



The Private War of William Styron

Mary Wakefield Buxton

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Returning to his childhood home in Virginia for the funeral of his stepmother, Elizabeth Buxton Styron, acclaimed writer William Styron finds himself plunged into boyhood reminiscence. He is "Billy" again, fourteen and heartbroken, with a mother recently passed from cancer and a grieving father who has fallen in love with the head nurse at the local hospital. The impending marriage terrifies Billy, who finds his new stepmother's strict worldview stifling to his creativity, his joy, and his hopes for the future. Driven by Elizabeth's desire for him to become a doctor, Billy is sent to Christchurch boarding school, where he finds himself drawn more to writing than to sport, or anything else deemed appropriate for a man of good Southern breeding. Desperate to build a life on his own terms, the young Styron turns to fantasy and alcohol. He emerges a painfully burdened man, hounded by "the black dog" of depression from which he would never fully escape, and gifted with a foundation of moral sense that would inspire all of his later writing. This is the story of the war Billy fought against the cruelty of circumstance, for the prize of his own soul and future—before he became Pulitzer Prize-winning author William Styron, gaining international recognition for his novel *Sophie's Choice*. Married into the family at a young age, Mary Wakefield Buxton, "the Ohio bride," writes of her mentor and cousin's coming of age with a sympathetic spirit but an objective eye, deftly revealing the complicated psyche of a man tormented by demons of and outside of his own making, and the beauty of the Tidewater region that birthed him.

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