

GENERATION:

MEMOIRS AND PERSONAL ESSAYS

by

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# THESIS ABSTRACT

## GENERATION

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“Generation” is a collection of memoir and creative non-fiction essays concerned with the themes of family, genetics, the links between the generations and the responsibilities of family members toward each other. The role of women, particularly of women artists as daughters, wives, and mothers, and their struggles to achieve time and space for their art is also a central concern.

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## AT DELAWARE AVENUE AND PINE

Until I was five years old, my family lived in a 19th-Century seaman's hotel on the Philadelphia waterfront. During the depression, my widowed grandmother had converted the middle two floors of the small hotel (the only property that hadn't been lost when my grandfather went bankrupt) into makeshift apartments with small rooms, one after the other, along the long corridors. There she gathered those in the family who needed a place to live out the hard times. She and my uncles ran the restaurant and bar on the first floor, and a gas station on the corner.

I can still recall image after vivid image from that period of my life: someone handing me a small, round red pepper and the intense scarlet of my burning hands and lips and eyes after I ate it; a smiling child with no arms, just stumps, in the wading pool of Stanfield playground; and a row of green velvet ring boxes, each containing a beetle, which I had captured in the hallways or on the sidewalk outside our building. Or maybe they were roaches or crickets. My aunt, who had given me the ring boxes, screamed when I showed her my collection. I was delighted with her reaction, with those tiny machine-like things, glossy and skittery, with clever moving parts. I'm almost positive those images are true. If they seem strange, surely that's because the most painful or shocking things that happen to us when we are very small are the things we remember most clearly.

The hotel was surrounded by warehouses, a chicken slaughterhouse, a building with a peculiar dead smell where bales of rags were stored, and the thick grey river. The neighborhood had an odd pitch and scale: a train passed the side of the hotel, and across Delaware Avenue, a wide street no child could ever cross alone—it seemed dangerous

even for parents to cross—huge freighters docked at the ramshackle piers that stretched into the oily river. Outside, people seemed small and insignificant. Inside, they seemed too large for the narrow space.

I'm not sure if living there made me see the world as a series of images, rather than events (perhaps all young children see the world that way, or perhaps that's the way we remember our childhood), but I do know once that home was lost, I wanted to recapture it.

My mother was an artist, which was part of my wanting to draw the things I saw in the hotel, the things she drew. When my baby brother Mike was asleep, my mother would paint on a large canvas, and I'd sit on the floor trying to draw the pots and blocks she put in front of me. She later told me about how we drew together, though I only remember her canvases and the smell of turpentine, paint, coffee and cigarettes, and the waxy feel of the crayon in my hand and its odd smell, the happy feeling of having her to myself in the quiet afternoon. At that age I owned words, but did not know how to get them on paper. It never occurred to me that the words in books were made by someone. Language always seemed weaker than images, and less true. The only words I can remember from those earliest years are my first lie (told to avoid a beating) and a thought that floated into my head when I saw my mother faint.

When I've told my children and friends about those years, they seem horrified—what a terrible place, they'd say. Even in those days, it wasn't a place where families lived. My cousin Billy, who was then eight, once became lost on the way home from a store on South Street. He was attacked by a group of older boys who stole the groceries and change. When a man who found him wandering in a maze of row houses below

South Street took him to a nearby police station, the desk sergeant wouldn't believe Billy when he told them that he lived at Delaware Avenue and Pine Street. No one lives there, the cops told him—only factories and warehouses and docks are around there—no houses or apartments. Luckily, a policeman who ate at my grandmother's restaurant rescued Billy and took him home.

And it was our home, a fascinating place, one that shaped me—all of us, I think, for the rest of our lives. The layout made my parents, brother, grandmother, aunts, uncles and cousins feel isolated from the outside world, yet crowded--there was little room or privacy. When I was very young, I heard (or sensed) all the worries and stories that occupied that building—my grandfather's lost fortune; the three college educated uncles, my mother's oldest brothers, who'd run away to New Orleans: an engineer, a musician, and a businessman, emblems of the family's shattered potential; my father's drinking; the purple scar along my mother's throat. Years later I'd learn about the car accident that almost killed her, that killed her friend. The whispered word: *decapitation*. The insurance settlement from the accident that left my mother unable to drive for thirty years paid for her wedding dress, a glamorous satin Juliette gown. A picture of my father and her in the gown hung on the wall above the sturdy sofa, also purchased with the accident money. And a set of sterling silver flat wear. Twelve place settings. In the depth of the Depression my mother felt that buying solid silver was an investment, a tie to respectability, a link to the good years when my grandfather had properties, a Ford car, and a restaurant in New Jersey. A link to a better future.

The hallway on our floor was lined with my mother's paintings of the nearby trains and ships and buildings, but in colors much more fractured and glowing than those

in the outside world. I felt confused by the difference between that world and her view of it. The confusion of scale also disoriented me: my cousins' toy trains and the huge engine on Front Street; the painting of the engine on the wall. On the top floor of the hotel was an unused dance hall (my grandmother called it a ball room) filled with broken furniture and worn carpets. The first floor--a bar, restaurant, and kitchen--were dim, sour, and beery in the morning, then filled with men's voices, pianola music, and glittering bottles and neon signs at night. But the outside world was, in my memory, either beige or grey, probably because I've seen old photos from that area. From our third floor window I do remember Delaware Avenue at night, foggy and grey, with a red spot glowing beneath a blur of yellow moon. The red may have been a lantern on the train, or a light from a ship.

Since the outside world was filled with so much danger, most of our time was spent inside, looking out at the fire escapes, the trucks piled with baled rags, and the black men and women who worked in the building down the street, plucking feathers from the carcasses of chickens that only minutes before had been noisy and crowded together in barred wooden crates. These memories are fragmented, static.

But some memories are more like short scenes rescued from a damaged spool of film: I was sitting at the table, my mother was cooking. Behind me, my father's steaming bulk. The gas flame flared and ebbed under a black pot. In front of the stove, the wood floor beneath the worn-through linoleum seemed to be reaching towards the flame. Never touch the stove. My baby brother was painting his face and the highchair with pabulum. On a white plate, a halved blood orange, which seemed to be on fire. The smell of turpentine mixed with the onions and potatoes. My mother had started a new painting; smudges of red paint were on her face and arm. How did she get the ships and

river and its sounds all on flat board? Brother was patting the tray. A muh, muh, muh he hummed under the clock tick. Then, mother started to fall, slowly, first holding on to the back of a chair, then softly, onto her knees. She lay on the floor, scratching the linoleum's flat roses. My father's chair scraped back. What what, the kettle seemed to scream, what has he done now?

Before I began kindergarten, my father got a new job, and we moved to Trenton, to a small working-class neighborhood, with rows of drab bungalows, a park, four cemeteries and a school with a small, beautiful, Romanesque parish church. This was during the war; my father had been transferred to a new milk and ice cream factory, a branch of the dairy he'd worked for in Philadelphia. That was considered an essential industry, so he wasn't taken into the army. When we played outside in summer, sometimes a huge ice cream delivery truck with a sign, ABBOTT'S DAIRIES, would grind to a stop, and the driver would throw us a box of ice cream sandwiches.

No noise, trains, trucks, river, music or familiar smells. We had a yard and trees, a flourishing garden, and fields and woods to investigate. But I missed our water front home desperately, and the pack of bold boy cousins who lived down stairs, the boys I wanted to be like.

My mother, who was lonely without grandmom and our other relatives, continued to paint until her third child was born, when my father made her stop. She put the oils away and stored the paintings and clay figures in the cellar. By that time, I knew all the reasons people became artists, or, at least, why she became an artist: because it made her happy, because she needed to escape from children and diapers, and because she was not like the women who lived all around us and spent their days cleaning and cooking.



After she died, I found a journal my mother kept as part of an art course she took when she was in her sixties. One entry was her reaction to some English psychiatrist's theory of creativity. She wrote: "I now begin to understand myself and my family, my parents and siblings," and a few pages later, "I have entailed my talent to my children." I cried more reading those words than I had when she was dying.

My mother and I both missed Delaware Avenue and Pine intensely, for the shopping trips to South Street, crowded with the rows of carts loaded with fruits and vegetables, the short bony men in baggy suits, shills who tried to pull us into the clothing and material stores for sales. "Such a beautiful girly, such blonde curls and blue eyes. Lady, we have a dress for her, such a bargain." Sometimes we'd take long walks to Center City, to Franklin Square for a picnic. In Trenton our mother continued to teach my brother and me to paint and model clay, and that distracted me from grieving for our lost odd paradise. Some nights I would lie in bed and imagine I was walking with my eyes closed from Delaware Avenue to Second Street at the end of the block, recreating a kind of doggie memory: the feel of the cracked, rough sidewalk under my feet. Step by step I'd retrace the scents—tar, rags, gasoline, beer and roast beef, old unpainted boards, peppery weeds and singed feathers. The sound of a far off trolley, my cousin Mary Jane's laughter and screams of "Poison, poison," as she ran on the forbidden truck platform across from the hotel. She was waving a small red bottle of mercurochrome above her head. Then, comforted, I'd fall asleep.

Very soon I started school, however, which from my first day in kindergarten was misery. My teachers (all nuns, of varying ages and viciousness) urged me to write, and rewarded me for the words I produced. And now being able to read, I found an escape

from the crowded classroom: just quickly do the required work and I'd be free to read as much as I wanted. Also, getting good grades balanced my messiness, lack of concern for the rules, uncontrollable talkativeness, and my tendency during recess to drift to the boy's schoolyard and watch their exciting games. In the second grade I wrote a composition called "Colored Feathers," a one page account of my trips to the chicken pluckers' steamy shed to gather feathers for art projects. (Coincidentally, a chicken house, smaller than the one in Philadelphia, was on the way to school.) The essay won a gold star and a place of honor on the bulletin board, but I felt uneasy, though I'm not sure why. Perhaps because the page didn't say everything I'd felt standing in the doorway to the slaughterhouse, dizzy with homesickness for Philadelphia, breathing in the smell of sweat, singed feathers and blood. Painting made me feel that same buzzing, excited state. Only Sunday Mass came near the experience, with the gaudy statues, music and peppery incense. Writing felt too easy—and too hard, too unconnected to physical experience.

Every time I would begin to write a story, I became sidetracked and would decide to do the illustrations first. I eventually forgot the story and continued drawing and painting, usually ships, trains, the Delaware River Bridge with a big red sun above it, or a tidy country cottage with a wishing well surrounded by holly hocks, (which I copied from a greeting card) or captive princesses threatened by goblins and trolls. After a while my mother's supply of paper and water colors ran out, and there was no money to buy more. I began drawing on the cardboard that came inside new shirts (which my grandmother saved for me), stolen paper from school, and finally, the blank front and back pages of books, even my mother's books, when she was too distracted to notice. One morning, a car hauling a small silver mobile home shaped like a high turtle pulled up in front of my

house. A very tall, handsome man strode up the walk, followed by a short lady in a fancy dress. I pretended not to notice them. The man watched me drawing for a minute, and then growled, "Didn't anyone ever teach you to respect books? Why are you doing that?"

I didn't look up. "Don't have any paper."

"Is your mother home?" The front screen opened and my mother cried, "Oh, John. Johnny, is that you?" One of my lost uncles, the jazz musician from New Orleans, was found. They hugged and cried and made a lot of noise. He and his wife stayed for three days, sleeping in their metal trailer. At night he and my mother would stay up late and talk. Every day my uncle, who had no children, would talk to me about writing and drawing, and music—somehow my mother had found an old battered piano and I was getting music lessons from an ancient nun for 25 cents a week. He particularly liked, he said, the drawings of Philadelphia and of princesses in captivity. I fell a little bit in love with him: he was glittery and funny. He played clanky music that sounded just right on our out-of-tune piano. Years later I heard he'd been a ladies man and broken the heart of one of my father's sisters, the beautiful musical one. I learned he worked in our Philadelphia bar and had played the piano there some nights. He told me stories about the hotel when he was small, when my grandfather had first owned the building. In his twenties he played the piano for a group of young people who put on theatricals and operettas in the basement of a Catholic church—Old St. Joe's, or Saint Mary's, I think he said. Although he now lived what sounded like a glamorous life in New Orleans, and he loved that city, he smiled and said, "But Philadelphia...oh, Philadelphia..."

