

# THE FORMATION OF CALCIUM

M. S. Coe



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SPURL EDITIONS

## UPHOLSTERY FOR DUMMIES

I did something and it's done and there's no going back at this point. Now and then I imagine that there is – some going back, I mean – but really there's not unless God or someone has a way to make time work that I haven't figured out yet.

My name is Mary Ellen Washie, I am fifty-four years old, born in the great small state of Delaware and formerly a resident of Chautauqua County, New York, but no longer because I had to leave that place fast on account of what I've done. My family is left there, though, my daughter Sallie and her girl Mae and a few no-count cousins, but no longer my husband as he is departed, a recent development.

Things happened in Chautauqua County which I would prefer to forget but instead I need to record them here just as they were, and once that's done, I will be able to put them out of my mind forever, because they will be preserved and safe in a different place, on an actual tiny cassette tape. I thought about recording on my cell phone or somewhere digital, but I don't trust that medium. With all the hackers and floating clouds of information, might be someone could get to them.

I suppose the best moment to start is on the day my dear departed husband and I married. Still I think of him that way, as dear, even after all that happened between us.

On that date of our marriage I was already pregnant with Sallie, but it's not what you might think, I was no knocked-up teenage bride marched into a shotgun wedding, but a full-blown woman of thirty-two who had, in fact, been married once before, and who knew her

own mind as well as she knew which shoe was left.

But sometimes a woman like me rubs up against a hard time. Not my wedding day, only later, from the thing that prompted all this soliloquizing.

My wedding was planned for a Tuesday, as Jim Dave had Tuesdays off, and I worked only part-time in the front office of the same mechanic shop where Jim Dave changed oil. You would think that the two of us had met there in our place of business, but the truth was we had met before that and then Jim Dave had asked his uncle, who owned the car shop, to hand me the job. I figured it was pure security, right there, to have a man who could work for his family and deal out jobs as he pleased. Man like that wouldn't ever be laid off.

I had been sitting at the shop's front desk about seven months, I think, before we decided to get married. This was springtime and we wanted a woodsy sort of thing under this tree out back of Jim Dave's pa's property, but when the day came, the sky poured rain, and so we all of us had to cramp into my new in-laws' living room.

His ma hugged me and said, "Never have I seen such a prettier bride and gracing my own house, too."

That made me feel warm, at least until Jim Dave's pa started to complain about all the people tracking mud inside. He couldn't believe his son was so popular, is what I think, and felt put out about it, since he and Jim Dave never did get along, and so his pa thought that Jim Dave oughtn't get along with anyone else, either.

Overall, I felt glad we had the wedding the way we did, and even having to help clean up the tracked-in mud while wearing my dress didn't dampen my mood. Back then, Jim Dave looked like Elvis, just a heap more like Elvis than any man I'd ever seen around, with loads of dark hair only gray just a bit in the back, and big blue eyes and strong eyebrows and a soft, cute belly I wanted to press my face into straight off, and as soon as we got to our hotel suite, well, I jumped

Jim Dave's bones so's he fell straight to sleep after. But I stayed wide awake in that big bed and planned our future, the way we would raise a mess of kids and they'd all fight over who got to take care of us in our old age, and we'd take trips down to tropical islands on fancy boats stocked with caviar and champagne – but of course newlyweds are especially prone to silly dreams.

Sallie's first word was *booby*, and this sure made Jim Dave mad; he wanted it to be *dada*. She was an okay baby, I suppose – only one I ever had, so's I got nothing to compare her with. She did not like eating or sleeping or being quiet, so I had to force her into everything good, since Jim Dave was the typical father who sat back and watched me at it. Sure seems funny how a man who gets dirty every morning, noon, and night working on gritty cars grows squeamish when asked to work on a dirty baby.

On that day Sallie said *booby*, I carted her out to the garage to show her daddy she could speak. We had moved into the apartment attached to the back of the garage, a rent-free wedding present from Jim Dave's uncle, who'd kicked out the alky tire dealer who'd lived there before, and so's we were always around the place.

Jim Dave was down in the pit under a car, and I held Sallie in the gap where he could see. "She can talk!" I said. "This baby has started talking."

