about it. That night she heard only happy voices, but muted, as though partygoers were trying not to make too much noise.

Then her father died. Truly and he were walking together in the park when he had the attack. As he lay on the grass she held his head, willing him to live. He smiled. "Remember, my Truly, always be careful of two-way streets."

She would cry, out of the blue, the whole year. When she was thinking she wouldn't cry, because she was distracted. One world, a world in her mind, sprung up and out, like a pop-up book. For example, Was a tangible surface always needed? Were time and space, or space-time, attached to material objects only in *her* region of reality?

Then that world would fold up, and the other book would open. She would cry. Then another book would pop up and unfold. Were they all over the cosmos, all the cosmos that existed? Could she go to any of them? All of them? That book would fold up, and she would cry again.

But then she had this thought, How do I appear to those whom I see elsewhere and elsewhen? And she stopped crying. How do I look? Am I to them the same person my family sees?

This time, the book did not close. Instead, she remembered all

the family breakfasts, games, trips and walks with her father, who knew stuff. Her soul would have a wind through it, the leaves seemed choreographed, such was their dancing, and the light poured from the sun like buttermilk from a pitcher.

Finally all she did was think, and she stopped crying.

Still she missed him. She thought, Maybe some night I'll get back on a bus.

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James Como's new book is *Mystical Perelandra: My Lifelong Reading of C. S. Lewis and His Favorite Book* (Winged Lion Press).

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