One afternoon he played music hall songs for us on our old piano, and did a shuffle from a minstrel show, and imitated his younger brother, a Mummer, who tripped

on Broad Street (he was wearing bright green pantaloons a foot too long) right before the Mayor's stand. Back then, before I was born, stevedores and sailors stayed at the hotel and ate at the restaurant and bar: "McClernan's, since 1910." He told us about Wallace, the black merchant seaman who stayed at the hotel when his ship was docked. I still have a large charcoal portrait of him my mother made. Uncle John told us how his grandfather had come from Ireland with a bit of money—something very rare in those days. He'd bought some land that the Allegheny railroad later wanted, and with the profit from the sale, he set up his three sons in the bar and restaurant business, three bars along the Delaware River. Through those stories I had my first vision of our family stretching back from Delaware and Pine all the way to another country. Our family hadn't, as I'd imagined, always lived along those dim Depression corridors.

Before leaving, my uncle and aunt asked my mother if I could go with them on a trip to Boston, but she said my father would never allow it. When they left, Trenton seemed even drabber, more ordinary.

A month later a big box, addressed to me—only me—came from New Orleans. It was filled with lined pads, and water color paper, cardboard and poster paint. Erasers, brushes, pencils, and a small pencil sharpener. And it was all for me. A note said: "Now you can draw and write all you want, all summer. But not in books. Love from Uncle John and Aunt Mim."

"He was always my favorite older brother," my mother said. We were sitting on the sagging steps to the front porch. We'd opened the box right there. "He left home when I was ten."

"Older than me," I said, snatching paper and pencils from the box.

"He was always kind to me." I looked at her. She seemed very tired, and skinny, though her stomach was fat. Fat again. I grabbed a wooden box filled with jars of poster paints.

"His wife is lucky," she said. "So lucky." Her words were stones, though I don't think they seemed that way then.

"Yeah," I said, staring at the jars of red paint. Four different reds, all with different names printed on the lids. I'd never seen the name of the best red before. It began with a V, but I didn't, as usual, spell out the word and ask mom how it sounded, what it meant. I held the jar up to the sun. Perfect. The exact color inside a blood orange.

## WINTER GIFTS

The book was huge, maybe 12 x 15 inches, encased in a cardboard sleeve covered with a kind of linen material that matched the pale yellow binding. I'd never seen a book with its own coat. My mother showed me how to carefully slide the book out of the sleeve, how to carefully turn the pages. On the cover was the title: *Fairy Flowers*. By Isadora Newman. Illustrated by Willy Pogany. Inside the front cover, a dazzle of gold letters and dancing figures. The first illustration was of a gypsy cart, decorated with ribbons and bright flowers; a bride and groom were riding away. At the bottom of the picture was the road: it seemed to unfurl from my chest where I'd lodged the book. This was one of the pictures I remember most vividly: escape, joy, some magic down the road. I carefully turned the pages from one illustration to the next: a giant boy, grasping the sun, slowly sinking into the soil, his distraught parents watching, terrified. The Legend of the Sunflower. A small child in golden clothes in a gold four poster bed—a prince, probably—looking spoiled and petulant. The colors glowed on the beautifully printed pictures, each one pasted to the heavy page.

After I came to the final illustration, I went back to the beginning of the book. *Fairy Flowers*, the inside subtitle said, is a collection of stories and fairy tales about the factual and legendary origin of flowers. The text was obviously supposed to be read to a child—many of the words were ones I'd never seen or heard. A first edition, published either at Oxford University Press, or as the first American edition in 1929, it was an expensive book, not really appropriate for a second grade child. My godmother, Aunt Dee, gave me the book for no reason—it wasn't Christmas, or my birthday. But coming

in the mail at the drab, damp, cold middle of winter, when we rarely got to the public library, the book was doubly welcome.

All Dee's gifts to her nieces and nephews seemed inappropriate, at least to my parents. Why give a small child such a book--suppose it was ruined by my younger brothers and sister? Would I take care of it? Who had the time to read it to me? How much did it cost? How much food could have been bought, bills paid, if Dee had given that money to them? They always seemed to have questions about her gifts. Some parents might have put the book away, brought it down from a high shelf for special occasions, but I was allowed to keep it in the room I shared with my toddler sister. Dee had money, was childless and nearing forty. I was her godchild, had her name, her exact name before she married. I was the first grandchild. So I was to be indulged, encouraged. In any case, given my carelessness with possessions, the book wouldn't last long. Very soon, inside the front cover, I wrote my name in huge letters with a big black crayon. Perhaps that ruined the book, but I meant it not as a desecration, but as a declaration of my joy in possessing *Fairy Flowers*, in the hours I spent staring at the pictures. Illustrations by Willy Pogany.

Although the book might have been a foolish choice for the messy, careless, rebellious child I was, it was also perfect for me. Dee had the gift of knowing exactly what toys or books would resonate with a child. Her gifts were subversive, instinctively tuned in to the psyche of an unhappy little girl. I think she chose those gifts because she had also been unhappy, and that child still lived in her, lived to choose the elegant, odd, inappropriate things she gave us.

The pictures in *Fairy Flowers* were so powerfully resonant, that for the next two years I struggled through the text, as if that were the fee I had to pay to earn the pictures. I don't remember my mother reading me the book, but she probably did, or told me the meaning of words when I asked. The diction was florid, the vocabulary way above our second grade text books. "The Legend Of The Purple Dahlia" described the main character:

As his name implies, Monsieur Rosette was a most formal and methodical servitor, precise and punctilious in his duties, which he performed each day....Indeed, he was an exceptional gentleman, a paragon of etiquette, whose only desires and pleasures in life were in the service of his sovereigns.

I might have figured out that he was a good servant, but the line drawing that illustrated the story showed me that he was silly as well as noble, a serious man, admirable yet quaint.

But the most enthralling illustration was the one for the water lily legend. In it a young woman was floating underwater, naked except for her long hair and a few cleverly placed wave swirls. I'd never seen a naked person in a book before. I stared at the woman's breasts. According to the words, she was a princess who'd drowned while foolishly clutching gold she'd found at the bottom of the pond, a gift she would give to the prince she loved. Sinking into the mucky floor of the pond, unable to drop the gold or pull her feet free, she'd been transformed into a water lily--in fact, the very first water lily. Reading the words, I could feel the suck of the mud, the weight of the gold in her hands. Terrifying. The moral of the story: 1. Don't be greedy; 2. Stay close to home; 3. You are not the equal of the prince you love; 4. Expensive gifts and swampy ponds are dangerous.



Such plot lines (bad behavior/death/transformation/lesson) were frequent in the book, though many of the tales ended the way proper fairy tales did, with a happy marriage. But the words, the plots were beside the point—Pogany seemed to have his own interpretation of the legends, and the wonderful illustrations whispered his version: that perfect servant was an ass, the naked girl wasn't weighed down with gold—she loved the water, look, her hands were empty, as if yielding to the element that embraced her, luscious blues and greens blending from gentian to palest aqua. She was ecstatic, erotic, full of the joy of her body. And she could breathe under water. Why not? Of course, I wasn't, at the time, consciously aware of this disjunction between the text and the pictures, but I am convinced that on some level I was enthralled by their uneasy balance. Perhaps the book, in a dream-like way, reminded me of the gritty child life we were experiencing and the noble, confusing, abstract words we were supposed to live by—"transubstantiation," "indulgences," "purgatory." It reminded me of the harassed, overworked, fallible, at times cruel nuns and priests my father worshipped and the sensuous experience of the high mass, incense, music, and the hypnotic litanies filled with strange metaphors: Mary star of the sea, Queen of heaven, pray for us.

When we moved to Camden two years later, the book disappeared. My mother had various excuses: my sister had donated it to a school book drive, the box containing the book had fallen from the truck, or maybe it was in her brother's attic packed with some odds and ends left there during the move. I probably nagged her with questions, harangued her about the book, until she told me to never mention it again, in a snarl that said "Or else." For years I mourned the book, though I could still vividly see the images and remember sketchy plots of a few stories. Years after, I often told friends and my

children about the book, how I wanted to find it. I told the story so often that I bored my audience and probably started to embroider the details. After our kids were grown and I had a real job, I decided to search in earnest, calling and writing to dealers in rare children's books. I began to learn more about the author and illustrator. The book dealers had seen *Fairy Flowers* long ago, they said, once sold one, knew of a copy that had recently sold for \$300.00, a huge amount at the time. Would I be willing to pay that much? Yes. But no dealer could find a copy

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Wearing white gloves, I was carefully copying in pencil passages from a 19<sup>th</sup> Century children's book, taking notes for an assignment. I was working in the Free Library of Philadelphia's Children's Book Collection. The librarian who had been helping me brought a copy of *Little Lord Fauntleroy*.

"Would this interest you?" she asked.

"Very much, thanks. What a great place to work. How many books does the research library own?"

"Over 65,000 children's books, published between 1837 to the present."

"I had no idea." I paused. "I wonder if you might know of a book I've been searching for called *Fairy Flowers*, published about 1920 in England. I don't remember the author, but the illustrator was Willy Pogany. This isn't for my research—just personal interest. It was a book I once owned."

"I'll look, though it doesn't sound familiar," she said. I could tell she was the kind of librarian who enjoyed a challenge.

\*

“We have two copies.” The librarian was smiling when she handed me the book, which I hadn’t seen for more than 40 years. Hands shaking, I opened it, half expecting to see my name in large black crayoned letters: Dorothea Freiermuth. My maiden name, my aunt’s maiden name. If it was there, could I claim the book? They had two. But there was no name inside. A more careful child had owned this copy. I was afraid that nothing would be the same. But there was the cart, the water lily lady, the leapfrog. There were pictures I’d forgotten, the golden boy, the tulip lady in front of her tulip cottage. Other pictures I’d misremembered, or conflated.

I didn’t have time to read the stories, but I didn’t need to, the illustrations were enough. I was afraid I was going to cry.

The librarian was still standing there. “Sorry to be so foolish,” I told her.

“No, no, I do understand. We get about five or six requests a month,” she said, “from people searching for a lost childhood book. Last week a ninety-four year old woman was here, brought in by her granddaughter. She wanted to hold her favorite childhood book one more time before she died. We had a copy.”

What a great librarian, I thought. So nice that the collection, which doesn’t circulate, wasn’t only for scholars. I thanked her again.

“Glad to help. Let me know if you need anything else. You can leave the books at my desk when you leave.”

What a shame children couldn’t wander in those stacks, I thought, though I knew why that wouldn’t be possible. And what about children who may, in the future, not have

the experience of a passionate attachment to a real book, just the electronic one on a small screen? Would they even want to find the printed text in this library?

I wondered briefly if it would be possible to steal one of the Library's copies of *Fairy Flowers*.

\*

Last Christmas, my daughter Mimi, a jewelry maker who has inherited Aunt Dee's talent for gift giving, presented me with a lumpy package. Inside was a gold and emerald locket she'd made, an unused patent leather 1950s clutch purse to replace the falling apart one I'd used for years and years. She'd found it on e-bay. She'd also found on e-bay a really battered copy of *Fairy Flowers*. The book dealer, who was going out of business, sent a note saying she'd loved the book and kept it for years, because it was too damaged to sell. The spine was cracked, some of the brittle pages were torn and foxed. The cover was different than the edition I'd owned. But someone had loved the book and pored over it again and again. And it was a bargain: \$25.00.

All the glowing illustrations—the ghostly Indians, the Iris fairy—were still there, pasted on heavy stock. None was missing. And now I'd finally have time to read and understand the stories. It was the perfect winter gift.