Naturally he wanted to know what she'd said, but all the other guys were in there, and I felt shy saying *booby* in front of them, especially with my own so unwieldy and leaking, so I told Jim Dave to come on home so's I could show him.

"Be there at lunch," he said and told me to have him a pork chop.

He came in when the food was cold, and before he could sit down, I told him, "Baby said booby!"

He made me repeat it twice over because he pretty much couldn't believe it.

“You teach her that word?” he asked me, and I said that maybe I had, though not on purpose.

I looked down at my chest. “She eats out of them, after all.”

He goes, “Seems a dirty word for a little girl baby to be saying.” He mopped up ketchup with his chop and then bloodied the corners of his mouth with the stuff. “Hope this ain’t a sign she turns out bad.”

Now I know that this is when we started to split, me and Jim Dave. We never got a divorce – I don’t mean in that sense – but we grew apart, gradual like, over Sallie. I always figured she was a pretty good kid, and he thought she was pulling one over on us. Plus the idea of her growing up never seemed to fit soundly in his mind, so when she would ask for, say, his signature on a field trip slip over to the lake, he would harangue her about wearing a one-piece and staying away from the boys. Look how well that turned out.

But hey, enough about the past: I made a new friend today down here in Florida, where I thought maybe no one would ever cozy up to me seeing as they all look like tropical birds and I’m this dreary farmer who’s never before heard of the Art Basel. But they say that you get along with people who are like you, and I’m thinking this must be the case, since my new friend and I resemble one another so much that someone asked if we were sisters.

Her name is Natalie, and we met at bingo this very afternoon, so’s I guess you could say it’s a fast friendship. The bingo hall was in a church and seemed to me the cheapest fun you could get on a weekday afternoon at a quarter a card and free snacks set out on a table. Natalie liked my setup of gold-rimmed sunglasses, snow globe burying Elvis in flakes, fuzzy keychain, et cetera, and we got to talking. I gave her my name, or rather, my Florida name, which is Deedee, seeing as I have always been fond of the way it sounds, and she said she was more than glad to meet me, which was maybe the first real pleasantry anyone has offered me since I moved down here, and then right away we found out we’d been born not only in the

same year but the same month, too, September, which meant our parents had been ringing in the new year in a special kind of way, and she laughed her hat off when I said that.

It's true she started asking everyone around her – after she'd sipped quite a bit from her to-go cup which I doubt was purely soda pop, if you know what I mean – about their interest in a special bingo investment, starting at two grand with the possibility to double their money in a week, but as soon as I told her how I was saving up because I was hunting for a place of my own, she dropped it. She's not the pushy type.

When I stood up and shouted, "Bingo!" she was so happy for me: she told me I was lucky.

"Deedee," she said and grabbed my hand, "I think we should be friends. Don't you agree?"

Of course I took her up on it, and when she invited me over for cocktails this very evening, I said I wanted to, but I felt poorly because I couldn't reciprocate, seeing as I'd moved to town not long before and was still looking for the right kind of place.

She wanted to know where I was staying, and when I told her the Marriott Residence Inn, she said, "Well, how dreadful. Why don't we extend cocktails into dinner so you can get a home-cooked meal, too?"

"I'd be grateful," I said, trying not to get too weepy, but not wanting to hold it all back, either, because one thing I've realized is how much people like to see you going googly over them and their generosity and such.

Last night, Natalie opened two whole bottles of wine over supper, and that was after gin and tonics at the cocktail hour, all of which seemed to make her sweeter until just at the very end when she started complaining bitterly and unintelligibly about her homeowners association, which apparently is made up of several recycling

Nazis all named Cheryl. I worked my charms on her best as I could, and I even tucked her into her bed, though I doubt she'd be able to remember that last bit.

Her hospitality and kindness got me to thinking back to the time when I last felt close to someone, when someone was last sweet to me. And I've been leading up to tell about this, anyhow, since it is pretty much what you might call the crux of the matter, the reason I started recording this tape in the first place.