## AUNT DEE

My Aunt Dee wore a size 36 Double D bra. I don't know when I became aware of that fact, though it seems I always knew it, like the fact that she wore size 7 triple A shoes. Aunt Dee was famous for her shoes--narrow, expensive pumps, soft snakeskin shoes, or strappy leather ones like strips of caramel. I probably first noticed them when I was very young, as she always changed into utilitarian tie-up shoes when she visited us after the epic trip to Trenton—only about 30 miles, but requiring a train and two bus changes, the horrors of which she'd explain in dramatic detail—she'd almost missed the connection, a soldier had kept trying to talk to her. After she swept into our house, smelling of some wonderful new perfume, swirling a new cashmere coat around her, she placed the fancy travel shoes in the back hallway. She would always complain about how she could never find shoes in her size, 7AAA. It was terrible their being so narrow, she'd say, and stretch out her long elegant feet.

My mother, who usually wore tie-up Oxfords in varying degrees of scuffed decay, said nothing. I'm not sure if Aunt Dee changed into her tie-ups as an act of sisterhood with my mother, who was, it seemed, always pregnant and needed the so-so support of cheap ugly shoes, or if it was to demonstrate to the world that long, elegant feet looked good even in (narrow) highly polished Oxfords. Sometimes Aunt Dee just trotted around in immaculate white socks, which by the end of the day became filthy. She sometimes changed into a linen blouse and slacks, which wrinkled glamorously.

Whenever I became aware of them, those shoes (and bras) came to be metaphors for her vanity—and in later years, a source of amusement for me, my sister MJ, and our only girl cousin, Bonnie. Aunt Dee had been a beautiful child and adolescent (and, as a

matter of fact, a very young looking 80 year old), blessed by the best of the family's heterogeneous gene pool. She looked most like her French grandfather—black curly hair, dark eyes, unblemished ivory skin that tanned beautifully. She was smart and musically talented. And of course, had those big breasts that were such a mystery to me. My mother's breasts were large, larger, but they were for feeding babies. So why was my aunt so obviously proud of hers, since she had no babies?

All I knew: when she came to our house, it was exciting, exhausting, filled with the sound of Aunt Dee pounding the piano and singing "Deck The Halls With Boughs Of Holly" with the assembled adoring nieces and nephews joining in, croaking off-key. Probably my happiest memories of her were from that period: Aunt Dee reading to us from the newest books she'd brought us. *Five Little Peppers and How They Grew*. "Five little Freepers (what she called us, a play on our last name) and how they are growing," she'd say. We laughed and went on long walks and played games with Aunt Dee, who was never tired. And on those days my mother became very quiet and smoked a lot.

\*

Aunt Dee had a way with gifts. She and Uncle Al were the only ones in the family who had any money (they never did have children) and so were a kind of back-up credit union for their relatives. Did my sister inhale a quarter and was there no money for the doctor? My father called Dee. My brother's emergency appendectomy? Al and Dee sent money. Birthdays, Christmas, school shoes? Money. But those gift/loans (I don't know if those loans were ever paid back) were utilitarian. Like the soap and new underwear and other necessities my grandmother sent in occasional packages. But Aunt Dee's gifts, at least for me, were spectacular.

I was the first grandchild and great-grandchild in my father's not very prolific family. Aunt Dee was my godmother; I was her namesake, and suffered with the same too-long and too-difficult-to-spell first and last names she'd suffered with as a child. Like her, I was the oldest child in the family. I think perhaps she saw a chance to shape my life into the childhood she never had, to give me get the attention she never got enough of.

I seemed--at first--to be very like her. As a baby I also had curly (though not black) hair, nice features, a rosy complexion (though tending to freckles and rashes), and most important, was quick to talk, interested in everything around me. But by the time we lived in Trenton, I had become a scrawny, nervous, unappealing child with dark circles under my eyes. But smart, so I guess Dee saw some potential in me. And I did love and admire her, a sure trap for a childless woman. My father was usually drunk on the holidays when we all got together, so she may have imagined our lives were much worse than they actually were. As a kind of consolation for our poverty, and for my being the oldest child in a large family—which she had also experienced--she gave me gifts. She managed to have an old piano sent to me, though the lessons she paid for soon bored me, and I could never practice because my parents couldn't stand the clatter. In that pre-Barbie era, most girls had one baby doll. Of all the girls in my third grade, only one had a doll with a huge wardrobe, skates, hats, and a trunk she was stored in. The doll, Melanie, had huge blue eyes that opened and closed, curly hair and seemed to be about eight years old. I wanted that doll with a kind of distant yet resigned longing; I knew that such gifts were reserved for girls who were the only child in their families. But I always hoped.

That Christmas--Aunt Dee had come the day before and stayed overnight--I stumbled down the stairs early and found an enormous doll house next to the tree. It wasn't from Santa; it was from Aunt Dee and Uncle Al—that's what a big card said. The house had tiny light bulbs that lit up, wall paper on every wall, real carpets on the wood floors. And every room was filled with beautiful furniture. A mother and father doll were in the kitchen with their little girl doll. They all seemed a bit too large for the scale of the house and because of their size and stiffness, couldn't fit in the chairs.

"Do you like it? Do you like it?" Aunt Dee said. "It's all yours. We had it made."

I was numb with terror and excitement. "Can I play with it?"

We spent an hour examining the rooms, the tiny dishes and pots and pans, the iron stove with a real oven door that opened. About every ten minutes I threw my arms around her neck and kissed her and thanked her. Uncle Al looked distant and bored.

"Of course, you'll have to put all the furniture away when you aren't playing with the doll house." There was, she showed me, a box for the furniture and the doll house family. "You want to make sure your baby sister doesn't put any of the little pieces in her mouth, right?" She looked guiltily at my mother. "You will take care of it? Because we had an expert carpenter build the house especially for you. There's not another one in the whole world like it." I wanted her to go away and let me play with it. But I also was thrilled to have something bigger and better than the Melanie doll. And already I could see the potential for working out a trade with Melanie's owner: she could play with the doll house and I would dress up Melanie and pretend she was going to a party.



I don't remember where the doll house was stored—maybe in the dining room or in my bedroom, where it would have taken up a lot of space, as our house was very small. Perhaps Aunt Dee always wanted a doll house, but I'm not sure. I just sensed that I was to keep the house immaculate for her. Fat chance. Soon the doll house was sitting on the dirt floor of the garage that at times smelled like a litter box. I don't know if she had seen the irony of that perfect little house inside the chaos of our small bungalow.

The doll house was one of Aunt Dee's greatest gifts to me, though I don't think I ever sent a thank you note, something that probably irritated her. *The mother's fault. Bringing them up without manners. Letting them run wild.* But I believe the doll house also spoke to my aunt, entranced her the way it entranced me. The gifts connected my childhood in some way to hers.

We moved the next year. The doll house and the piano had to be left behind, as they wouldn't, my mother said, fit into the van that took our furniture away. I could take the doll furniture, and the doll family, in a small box. Somehow, another of her gifts, the *Fairy Flowers* book, was also lost in the move.

I don't know what my aunt thought when she learned the doll house had been left behind. I never told her about the book.

\*

In 1918, when Aunt Dee was twelve years old, her father died in the Great Flu Epidemic. Her baby sister died soon after. My grandmother was given a tiny pension and offered a job working with Childrens Services for the city of Philadelphia. Her husband had been a mounted policeman, and so I guess the job was a kind of supplement to the pension. Or maybe that was the pension. The only picture I've seen of my

grandfather showed a handsome man seated on a rearing horse, looking very dashing. Aunt Dee told me once that her mother, who'd had six children in twelve years, hadn't really been very maternal. Since grandmother was still in her twenties when her husband died, perhaps she was relieved to become celibate and avoid childbearing. Perhaps she was happy to go to work at a time when very few women could do that without condemnation. Working Widows, of course, if they were humble enough, and virtuous, were exempt from criticism. My grandmother was very lucky, because she was able to support her five remaining children, though working for children's services exposed her to cases of child abuse, children taken from homes, starving children. I suppose those experiences made her very protective of her own children and very strict.

Although Aunt Dee had hoped to someday go to college and become a teacher, that year she was enrolled in a business school; after two years she graduated and got her first job. She was fourteen or fifteen and her pay must have helped to support the family. She never told me about her life in those years. No one in the family ever talked about them.

\*

Every summer, Aunt Dee and Aunt Kate and Grandmother F. would take us to the shore for a week or two. A week before the trip, a box would arrive with new bathing suits, underwear, socks, shorts and shirts, and dressy outfits for the boardwalk. Shovels and buckets and other equipment would be purchased when we got to Wildwood. Our trips were supposed to give our mother a break, and to get us out of the steamy city and away from the bad influence of neighborhood kids. At the shore we'd be plied with

wonderful food and adventures. Well, that was the idea. Though we loved the loot, and the beach and the ocean, such luxuries had a price.

Immediately after getting to the rented cottage, we went to our small musty room with narrow sagging beds. After unpacking, Aunt Dee would show us our schedule, which was taped to the inside of the bedroom door:

8:00: rise, wash, brush teeth and make beds.

8:20: breakfast.

9:00 walk, reading or play games

10:00 to noon, beach.

And so on. The schedule was made without consulting us, and we had to stick to it.

The worst rules (which were different from the timetable) were not on the list. They were Aunt Dee's code of child behavior. Of course we were to say please and thank you and do a dozen other things we never did at home, boring stuff that, if obeyed, would be rewarded on the boardwalk in the evening with amusement rides and fudge.

Other rules were not written down, but enforced by Aunt Dee's frowns, small coughs, or soft, fluting complaints about what proper boys and girls did and did not do: they did not suck their teeth, swing their arms while walking, pick noses, scratch butts, spit, chew their nails, or use mild curse words like "heck" and "darn" and "jeez!" which were disguised forms of "hell," "damn" and "Jesus!" "Jesus" when said with exasperation or disgust, not reverence, was a doubly a bad word: a curse and a sacrilege. The word "shit," which one of the visiting uncles once said when he stabbed himself with a bottle opener, threw Aunt Dee into a prolonged paroxysm of horror, which threw us into barely suppressed fits of amusement. Anyway, it was one of the four cusses my mother

occasionally used, though not in Aunt Dee's presence: "hell," damn" "great Balls of Fire," and, yes, "shit," were in her repertoire. So what was the problem? And although we didn't really have those "low class" habits—well, besides nail biting and nose picking—when we were alone at the shore, we practiced all of the disgusting other ones diligently. My brother Mike was especially good at hacking and spitting.

Mike and I understood that my father's relatives saw those two weeks as a time in which they could break us of all the bad habits we accrued under our mother's negligent supervision the rest of the year; those two weeks were a period that could help us develop other, good habits (brush your hair a hundred times to get out the tangles, wash hands before every meal, say grace before every meal). On some level we felt following those rules would in some way make us unfaithful to our mother—and oh, my god, we were bitterly homesick for her after a few days. And so what we really learned during those two weeks at the shore was how to annoy our assembled relatives to no end. And that was probably the most enjoyable part of the vacation.

\*

Aunt Dee had been some kind of musical prodigy, according to family legend. At an early age she began to play by ear, duplicating songs she heard played on a cousin's piano. She was taught the basics of reading music by an old nun at her grade school, and as she became more skilled, was allowed to pick out songs on the church organ, and finally play the organ at Mass. Most of all she loved to replicate the music she heard in church or on the radio, with, I imagine, some sort of uncomplicated bass line. For this ability she earned much admiration and modest fame in her grade school. At one point, supposedly a parishioner arranged for a famous piano teacher to audition her. If she were

good enough, Aunt Kate told me at Aunt Dee's funeral, he would provide lessons free, or in Dee's cousin's version, the parishioner, or a local priest, would pay for the famous teacher's lessons. Or was he a famous pianist? Aunt Kate was vague on details. After listening to Dee play, the famous teacher accepted her as a student. But he first had to break her from playing by ear, and wanted her to practice, practice, practice scales and classical music for hours on end. It was so much easier to play by ear. So she quit, though she worshipped the teacher and the music. In her twenties she played the piano for a small parish musical group that put on Gilbert and Sullivan musicals. She'd play and sing some of those songs when she visited us: "When I'm calling you-ou-oo-ooo, Will you answer true-ue-ue-oo-ooo? Even better than "Deck the Halls."

\*

When I was about eleven or twelve Aunt Dee made one last effort to set me on the right path. She arranged that I would take music lessons with her once a month, and then we would spend the day together, in a sort of condensed version of our childhood stays at the shore. When I got to her small, perfect apartment—every beautiful object was in its place, the floors shone—I had a snack. I first tasted real butter and honey and Pepperidge farm bread there, and always something was on offer I had never tasted before, something like petit fours, or a new kind of lunchmeat. After my music lesson, during which she discovered that I hadn't practiced nearly enough, we had some adventures. At that age I was painfully self-conscious, feeling homely and badly dressed in ill-fitting hand-me-down clothes, which contrasted with Dee's elegance. Perhaps I was a kind of foil to her glamour. We'd go down to Chinatown and have a meal, during which she shared her extensive knowledge of Chinese culture while I slurped won-ton

soup. After we ate about five other dishes, she asked the owner if we could have a tour of the kitchen. She whispered to me about the cleanliness of the stoves and counters, as if she'd personally inspected every restaurant in the area and chosen this one as the very best. In a louder voice, she explained the process of making won-tons, which, watching the kitchen workers, was fairly obvious, even to a child who had not studied the culture. The men filling and rolling the dough looked at her curiously.

Then we would rush off to the Franklin Institute, a long walk during which I tried not to swing my arms or suck my teeth. I think one time, in between destinations, we stopped at Lit Brothers Department Store, where she bought me three pairs of some clever semi-elastic underpants ("Suspants") that had little tabs and snap-on things to hold up my stockings—a kind of training girdle, at a time that I weighed about ninety pounds. She had noticed how my nylons, held up with garters, bagged around my ankles, and at times slipped precariously below my knees. At the Franklin Institute I remember only a haze of exhibits and the long time that Aunt Dee spent questioning a really handsome man who had lectured briefly on a new exhibit about the workings of some machine. After an ice cream sundae, I was ushered on the bus to New Jersey, clutching new music, other small gifts, and two dollars, dizzy from a headache, too much food, too many images, the bumpy ride, and the intense smell of gas and exhaust fumes. When I got home I threw up.

This protégée period lasted a year or two, and then she gave up, or I decided I couldn't take any more. In any case, I screwed up academically during high school, slipping gradually from the Classical College Prep major to, in my senior year, a General

Diploma, which was usually given to the dregs of the high school, mostly boys who liked best to take apart cars.

I avoided Aunt Dee for long periods, because I was afraid of what she'd say to me. It must have seemed to her that I was throwing away my chances of a better life, especially when I got married a year out of high school. But, by that time, my sister had reached protégée age, and our young cousin was already in the loving grip of that relationship. Although envious of how suitable they both were to that role, being much more mannerly and attractive, smart and disciplined than I, I was also relieved to escape never being quite good enough.

\*

Aunt Dee worked for many years for the American Anti-Vivisection Society, which had been founded by a wealthy, reform-minded woman in the 1880s. The goal of the society, which had a number of eminent Philadelphian supporters, was to end scientific experimentation on live animals. I don't know what Aunt Dee's job was, but the office, in West Philadelphia, had a three woman staff. I visited there at least once and have a dim memory of a shabby second story office, with wooden tables covered with file drawers. I guess the drawers were filled with cards with the names and addresses of contributors. Miss Hay, a brisk but modest maiden lady, ran the office. Who did all the campaigns, higher level stuff. I don't know, but one of their projects was the Miss B' Kind club, the goal of which was to reach and educate young grade school students about cruelty to animals, though it also seemed vaguely vegetarian in its messages. I believed Aunt Dee was Miss B' Kind, and that she wrote the pamphlets and booklets that were sent to children, or distributed during staff visits to public schools. There may have been

club meetings at the office, but my only memories of the place are of the somewhat homely but benevolent Miss Hay, my aunt, and a part-time woman, and Tom, the fat and arrogant stray cat that had been adopted by the women. There was something Dickensian about the disheveled office, the eccentrically earnest women, the dust motes that floated in light coming through the windows, the distant clang of a trolley. Perhaps I stole that office from a Dickens novel.

I do remember somewhat more clearly the book my aunt sent, which contained supposedly true stories about poor animals that had been abused; some were rescued by kindly people, but most met bad ends. Rather gory stuff, actually. In the book was a wonderfully lachrymose story about a little girl, Betty, who lived on a farm, and the fluffy lamb, named Fluffy, who was her best friend. There was a sentimental build up, illustrated scenes of the girl and lamb gamboling around a pasture, the lamb nuzzling the laughing child. And so on. But then the lamb disappeared. Scenes of Betty searching for the lamb, no one answering her questions. On the last page, Betty realizes the meat she is eating during dinner is what remains of poor Fluffy. She becomes sick, runs from the room, cries all night, and never eats meat again. It was the best tear jerker I'd read since "The Little Match Girl." The book made me admire Aunt Dee for her writing skill and her role in helping the poor animals.

When a few weeks later Sister Mary Joan told us we could bring in our favorite story and read it to the class, I decided to share Fluffy the Lamb's tale, which was the height of what I considered good story telling: it was sentimental, had vivid, though uncomplicated characters, and a sad ending. I read the story to the class one Friday afternoon, with, I thought, a good deal of dramatic flare, and a kind of trilling voice for



the little girl: "Oh, Fluf-fy, Fluf-fy, where have you gone?" When I came to the end of the story, the class, instead of clapping, as they usually did after a student's reading, simply stared at me. Someone asked, "You mean they *killed* Fluffy?" Someone began to cry.

"Where did you get that terrible book?" Sister Mary Joan huffed, her face bright red against her white veil. "Give it here. You can go to your seat, Miss. I'll give you the book at the end of the day. And now we'll all sing 'We gather together,' our Thanksgiving song." While we were singing, I decided to write a story about a pet turkey when I got home...though I'd end it with the girl, who was starving and whose parents were dead, eating turkey meat with great enjoyment.

Miss B' Kind club's influence lasted all my life—I'm still a sucker for stray, feral cats, and despite the dismay of our indoor cat, am feeding one right now. And I haven't, alas, been able to completely kill the sentimental streak in my writing.

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When my brothers and sister and I were born, my aunt was in her forties, probably aware that she'd never have children. I heard years later that she'd used birth control when she was first married and her husband was in school, and then, when they decided to start a family, she was punished for committing mortal sins that paid off: Uncle Al graduated from Penn after years of night school, where he was studying accounting. He made tons of money on the stock market, but God had seen fit to punish their bad deeds—Aunt Dee was barren. My mother's rampant fertility must have been a sore point for Dee. And, as things worked out, her sisters took up child bearing when my mother stopped. The new babies appeared slowly, but regularly, nothing like the birth

rate in my mother's family, where numerous babies were born every year. The month I was born, twin cousins were born in Baltimore, and a boy cousin, in New Jersey. On that side of the family, it was easy to become lost in the mob. When I was young and learned about the role of sex in having children, I thought Aunt Dee probably never had children because she couldn't stand to have sex with Uncle Al, that cold bald fish.

After I'd been married a couple of years, I got a job in Philadelphia near the office where my aunt worked. I'd just learned I was pregnant, but wanted to keep that a secret, especially from my boss, because in those days, pregnant women were usually "laid off," once their condition was discovered, with no promise of getting the job back. My husband had been drafted into the army and was assigned to the Radar School in Monmouth County, and I was worried about where I would live, how could I feed and clothe the baby. Every week, my aunt and I met for lunch at her office, or occasionally at a nearby restaurant. She was then under the sway of Gaylord Hauser and some other healthy-eating gurus, and tried to convert me to the wonders of greens and yoghurt. I usually ordered corned beef sandwiches, for which I'd developed an intense craving. I felt able to stand up to her at that point, being a married woman for almost two years, fully mature—19 years old—and respectable (despite my family's worries on this point).

When I was 15, the miserable scarecrow I had been suddenly gained twenty pounds and learned the intricacies and marvels of makeup. And I had developed breasts that were up to the family standard. My hair, shaped and bleached into a short and curly poodle cut, and my body type were exactly in synch with the '50s ideal (think Judy Holliday in *Born Yesterday* or *Bells are Ringing*), or Marilyn Monroe, a much bigger reach. In short, I was full of myself, and delighted with my ability to finally attract the

attention of men. So it was this new me, armed with my job as assistant manager of technicians at a piano company, who felt she could stand up to the force that was Aunt Dee. I looked good, I was going to be a success.

One week we had lunch together at a crowded luncheonette. We both took off our coats at the same time, and there were low whistles from a nearby table crowded with men from the midtown offices. As I'd reached that early stage of pregnancy when my bra was becoming uncomfortably tight, I blushed, rounded my shoulders and cringed into the booth.

"I just hate that," Aunt Dee said, breathing deeply. "All my life I've been subjected to that kind of annoyance." I was a bit shocked. She thought the whistles were for her. Then I was even more embarrassed. Maybe the whistles were for her. She was still very attractive and looked much younger than her fifty-odd years. She was wearing a clingy, silky black blouse tucked into the narrow waist of her skirt. "Oh, just ignore them," Dee said. "The tuna salad here is delicious. Very healthy, lots of protein." She settled into the booth. Well, I settled into the booth. Aunt Dee was sitting erect, her breasts challenging the air that smelled of fragrant pastrami and coleslaw.

Then she looked closely at me. "You're pregnant, aren't you?"

I mumbled yes.

She paused and continued to stare at me. "Well, you'd better stop eating those fatty sandwiches. Why don't we walk every day at lunchtime or after work? And you'd better get a good bra. Wear it to bed at night. You don't want to end up with them hanging down to your waist like...like some women." I knew she was referring to my mother; I'd had the same worried thought. "Go to Wanamaker's and get measured, I'll

give you the name of my fitter. Then in a few months you'll need a maternity bra." I remembered the ugly, heavy cotton brassieres hanging in a maternity wear shop. Remembered the time years before when she and my Aunt Mag and I were walking near Dee's apartment. A heavily pregnant woman was plodding down the sidewalk. "Well, I never," Aunt Dee said. They both looked horrified. "You never know what you'll see on the street." I was very young, and probably misinterpreted what they meant. Perhaps their words reflected some neighborhood scandal. But I thought that they felt just being pregnant was shameful, or if not shameful, something to be hidden away in the last few months.

Suddenly, my happiness and worries, and the secrecy about the baby were shattered. I felt deflated, sorry that I hadn't fulfilled Aunt Dee's (and my own) expectations. And yet she also seemed not at all disappointed in me, seemed to be very satisfied about something, which I tried to shut out.

Four months later, after moving to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where my husband had been transferred for even more training, I got a letter from Aunt Dee. She and my sister MJ were coming to visit for a few days. I'd thrown myself into the idea of motherhood and had even taken up embroidery (working on a tiny quilt bedecked with assorted cute animals), baking, eating sensibly, and trying to glean as much as I could about childbirth from the women in our apartment complex, all of whom seemed to be pregnant. I was very lonely, as my husband spent weeks in the field as an electronics geek with the gung-ho Airborne division. So I welcomed the unexpected visit.

When they arrived, I felt as if we had the old Aunt Dee back. She was cheerful, approved of my new sensible, spare diet, and exercise regime, brought gifts for the baby,

was curious about the customs and quirks of North Carolina, and enthused over the vegetable man who came to the back door with tomatoes, string beans and okra. "Okra! What does one do with that?" She loved the PX, the cloth mill outlet, the apple orchard behind the apartment complex. My sister was excited about the prospect of being an aunt. The three of us had lots of Aunt Dee-type adventures which luckily she financed. We walked around Raeford's historic area and went out to lunch, where Dee grimaced at the baked bean salad and hush puppies.

The day they were leaving, Aunt Dee packed up and went to the bedroom to change into her travel clothes. She'd forgotten some socks that were still on the line, and asked me if I'd get them.