There came a time when I grew so fed up with Jim Dave I could spit. Sure I still brought him meals, but on purpose I didn't season them the way he liked, and if we'd been able to afford a bigger place I wouldn't have slept in the same bed he snored away in, but we were poor as snot ever since Jim Dave had given up his work ethic and quit his uncle's mechanic shop, which then of course forced us out of the garage's free apartment. He wouldn't seek out other work as he claimed his hernia was killing him, though I saw him lift what he wanted to lift when he wanted to lift it, which was a thirty-pack of beer about three every Sunday.

Our world became my responsibility. Where we lived, what we ate, and of course how to pay for it all. I did my best. Quit the part-time work – Jim Dave's uncle was mad at me, anyhow, for not being able to get Jim Dave back in the ring, especially considering that we had lost Jim Dave's coworker Squirrel and the shop was seriously understaffed – for two full-time jobs, or near enough, because you see they keep you just under to avoid paying benefits. One was cleaning houses and the other was cashiering at the grocery store, which turned out convenient enough seeing as I got a discount and never had to make an extra trip for milk. What chews me up is, I paid attention in school because no one told me it was a waste of time. Being able to recite the presidents or do long division does not get you any kind of good job – what gets you a good job is having money or connections in the first place.



As you could imagine, the responsibility wore on me hard, and so I admit it was near enough a relief when, a week before turning seventeen, Sallie announced that she was moving out and going to live with her boyfriend. She didn't mention anything about being pregnant at the time, but we had our suspicions.

Only, with Sallie gone, still nothing got better for me, except of course for the fact that Jim Dave took over Sallie's old room, which wasn't much bigger than a broom closet. Straight off it filled up with his smells and his toenail peelings, but thanks be at least I could cordon him off. Jim Dave's attitude got worse. When Sallie's little girl was born, he got so mad at all the time I spent up at the hospital that he hid a leg of chicken in my bed.

"What's this nasty thing?" I asked him when I found that old chicken leg tangled up with my sheets.

"That's your dried-up old nose," he said, "gramma."

Now he knew I was sensitive about being a gramma at an age much earlier than I had expected, not yet fifty, and that just pushed me over the top, so's I said, "No, it's your dried-up old sausage, is what it is."

Then he pulled my hair until a chunk came out, and right after I'd finally taken the trouble to dye it a nice red, too. I had to dye it again when I skedaddled, of course, and now it's blond, the same beachy shade of hair as Natalie and most of the women here in Florida.

"You'll never see my dick again," is what Jim Dave said, and he stuck to his word. This, when he used to be my Bubbles, an endearment come about in the unfolding of nicknames, he was my Bubba, then Bubba Butt, then Bubble Butt, then Bubbles.

Sex was never a preoccupation of mine, I think because my no-good cat-scratching first husband had problems in that department. Still, it's lonely to be a woman without any man, most especially in Chautauqua County, where what all the folks do at night is eat a home-cooked meat-and-potatoes meal and the women bring beers to



## THE FORMATION OF CALCIUM M. S. Coe

Middle-aged Mary Ellen Washie has finally freed herself of her stultified past life in western New York state and moved to Florida. With the husband she's grown to hate firmly in her rearview mirror, and all ties to her family cut off, she changes her name, bleaches her hair, and befriends Natalie, a seemingly kind, martini-loving woman whom she promptly begins to manipulate. As her machinations propel her beyond the brink of who she used to be, Mary Ellen seeks to unburden herself — but not one to sit down with pen and paper, she narrates the events of her new life into a cassette tape recorder, giving each tape an innocuous name to keep the curious away. A riveting account of one woman's awful reinvention, M. S. Coe's new novel is disturbingly funny and completely unexpected. With elements of pulp noir and confessional literature, *The Formation of Calcium* depicts the bland misery of modern American life as one woman seeks her own ill-fated transformation.

**M. S. Coe** is an American writer living in Guadalajara, Mexico. After she graduated with an MFA in creative writing from Cornell University, Clash Books published her first novel, *New Veronia*, in 2019. Coe's stories have appeared in *The Antioch Review*, *Cosmonauts Avenue*, *Electric Literature*, *Nashville Review*, *Waxwing*, and elsewhere. She has held residencies from the Herbert Hoover National Historic Site, Petrified Forest National Park, and Ora Lerman Trust.

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