I knocked on the door and asked if she'd was decent. She said come in, come in—she was just about ready. But Aunt Dee was only half dressed. Her lacy lavender bra and tailored blouse were still lying on the bed. She was modestly turned away from me, buttoning her slacks. "Just put the socks on the bed," she said. Suddenly I realized she was standing in front of the full-length mirror, and, unable to resist, I stared at the reflection of her famous breasts. They were terrific breasts, like those of a young girl. Big. Perfectly in place—all those expensive bras had worked. No wonder she was so vain. I mumbled, "OK. You'll need to leave soon, if you want to catch that train. MJ is ready." I quickly left the room, suddenly feeling lumpy and waistless and fat. When my aunt came out of the bedroom, she was even more cheerful and brisk than she had been, but I was relieved when she and my sister drove off in a cab to the station. I realized she had a new protégée, and I had somehow lost any potential for a good life, any possibility of keeping my ever-larger breasts attached to my ribcage.

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For many years Aunt Dee's and my relationship was distant, but cordial. (I always loved her best at a distance.) I eventually had three children, went to college, then graduate school. At some point she had taken up painting, and I'd see some of her abstract work on my aunt's and cousin's walls, and she eventually sent me a painting. She and Uncle Al moved to a small house in North Wildwood, where she eventually began giving art lessons to the children in the neighborhood. Every Christmas and birthday I'd get a check; I usually delayed sending a thank you note for months. She was writing interesting local color articles for the town newspaper, which also published her sentimental poems. They were all metrically perfect, with perfect rhymes. I'd get copies of her work and send her mine. When my first article was published, she was effusive in her praise. She'd come to the major family get-togethers, and I did try to let our kids know her better, but after one trip to her shore house, they refused to go again. (Aunt Dee still had very strict rules about—well, about everything—not getting sand into the house, using the proper utensils, and so on.) So after one or two visits, I didn't take the kids again. I wasn't sure if she was hurt or pleased. My brothers and sisters and I would joke whenever we'd done something to displease Dee: "Guess I've been written out of the will."

But she was the only one besides my husband who supported me when, after graduating from college, I decided not to teach in high school, but go to graduate school, and then later to seriously study writing poetry. Part of that support, I realize, was because I was going to Penn, and she was thrilled that I'd been able to go so far, and extra-thrilled when she could brag that she had TWO nieces now going to a school that

glowed in her imagination as the reward for intelligence, good looks and exemplary behavior. She also felt her influence had led us there, that she'd guided all her nieces and nephews, almost all of whom had become well educated. And she did support me in those years, would comment on my poems, read my essays. And during that period she seemed happier than she ever had been.

I had heard rumors that her job at the American Anti-Vivisection Society had ended badly, that she was fired, or retired pensionless, or left in a huff. And once she sent a letter to all her nieces and nephews telling us how she'd loved us, how rewarding it had been to have us in her life. I was too distracted at the time to realize the letter was probably a call for some kind of thank you. I can't remember if I ever acknowledged it. After all, Aunt Dee and Uncle Al were in terrific health in their 70s and 80s, rich, and seemed to have settled into a happy life of working for the local church (he did the accounting, she played the organ), volunteering in the community, having dinner parties, golfing, teaching art to children, and investing in stocks, big cars and narrow shoes. I always wished I had time to spend with her, but had the excuses of living 90 miles away, having to care for my own then ailing mother, and trying to raise three kids while getting an education. Then I heard that Uncle Al probably had dementia, Aunt Dee was becoming frail and the guilt of decades crushed me. I promised myself I'd go down the shore more often, try to help. But a small feeling of dread was there too.

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Two years before she died, Aunt Dee, who was then 91, asked me if I could take a day off and drive her around Philadelphia and New Jersey to see the houses where she had once lived. I agreed, thinking she must want to see what she called "the old places"

one last time before she died. We began our tour early in the morning, a cool fall day that would turn into a bitterly cold night. All day we drove around Philadelphia looking for the streets and numbers of houses she'd lived in more than 50 to 80 years before. Most of the time we parked the car near, or if possible, in front of the house she had remembered. On Emily Street, where she was born, she began an off and on monologue that would last most of the day. I think she was talking to herself, trying to pin down memories called up by the houses and buildings.

She remembered very little of the house on Emily street: it was dark inside, the stairway in particular. "Once," she said, "I was walking down stairs and my brother was hiding behind the curtain—there was a window at the landing where the stairs turned. I was so frightened when he jumped out and shouted. I screamed and screamed, and cried, which was odd, as he was always doing that. But that one day I was terrified. I always hated the house and hated being alone in it—not that I was alone often, my grandmother lived with us, there were five children then." She became very quiet, and I asked if she wanted to see if any one was home, if they would let her go inside. "No. Just go to West Philadelphia next." She stared out the window. "I recognize the front of the house, this row of houses, but so much has changed." She paused again for a few minutes. "I never told anyone this...."

I waited. She looked so fragile, as if all the vivacity and fight had gone out of her. When had that happened? Late into her eighties she'd been a brisk walker, interested in everything, opinionated, still reading everything, still searching for the perfect shoes for her feet, which were now bony, with gnarled joints.



She touched my hand. "One summer day, we were staying at my cousin's house in New Jersey, when my aunt got a message that my brother and I were to go home, immediately. Our baby sister was very sick. We were terrified, because our father had died only three months before. Or did he die earlier or later? I can't remember now, maybe that was a different time, but someone drove us back to Philadelphia in a borrowed car. When we got there, Aunt Maggie met us at the front door and told us Mama had to run an errand and we were going to stay a while at her house, which was on the same block.. I guessed my sister was feeling better if my mother went out. I didn't want to think about it."

Aunt Dee told us that she had to wait for her mother to come home, and could not to go to their house until then. That made her uneasy, so when her Aunt Maggie sent her to the store for bread, Dee decided to slip into her house through the back door to see if her mother had returned. To ask if her sister was better. She stood for a while in the pantry—the house was very quiet--and then called "Mama" in a low voice. No one answered. She walked into the kitchen and saw her sister on the kitchen table, which was in the wrong place, not in the middle of the room, but next to the sink. A sheet was pulled up to Rose's neck.

"Her lips were blue," Aunt Dee said. "I touched her cold hand. Then I heard the front door open, so I hid in the pantry. A man was talking to someone, and then the front door closed. I could hear the man moving around in the kitchen. When I looked through the door, which wasn't closed tight, I saw a basin on the table and some thin red hoses. Then water or something was running, so I slipped out through the back door and ran to my aunt's house with the bread. I don't remember when we were told Rose had died. She

was laid out in that house in the front room. In a tiny white casket. The house smelled like carnations for days, and after that, I could smell them every once in a while.

Sometimes when I was alone. Harry," she suddenly snapped at my husband, "You are going the wrong way." He tried to explain that the streets had changed since she lived in Philadelphia, now Spruce Street was one way.

I tried to say something to her about how terrified she must have been when she saw her sister, but she just said sternly, "I never talk about that."

Was it that day that she told me about the outhouse in the back yard? Or was it her sister who later told me? How when Aunt Dee was going to the business school, she was very ashamed of the privy in the back yard, which was disgusting and smelled really bad except in the coldest winter days. She wouldn't invite her friends home for fear that they would need to go outside. At that time, most middle-class people had plumbing and toilets inside the house. Only the slums still had the shared outhouses, but their landlord said their rent was so cheap, he couldn't afford to build an indoor toilet. Dee would gag, sometimes throw up when she went out there. I finally understood why my aunt became so upset if anyone said "Shit!"

We passed St. Frances de Sales church, where she and Uncle Al had gone to Mass for years, and the apartment building where they'd lived then. It was pretty much a scarred tenement in an area rapidly becoming a slum. "Let's go down to Society Hill," she said. Aunt Dee was very proud that the area in which she'd grown up had become a very upscale neighborhood, that Old St. Joseph's church, where as a precocious child she'd played the organ for Sunday Mass, was the oldest Catholic church in America, a

national historic site. She always loved any connection—however slight--she had with prestigious institutions, with wealth.

We went into the lovely old church, up to a kind of balcony around the main floor. This is a perfect church, I thought, remembering I'd been baptized there. So technically, I could be buried from there, as my mother had. We were, Aunt Dee reminded me, one of the old parish families, and so had privileges there . Yes, I thought, the old families from when this was still a neglected parish in a not so good part of Philadelphia, before Society Hill had even been thought of. I remembered the joke I'd overheard when I was little. (Probably told by my mother's family at my aunt's Lace Curtain aspirations). It seemed a poor, but beautiful Irish girl had married a man who accumulated a great fortune. He decided to build a house in the rich part of the city. They moved to the new house, but stayed only a couple of years, then moved back to the old slum neighborhood. When asked why she'd left the grand neighborhood, the beautiful home, the Irish bride replied:" I'd rather be a Queen among the Pigs, than a Pig among the Queens, so I came back." For some reason this was supposed to be hilarious, but I can't remember any laughter.

A woman was playing the organ, practicing for a funeral, it sounded like. Aunt Dee walked stiffly over to the woman and told her how she'd played that same (now restored) organ when she was a child, a student at the parish school. The woman graciously invited her to play something, and Aunt Dee did, some old, corny tune that hadn't been heard in that church for years, now that it was known for its sophisticated music programme. But my aunt looked happy playing "Mother, At Thy Feet Is Kneeling," the schmaltzy song that used to be played at Catholic weddings and funerals,

banned after the church revised the approved music list. But the new, really awful, modern church music was also not the kind of music played at Old St. Joe's. Now Mozart and Bach and Elgar were on the menu. Aunt Dee played a few choruses of the old song, and I had a sudden impulse to sing it in a really, really loud voice. But I didn't. A young Jesuit priest at the altar winced as Aunt Dee ended the piece with a loud, prolonged chord and a grandiose flourish of her bony hands.

I think we went out to dinner that night and Aunt Dee slept in our bedroom before we drove her back to the shore the next day. Later I heard she complained about how cold our house was, how she'd nearly frozen.

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Shortly after we did the tour of her old neighborhoods, Aunt Dee asked me, my brothers and sister to come down to Wildwood, as she had something to give us. My brother Mike was in town, so we rode down together (the others would come at a later time), and had a pleasant time talking with her about Trenton, and "Deck the Halls," and other happy memories. It was a good visit, and after a few hours Aunt Dee, whispering that Uncle Al's memory was going (he had seemed belligerently wordless), told us she had to get some rest, and if we didn't mind, could we end our visit. She handed us each an envelope, and made us swear that we'd not open them until we returned home, and not open them in the same room. On the way back, we joked about what the envelope contained—a letter explaining why we'd been kicked out of the will? Further instructions on how to behave at the shore? But we were quiet in between jokes. It was obvious that our aunt and uncle were deteriorating—Al must have been about 93 then. I was beginning to regret all the excuses I had for not spending time with them in the past.

When we got home, we separately opened our envelopes. A letter was inside, explaining how, after consulting with their tax person, and considering their age and health, they had decided to distribute some of the money that would eventually come to us. Attached to the letter was a check for \$20,000.00. Wow—twenty thousand times 13 nieces and nephews. I screamed. From the other room, Mike said, "So I guess we're still in the will?"

We spent a couple of hours trying to figure out why we'd been given the money. Mike said it was to save us from paying inheritance tax later. I thought maybe our aunt and uncle were dying. We tried to call the rest of our family, but no one was home. Then the phone rang. Aunt Dee was calling to see what we had to say about the gift, and find out why it had taken us so long to call her. I lied that we'd run into a traffic jam on the highway and had just gotten back. I thanked her effusively, telling her how helpful the gift would be, since we'd just moved to a new house, and were really short of cash. (She had taught me years before to always, in a thank you note for money, tell the one I was writing to what I intended to do with the "generous gift.") She sounded delighted, I thought in part because I was so flustered and obviously grateful, and she knew I'd been lying about the traffic jam, and in part because I'd once again been late in my response to a gift. And oh, the guilt I felt at having such mean thoughts.

The next year, Aunt Dee called and asked if I could come down to stay with her for a few days. I was surprised. She had never, ever asked me for anything. Ever. When I got there I could see she was in the middle of a crisis. She'd had to have Uncle Al committed to a nursing home. His dementia had become more than she could deal with. He was still in good physical shape, but she weighed only about 100 pounds, if

that. The day after he'd been taken to the nursing home, he had a stroke, and was now in the hospital, unconscious. She needed me to drive her there. We went back and forth to the hospital for several days and it was apparent to me that Uncle Al wasn't going to get better. It was also apparent that my aunt thought it was her fault he'd had the stroke.

On the fourth day I was there, we went to the hospital in the late evening. A friend of hers, a youngish priest, was also there. He was a tall, blonde, scare-crowish guy with a well-tailored priestly suit. I thought he was going to administer Extreme Unction, the Sacrament for the dying, but as Aunt Dee told me, he was going to perform a healing service. Healing? Maybe it was to make her feel better. But Father Tom, or whatever his casual priestly name was, seemed fervent and intense. He lit some candles and spritzed holy water, and recited some prayers that sounded like speaking in tongues, but I probably imagined that, as he was mumbling so low. Then at the climax of the ritual, which I was beginning to think Father Tom had made up, the three of us, he explained, were going to transfer our energy to Uncle Al, while holding him and praying some familiar prayers. I realized my aunt had corralled me into a religious service. Maybe she felt I'd be so impressed by Al's revival and subsequent return to the nursing home that I'd fall on the floor and promise to return to the Church. I stared at Uncle Al, white against the white sheets, his bald head glowing in the candle light. He was wheezing and softly moaning.

"You will concentrate all your energy on Al, willing part of your health unto him," Father Tom whispered to me. I was beginning to remember a Bergman movie where a servant had cradled her dead mistress. I really didn't want to do this. The three of us propped him up, laid our hands on him, said an "Our Father," and tried to transfer

energy to him. He did seem to jump a bit, but that may have been the result of the priest's jerking him. "Now," said Father Tom, "we'll have to wait. Let us silently say the rosary." He handed me an extra set of beads. Did he always carry a spare? Or was this one of the rosary beads blessed by the Pope that Aunt Dee owned? While they prayed and I mouthed prayers, I watched Father Tom, just another one of the odd friends she'd collected in the years she was living at the shore. Then I stared at Uncle Al. Who was he? What did he think of me, of us? He hadn't said much to me in all the years I'd known him. Had they been happy together? Had they once been madly in love? Aunt Dee had once hinted that he was a terrific lover. I tried to imagine him, when they were alone, bursting passionately out of whatever shell he lived in. I tried to wipe those thoughts out of my mind, and finally started reciting Hail Marys in my head to cut out the inappropriate thoughts. After all, sins could be committed in thoughts as well as words and deeds, the nuns had told us. Sins. I hadn't thought of them for a long time.

Finally we returned home and went to bed. At about four in the morning the nurse at the hospital called to say Uncle Al had died.

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Two years after that, Aunt Dee began the longest wake in, if not the history of the world, of the Delaware valley and the shore areas. After Uncle Al died, she'd begun deteriorating, losing her ability to walk and becoming unable to eat. I thought she was starving herself out of guilt from having Uncle Al put in the nursing home. A kind of Catholic suicide. She just couldn't eat she said. Tired of life, I thought. Every day she rose early in the hothouse temperature she kept the heater set on, even in the summer. Hobbling to her lounge chair, she said her rosary over and over, until the shut-in Mass

began on TV. She sipped a bit of tea, and gave orders: how to cook the meals she never ate, where to return the spice jars to their proper alphabetical place. Dozing most of the day. But then she'd become alert and seem as if she were her old self. Over the summer, she had us all come down, one at a time for a final weekend with her. Either Mike or I hit on the idea that this was an extended wake, one she could be present at, and hear the kinds of things the dead don't get to hear. It was also a time for almost final gift giving—there was still the fabled will.

She sold Uncle Al's Buick to my husband, Harry—his dream car, though Al had done a lot of damage to it before the keys were taken from him. But it was Harry's longtime fantasy—a 15 year old luxury car with all the extras and leather upholstery, and only 12,000 miles on it. The car of all those legends, his. His dream, despite the damage to the windows caused by Al pouring water down into the mechanism that opened and closed them. Harry paid Dee the car's blue book value, minus the estimate for repairs. Then, three weeks later, Aunt Dee returned his check. She did it that way so that she could honestly say that Harry had paid her for the car. What she did with his check was her business. She also gave him Al's beautiful rifle. These gifts were for the odds and ends Harry had done for her the few years before, but also, I thought, as a reward for being a good husband to me, for helping me to get an education and to write, for putting up with my atheistic idiosyncrasies.

I got my gifts the next time I went down the shore on my own. Aunt Dee handed me a medium sized cardboard box with some of her precious cut glass, which made me cry. She thought it was for joy—and I was happy—and she probably didn't remember the incident that had so hurt me years before. When my sister was about to be married,



Aunt Dee came to her wedding shower and gave her some of grandmother's fabled cut glass. I was surprised, as she hadn't given me any when I was married, though I'd rather brazenly hinted it would be an appropriate thing when she asked what I'd like for a gift. She must have seen the disappointment on my face; she said brusquely: "I'm giving those to MJ, because I knew she'd appreciate the crystal and take care of it." I was shattered.

But now I was getting my share. Pieces I'd never use, probably. Absolution. She also gave me my great-grandmother's thick gold wedding band for my daughter.

"And now," she said, "I'm going to give you something precious to me," and produced a small clear plastic box. From it she took a heavy, heart-shaped locket and chain. The locket had a smaller heart traced on its face with stones, diamonds, she said, gold, and then told me of the long lineage and lawsuit that came with the locket. It was heavy in my hand. Looked like copper, and those were probably rhinestones, I thought.

"This locket originally belonged to Ethel Barrymore, the famous actress, part of the great Barrymore family," she began, and told me how it had been pawned, and begun the slow route to Aunt Dee's neck. "Barrymore was, early in her life, married to a very wealthy man, and that's probably who gave her the locket. She became an alcoholic and in her later years, lived in Philadelphia, and pawned this very locket when she was destitute." I must have looked doubtful: of the story, but also of when I could possibly wear it.

"Aunt Dee, I love it, but you know I don't wear jewelry, not even a ring—you do remember how I refused to wear a wedding ring, how everyone in the family was upset? Why don't you give it to MJ or Bonnie—they would appreciate it. And to tell you the

truth, I always hoped you'd give me your piano; I'm the only one in the family who ever played on it other than you, and I'd like to have my granddaughter take lessons on it."

"I have plans for the piano, giving it to the local school. You can hand the locket down to your daughter or granddaughter eventually, but I want you to have it. This is important to me."

So I thanked her over and over and swore I'd wear it every time I went to the theater, or parties, and think of her and Ethel Barrymore. Had she ever seen Barrymore in Philadelphia, seen her in a play? Felt some connection? Was the story of the lawsuit true? Well, it didn't matter. All these things she was giving me had meant a great deal to her. They were emblems of her connections to a better life, to where she'd ended up, how she'd risen from Emily Street with its terrible outhouse to a much better life, dragging a motley crew of small relatives with her. We both started to cry, and I told her I'd cherish everything she gave me. Always.

That afternoon, Aunt Dee was napping and I was trying to cool off on the back porch—inside the house was about 100 degrees. I heard something inside and went through the kitchen and living room. Aunt Dee was in the hallway, naked, trying to find the bathroom. "Do you need help?" I asked. She looked puzzled. "Get me my robe? I couldn't find it. I'm going into the bathroom. I think it's right here." She stared at me, and then, with an eloquent gesture swept her hand along her body, said, "This, this is what it all comes to." She had lost a lot of weight, and was covered with a mass of wrinkles. I couldn't bear to look at her body, just stared into her eyes and said, "I'll get your robe." Why, why hadn't I thought to say something like "You're still a good looking woman, Aunt Dee"? Because she'd have known I was lying?

Two weeks later she died, but that event and the funeral that followed seemed bland and conventional and blurred. I can't remember if someone played "Mother At Your Feet Is Kneeling," at the funeral mass, but it was the least they could have done for a faithful organist, communicant and contributor to the church.

Soon after that, Al's nephew called to let me know that Dee had told him before she died that I could have the piano. The gift I'd wanted. Beyond the grave she's still giving me gifts. And what had I ever given her? Even my thank you notes were months late. I'd dedicated my Master's thesis to her and my mother. And sent her my published poems and articles, but I should have done more. I read a passage she'd written in one of her published articles, about the two year old me dancing on a table that Halloween, swirling my gypsy dress. Maybe I gave her love then, or happiness. All her gifts to me now seemed like messages: to love beauty and books and learning, abstractions embodied in gold and glass and fairy tale images and a fabulous doll's house.

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While I was going through the canvas bag full of Aunt D's papers, I found every poem she'd ever written; copies of angry letters critical of grammar and usage to the editors of newspapers and to hosts of TV news shows; short, nostalgic articles that had been published in local weeklies; letters from me and my brother; a copy of my Master's thesis, and every new poem of mine I'd ever sent her. But nothing about Miss B' Kind. I wanted to know more about the club. Curious, I googled "American Anti-Vivisection Society," sure that the organization had died years earlier. It hadn't, and their site had a link to a publication celebrating the 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the organization's good works. A click took me to the cover of the magazine, which showed three women in front of the

society's office. There, in 1924, was Aunt Dee, eighteen years old, in a rather stylish skirt and sweater; she stood next to Miss Hay, who was swathed in furs and a jaunty hat. The credit inside misspelled my aunt's last name. Dee looked gawky and nervous, her curly hair wild and unbecoming

I called AAVS and asked if I could look through their files, as I was thinking of writing about the Miss B' Kind Club and my aunt's role in it. I was invited to come to Jenkintown, where the offices are now located, and look through their bound journals. The woman who was archiving the books (they were soon to be put in storage) brought me a pile of leather-bound journals. On the first page I opened was a picture of my Aunt Kate, Dee's younger sister, who was about seven at the time. She was the star of a little musicale put on by the group. Dee and another aunt, Peggy, were on the next page which showed all the children in the show, which featured a play written by Miss Hay, music by a talented child violinist, and *tableaux vivants*. The journal was filled with articles about, of course, animals being mistreated and tested in labs, but also reviews of Shaw's plays, articles on Vegetarianism, and the dangers of inoculations. When Dee began working there wasn't clear. Nor did the society have employment records. Had Dee taken part in programs the society put on for Philadelphia school children? Had AAVS offered her a job after my grandfather died? All I knew was that she had found a haven there, and the girls in the family at least had a kind of after school program while my grandmother worked. And how strange it must have all been for Dee, to go from that awful house on Emily Street to working with women who were wealthy, educated, liberal, do-gooding and kind. And vivacious: the spinster Miss Hay of my memory was in the images I found, a glamorous, perky twenties intellectual. Those women encouraged her: some of

Dee's early poems were published in the journal. Written when she was eighteen, they were much better than the poems I'd written at that age. I thought that in 1924, she was, and probably always would be, that talented child terrified of the house on Emily Street and longing for a life like those of the women she met at the AAVS. And she wanted all the children she knew (and in particular me, her first experiment) to make that leap to a better life. She had found the magic formula: beautiful manners, perfect grooming, the Catholic church, belief in God, music, art, great books—and money. (Of course, beauty and intelligence were also helpful, but the formula would work for anyone, no matter how limited.) All her life she tried to persuade us that she knew the key to happiness and success.

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A week after the funeral, a woman called to ask me if I was a relative of Aunt Dee's and if I'd attended her funeral. She had known Aunt Dee when she was a child, and had lost track of her. When she saw the funeral notice in the paper, she'd been very sick and wasn't able to make the long trip to the shore. The funeral director had given her my phone number. She always wondered what had happened to Dee.

I said I was Dee's niece, and told her a bit about my aunt's later life.

"You are so lucky," the woman said, "to have known Dee all your life. We knew her when I was very young. I was in the Miss B'Kind Club, and we had such fun, and we learned so much—I still contribute to Animal Welfare, after all these years. My mother was a widow, trying to raise four children alone. We lived out near the University in the houses that were later pulled down. It was kind of a slum then. Your aunt was so

beautiful and kind. I think she saved our lives. For years I wanted to get in touch with her to thank her, but didn't know where she lived."

I told her how Dee had worked with children until she was eighty, teaching and inspiring them. I thanked her for calling and telling me more about my aunt's early years and Miss B'Kind..

"You were so lucky to have her all your life."

"Yes, I was," I told her. "I really was."

## THE RIGHT WAY TO HAVE A BABY

That morning I woke up, groggy, numb, not sure where I was. In a bed, in dim light. I'd had a baby the night before, maybe that morning. I felt my body, the collapsed belly, a hard stone under loose skin, remembered a bright overhead light like a swinging sun. An earthquake. Then a large red lump of screaming baby on my stomach, pulsing fat arms and legs. Laughing, a faraway voice saying, "Must weigh nine pounds." Before that, something was wrong, nurses saying quick things and a masked doctor, one I'd never seen before, shouting "What happened?"

But it was over and hadn't really been so bad. And I'd been strong. Maria, my friend from the apartments, had dropped me off at the Base hospital at 11:00 p.m. My husband was on 24 hour guard duty and wouldn't get off until six that night. Did he know? The pains, one after the other, not too bad, started at midnight. The nurse told me it was a big baby, my first, and I'd probably be in labor for at least twelve hours. "I have a wide pubic arch," I mumbled, remembering a note I'd seen while sneaking a look at my chart. "Primipara. Wide pubic arch." By 2:00 a.m., the contractions were much harder, the pain just about bearable. I started mumbling the "Hail Mary" in Spanish. Sister Rosalie's class. "*Dios te salve Maria. Llena eras te gracia.*" Say it right: Castilian "c." Dioth. The prayer lasted just as long as the contraction, distracted me from crying out: "Momma!" Was I relaxing, breathing right? I suddenly felt terrified. What happened to the nurse? How bad would the pain be in ten more hours?

That's all I could remember: a blank space, then voices and screaming. I lay back, relieved. We had a baby boy. When would they bring him? I had to go to the bathroom,

though I'm not sure how I knew. I couldn't feel anything. The smell of stale blood and iodine.

A woman came in the room with a tray. "Your breakfast." She showed me a plate of greasy, lumpy eggs.

"Not hungry," I said, suddenly nauseous. "Do you know when they bring the babies?" I remembered all those '40s and '50s movie scenes I'd watched in high school: the mother, hair shiny and curled, full makeup, wearing a fluffy nightgown, reaches for the adorable infant in a blanket, beaming husband touching her arm, friends and relatives waiting in the hall. I looked down at my ratty cotton hospital gown. "Is the nursery near here?"

"I don't know, Miss. I don't usually work here. Filling in."

"Please, where's the bathroom?"

"Down the hall, two doors on the left. But maybe you should stay in bed until the nurse comes in. Try to sleep. I'll leave the tray."

Something was wrong. I tried to remember the book I'd read about labor and childbirth. My brain was fuzzy. I lugged myself up, feeling as if I was made of cement, and hauled myself over the edge of the bed to the floor. Shuffling from bed to table to the door, I leaned against the wooden wall, slowly dragging my bare feet down the hall. Where was my little suitcase, my shoes? I could see a large room at the end of the hall with rows of beds. Women in nightgowns were moving around, some making beds, others getting dressed. Getting ready for the babies, I thought.



A woman stood at the large bathroom mirror putting on makeup. I went in a stall and tried to pee, but my body seemed to have forgotten how. I hobbled out, crunched over, to the mirror. Oh, my god. I looked horrible. White face, wild hair.

The woman asked, "Are you OK? Want me to get a nurse?"

"I'm OK."

"What are you here for?"

"What am I here for?"

"Yeah. They brought you in early this morning. Did you have emergency surgery?"

"I had a baby."

"Oh," she said, "Great." Kay introduced herself, told me we were on the Medical/Surgical ward. She'd had a hysterectomy a week before, was going home that day. All the women on the ward had surgery or miscarriages.

"Where are the babies? Do they bring them in the morning?"

Kay slowly put her makeup back in a case, looking away from me and beginning to move to the door. "You should ask the nurse." She mumbled goodbye and left. I wondered if I could make it back to the room.

When I reached the hall, a nurse grabbed my arm. "You shouldn't be out of bed. Did you need the bed pan?" I was too tired to answer, just shook my head.

She helped me back into bed, said don't get up. You need rest. She checked the bulky pad I was wearing and got a new one, poured something I couldn't feel between my legs.

"See, you're bleeding. Probably tore a stitch. Are you in pain?"

"No." She gave me two large white pills and one small pink one. "Will they bring the babies now? I'm going to breast feed and need to start."

"They don't bring the babies on this ward, but the doctor will be in. He'll explain."

"Can you tell me what time it is? When was my baby born?"

She looked at her watch. "It's eight thirty. Doctors make rounds after nine. He has all that information. Try to sleep."

I lay back, my body floating an inch or two above the mattress. I tried to remember what had happened. Alone in the delivery room, I had started to shake, my back curving up. A little after 2:00 a.m., the nurse came back. "When did this start?" she demanded, putting a tongue depressor between my teeth. Couldn't remember. But I was OK now, just groggy. Could the pills I'd been given get into my milk? Then I thought: what if something had happened to the baby? But I'd seen him, heard him crying, saw him moving. So why was I here?

I tried not to think about the baby, to wait for the doctor to come in, but I began to cry, my head filled with fear that felt like a premonition. When the nurse came back, I was sobbing.

"What's wrong? Calm down, you'll have hysterics."

"Is my baby OK? Is he alive?"

"Of course, he's fine. The doctor will be here in a few minutes." She gave me a glass of water and washed my face with a damp, cool cloth, as if wiping away any evidence of tears. "You'll make yourself sick."

Later I'd learn that the baby was OK, normal, healthy, but I couldn't then quite believe it was true. If he was fine, why couldn't I see him?

When the doctor came in, he was cheerful and hearty. "Well, Mommy, how are you doing?" He briskly examined me, hmmm'd, then smiled and said I'd need a few days before this all healed up. All what? I don't think he was the doctor behind the mask in the delivery room, but I'd never seen the same doctor at the clinic twice, even when I had weekly prenatal appointments.

I began to cry again. "I want to see my baby. Please. Did something happen to him? Is he OK? Why am I here?"

"You're here to get extra rest. It's noisy and busy in the maternity ward—the babies are with the mothers all day, and meals aren't served in bed. You'd have to walk down to the dining area, and you wouldn't be able to sleep."

"I don't mind noise. I can get out of bed and walk. Did something happen to me?"

I hadn't felt any pain that was unbearable, but by two a.m. I had been terrified. Grantly Dick Read's *Childbirth Without Fear*, the then radical book about natural childbirth, published in the 50s, had promised me an easy, pain-free delivery—maybe it only worked if you stayed brave. I remembered how frightened I'd been in the labor room and began to sob and hiccup.

The doctor looked at the chart and stared at me for a minute. "I'll have you taken to the nursery in a wheelchair, and you can see your baby, OK? Will that make you feel better? In about a half hour. Nurse will get an orderly. Can you stop crying now?" I smiled between hiccups, thanked him. I wanted to tell him I'd tried to do everything

right, but a tiny voice warned me to act normal. What was normal? "Thank you," I said, "Sorry to act like such a baby."

"Well, that's fine then, Mommy. I'll be back this afternoon."

I'm not your mommy, I thought. "My husband's on guard duty," I said. "Could the nurse call his commanding officer in Ordnance?" I put on what felt like a brave smile.

"He's probably already been informed."

Probably Harry had been and still was standing out in the cold rain, in that leaky poncho, guarding a magazine filled with parts for the radars. Wherever he was, he probably felt as miserable as I did. Only a year before, we'd been making plans for college, living in a small apartment, both working for RCA. Then, Harry had been drafted, unusual in a period between wars and demi-wars, when there was an overabundance of 17 and 18 year old boys eager to enlist. When I unexpectedly became pregnant, I decided to move with Harry to Fayetteville, North Carolina, while he served out his time as a Radar Specialist at Fort Bragg. Actually, I'd been thrilled to go with him, as I'd rarely been outside the Philadelphia area. We were suddenly very poor, living on his allotment of \$90.00 a month. Even in the '50s, that wasn't much money. But I was sure we'd soon be home, start college, and raise the baby. At that point, our plans were pretty vague.

Two hours later, an orderly arrived. He helped me into the chair, and we jerked down a few corridors, until we came to a large glass window. I could see a few babies in little carts behind it. The orderly put his head in the door—I couldn't go inside—and

asked the nurse to show the Cummings baby. She brought a cart close to the window, then picked up the blue bundle and held him at a practiced angle.

The Cummings baby was a mess. His head, topped with a feathering of red hair, came to a point, his face was bright red, battered and swollen. His eyes puffed closed, slanty little slits. A poor ugly creature, he looked nothing like those movie newborns, or the ones in books.

"Can't I hold him?"

"No one can go in the nursery but the medical staff."

I looked again at the baby's eyes. What was wrong? The nurse smiled and moved away from the window. I didn't say anything. The orderly chatted about the size of the baby, how healthy he looked. Had I read the card on the cart? I shut out his voice. The pills were beginning to wear off and sitting in the wheel chair hurt.

Baby Cummings was supposedly fine, but I didn't believe it. Something was wrong, something had happened. Back in my room, I began to wonder about the baby's appearance. I vaguely remembered a picture in a book. The baby's eyes. Mongoloid. Was that it? But that only happened to old women who had babies, and I was only twenty. By the time the nurse came in with more pills, I wondered if the baby was deformed in some way.

She was cheerful and had answers to all my questions. Harry would be here after lunch, the baby had been born at 2:20 a.m., weighed almost nine pounds. "The biggest baby in the nursery. Your husband will be so proud. Does he have red hair, too?" she asked.

I stared at her. She'd probably gotten the information from that annoying orderly. Obviously, she was trying to keep the truth from me. "Is there something wrong with him? He doesn't have any—uh, physical problems?"

"Why?" she asked sharply. "Didn't you see that beautiful baby?"

Well, she hadn't seen him, so what did she know? I started to cry again, choking down what felt like howls in the back of my throat. "Are you in pain?" she asked. "You really need to get some sleep. I'll get you something." All I could remember was the postpartum photos of those heroic Dick Read natural childbirth mothers and their probably perfect babies.

Two hours later another doctor came in the room and woke me up. "How are you feeling?"

"Sore, groggy."

He looked at me closely, then smiled. "Nurse tells me you've been upset. What's the problem?" He seemed sympathetic, interested. I tried to explain how I was in the wrong place, how the woman in the bathroom told me who was there, how I hadn't held the baby.

The doctor said nothing.

"I think... there might be...possibly, something wrong with him. Did you see him?"

"I'm not a pediatrician, so I don't go to the nursery, but nurse said the baby is fine." He stared at me. "What's today's date?"

"The day? Monday."

"What is the *date*?"

"The whole date? Monday, December 9<sup>th</sup>, 1957. Don't you know what day it is?"

"Why do you think something is wrong with the baby?"

I tried to explain how the baby looked, his head and eyes. I paused, looked at the doctor, who was still smiling. "I thought that he could possibly be..." I couldn't say the word, as no one else had seemed to notice.

"Mrs. Cummings." The doctor paused. "Do you want to hurt your baby?"

Harry came to the Med/Surg ward later that afternoon, carrying a box of cigars, flowers and candy. He kissed me on the cheek, pretended not to notice my red eyes.

"Are you OK? Sorry I couldn't be here with you. Someone should have called the C.O.: I could have gotten off duty."

"That's OK. This way, before you could start to worry, it was all over."

"But I wanted to be here, close to you."

"They wouldn't let you see me in the labor room. Fathers aren't allowed." I wished he had been there in that dim room, holding my hand. "Who are the cigars for?"

"The guys in the barracks. Sarge handed out some last month when his wife had..."

"He can probably afford them."

"They were really cheap at the PX." He put the flowers and candy on the table beside the bed. "Was it bad?"

"Not really. It was quick. For a while I thought it would be a lot worse."

He hugged me, but my body was stiff. "I saw the little guy. He's huge. The other babies look like wimps next to him. Your mom will be thrilled about his red hair. He was crying his head off when I left."

"I saw him."

"They're going to transfer you to the maternity ward tomorrow. Are you OK?"

I shrugged. I wondered if they'd told him about the shrink who'd talked to me, how I'd have to see him again. Harry didn't say anything about it, mostly seemed worried that I was so sick and weak.

"I've got to go back to headquarters for about an hour. I need to fill in some paper work so I can get a few days' leave. Gus is waiting outside in the jeep. Be back after dinner, after I get our car. I love you. I love the little guy."

"Love you." He'd gained weight, I noticed, was heavier than I'd ever seen him. Still slender, but filled out, more muscled, tan from all that marching and maneuvers. I could see he'd adjusted to life in the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne, the most macho (they thought) of the army divisions. Who would have thought that the quiet, sensitive guy I'd married would adapt so well. He'd gotten a rifle marksman medal, been promoted to Private First Class and now had a small group of miserable, no-rank draftees, to show how to con an army that didn't really need them. They'd created a shuffleboard game in the warehouse and played cards after their minimal duties were finished. Most of all, they stayed out of sight—Harry's top sergeant's orders. Harry had learned how to fix TVs on base really slowly, to steal huge chunks of turkey breast from the officer's club kitchen, and to negotiate the insane Army rules and regulations with a bunch of buddies. He was almost enjoying himself. And now he had a son: a tough, red-headed Army brat. I knew he'd



been lying when he said a having a girl would be great, better even than a boy. I'd spent months cleaning our tiny apartment with a fervor I never before or after would have, dodging the huge flying roaches that locals claimed were just part of Southern life, and stitching a tiny embroidered quilt covered with baby animals and the first two lines of "Now I lay me down to sleep."

I felt really pissed, which was much better than crying.

Despite all my efforts, I was one of Dr. Read's failures. What had I done wrong? Within a few years natural childbirth, La Leche League, and dads in the delivery room would become the right way to have a baby. I was just a few years early

The next morning I was shifted to the maternity ward, a long barracks-like room filled with beds. During the day, the babies were trundled into the room and stowed in metal army-issue bassinets that were placed at the end of the beds. My bed was about two thirds of the way down the row. To my left was a large section where the non-com, regular army wives were; most of them black or Mexican. Many were breast feeding and were allowed to keep the babies with them during the night. To the right was a smaller section with several empty beds. In that area were the officers' wives, most white, who all seemed to look like the new mothers in those movies and magazine illustrations. Every four hours, warm bottles of formula were brought to those women, who fed their babies on schedule. Nursing mothers weren't required to keep their babies on a feeding schedule, though the doctors and nurses urged them to do so. The mothers for the most part ignored the advice. I felt a wordless disapproval from the nurses and glossy wives who were cheerfully and painlessly bottle feeding: Why would *you* want to do *that*? We don't need to do *that*. I felt I belonged with the officers' wives, though none of them

spoke to me, and a reluctance to become part of the other group, and felt a deep shame in discovering those feelings in myself. Actually, since my husband was a draftee and all the other women's husbands, whatever the level, were part of the regular army, career soldiers, we were at the bottom of the social heap—army trailer trash. And yet I had nice clothes, an unidentifiable Northern accent and had actually brought books to read in my hospital suitcase. So the nurses were confused. Next to me on one side was a bed width space and on the other, an empty bed. No one seemed to know where I belonged, least of all me.

When baby Cummings arrived I did finally feel, if not passionate love, awe at his tenacious energy and fragility. He stared into my eyes, clutched my finger, kicked and shuddered.

"High strung," the nurse said, "That's just a shudder response. It goes away," as he flailed his arms and legs at any sudden noise or touch. Had that happened during the delivery? Had he been hurt? "Welcome to my world, little shudderer," I thought. "What happened to us? Are you OK?"

When it was time to feed him (I'd decided to try to stay on schedule), the nurse handed me a sterile pad that smelled like alcohol, told me to wipe my nipples before breast feeding, and nurse for only a few minutes on each breast every four hours the first day. "Don't worry about how much little Eric gets these first days, if he's hungry at night they'll give him a supplemental bottle."

"But I don't want him to get a bottle. I read that—"

"He'll only get water. *If* that's what you want." She glanced at the nursing mothers to our left. "Do you know anyone who can help? Is there anything I can do for you?"

"How will I know if any milk is coming out? That he's getting enough to eat?"

"Oh, you'll know."

Lt. Willard was the name embroidered on her uniform pocket. She began to straighten the bed covers. "Women who decide not to breast feed have injections to dry their breasts after they've delivered."

"I don't think I had an injection. I didn't ask for one." I unwrapped the blanket, looked at the baby's fingers and toes, the small port wine birth marks on his forehead and chest. He looked OK.

"Those marks will fade," the nurse assured me.

"Did anything happen to me when I had the baby? I can't remember...."

She put paper cups of pills on the bed table. "Your blood pressure was very high, and you tore when the baby came so fast, but these things are common, and you'll be fine soon. The pink pills are for blood pressure, and so is the special diet you're getting."

I hadn't noticed I was getting a special diet. I just thought all hospital food was bland and disgusting. I suddenly had a yen for a Philadelphia hoagie.

I wrapped the baby in the blanket, held him to my breast and to my amazement he immediately started to nuzzle and then chomped down hard on the nipple. Shocked, I cried out in pain, and he spluttered, pushed away from my breast and began to cry. I tried the other breast, but he spit, began to cry louder. He has really strong lungs, I thought. And vocal cords. Red faced, he howled. Eric, little Eric, I hummed, but the name

sounded harsh. Ricky, Ricky, that was softer. Ricky moved his face from side to side. He screamed. To the left babies were sleeping or quietly suckling. To the right the bottle babies had dozed off.

It had been decided that I'd stay some extra days because of the peritoneal tears I'd sustained during the delivery and because of the depression. I soon fell into the routine: the babies were brought right after the doctor rounds, then feedings, visitors. Besides Harry, I had no visitors. In the afternoon an escort took me via wheelchair to the shrink's office. The mothers ate at the end of the hall in the dining area, at long wooden benches and tables, very uncomfortable for the mothers whose stitches were drying and tightening. At meals the women chatted, exchanged information about their husbands' previous assignments, the towns and bases they'd lived in, bargains at the PX, the post exchange where food, necessities, and luxuries could be had at tremendous discounts. I usually watched in sullen silence. One morning a woman sat beside me and struck up a conversation. "You're nursing, right? Has your milk come in? How are you doing?"

"Not so good," I said. "He doesn't want to nurse."

"You should keep him with you at night, don't let him go back to the nursery, so when he's really hungry, he'll be more eager. Don't let them give him bottles." Her accent was thick, not like the North Carolina and Georgia ones I was getting used to.

"But he cries all the time....I don't want him to keep everyone awake."

"If he gets bottles, he won't work for the milk, and he needs to work, to eat anytime he's ready." She had long thin ashy blonde hair, thick pasty skin. Poor white, I thought. She looked like the women at the cheap, iffy-meat store in the shabby part of town. She probably hadn't even heard of Grantly Dick Read's book. I was ashamed of

my feelings and tried to keep our conversation going. I told her my husband had been drafted. The army was new for us.

Her name was Carleena and she was from a tiny place in Arkansas, she told me, where there were no jobs. Many of the men joined the army when they were young and became career men. They sent money home. Her husband was a Master Sergeant, a lifer. She was a year older than I; this was her fourth baby. "My last, I hope. Carl is going overseas for a year. Germany. Luckily, I can stay on in base housing. Little Carl will go to the base kindergarten. The twins are potty trained" She smiled when she talked about her husband and army life.

"Do you think your husband will re-up?" She asked. Would he sign up for another tour of duty? I thought with horror. "He could," she said, "earn a big bonus for re-enlisting."

"Oh, no, no. His job at RCA is waiting for him back home. And he's going to school. Was going to school."

"That's good. Going to school, I mean. The army has a lot of training programs." I told her my husband had gone to the Radar School at Fort Monmouth.

"That's a real good school. He could be eligible for engineering..." She abruptly turned her head. "I think that's my baby's crying. I'm the third bed down from you. Come visit if you'd like to talk."

"Thank you so much."

She was the first person I'd really spoken with since I'd come to the hospital. I hadn't realized there were some for whom the army was a step up, a chance to escape from nowhere to a better life. So why was I acting like such a ninny, why did I feel as if

my life was over? I was actually relieved when the orderly came to take me to the psychiatrist's office that afternoon, and they took Ricky back to the nursery. I was glad he wouldn't disrupt the ward for a few hours. My breasts were very sore, and I'd get a break. "Light skinned women do have a problem with soreness and infection," the nurse told me. "And you have a red-head's fair, sensitive skin."

The last day of my hospital stay I went to see the base shrink for what I thought would be the final time. But it was clear that he thought I'd benefit from weekly visits "for a while." Did he still think I wanted to hurt my baby? I wasn't sure what power he and the army had to make me comply.

Dr. Benson had seemed to be on my side, to understand my complaints about the hospital treatment I'd received my frustration about not being able to learn what had really happened during labor and delivery. He listened and nodded, said he had no information about the delivery, but that I shouldn't obsess about it. Everything had, after all, turned out fine. I'd told him about the four months of wrenching morning sickness, the disappointing move to North Carolina, my desire to have natural childbirth, what the benefits were according to Grantly Dick Read. He'd nodded and smiled. I babbled on about Read's theories, that because I hadn't been with the baby, held him as soon as he was born, he wasn't, I thought, adjusting to breast feeding, seemed tense and irritated. Dr. Benson calmly pointed out that the other breast fed babies weren't having that problem. I'd confided my now delayed plans to become a painter, and my determination to eventually earn my degree.

When he'd discovered part of my worry about failing at breast feeding was that we couldn't afford formula, that we had no money left that month after fixing the car, he arranged for my husband to take home cases of Similac, and provided a PX voucher for nursing bottles and the equipment for sterilizing them. I'd agreed to give up the effort to breast feed, and our greedy baby was obviously quite content with the change. I was given more pills and a large towel had been pinned tightly around my chest. I attended classes to learn how to prepare and preserve formula. Dr. Benson seemed to approve.

What I didn't know then was that morning sickness, at the time, was seen by some in the medical establishment as an unconscious rejection of the fetus. A physician at the Harvard medical school had the year before published an article in which he measured the degree of neurosis of different categories of women who insisted on Natural childbirth. And Dr. Read was seen, not as a childbirth guru, but as a crazy maverick, unscientific, belligerent, a trouble maker, by those of the obstetrical community who knew anything about him. So all the things I'd told the shrink as a justification for why I felt depressed, all the things that I'd tried to do, had been thwarted from doing, probably seemed to him illogical. The stress of childbirth had obviously, as was then thought, uncovered an underlying neurosis or psychosis. I didn't realize that he and the nurses and doctors were as much in thrall to their training as I was to Dr. Read's ideas.

"So, I'll arrange for your husband to get time off to bring you here each week?" Dr. Benson watched me closely.

"Yes, it's been helpful," I said. And it had been, talking about how confused and angry I felt. Even if he didn't understand why I was so upset.

"You are certainly looking much better," he said.

Well, yes. I'd lost all the excess fluids I'd been carrying, was thinner than I'd been since I was fifteen, and my breasts were still huge. I was wearing a pale blue, slightly tight sweater from my pre-pregnancy days and expensive makeup, the last of the Charles of the Ritz in my old makeup kit. I looked good, I thought, as good--better even--than the officers' wives. "I'm feeling much calmer. Thanks to you." I was flirting mildly. He was beaming and stood to shake my hand. Looking at him closely, I realized he wasn't much older than my husband, and he was very short. Why had he seemed so tall just a few days ago?

I thought it wouldn't take more than a couple of weeks to convince him I was totally better. And then I would get the hell out of Fayetteville.

That afternoon Harry picked us up. He carried the baby to the car, bouncing him, humming to him. Already, I could tell he was going to be a perfect father. He told me about the layette and other gifts that had come from our families while we were in the hospital. He was going to help me as much as he could, he had two weeks leave at Christmas, we would visit home and I would rest as much as needed. He would help with the formula, share night feedings.

Baby Eric Cummings, auspiciously named for a Danish ancestor, and the ancient Viking warrior Eric the Red, within a week had turned into a healthy, big baby with a nicely rounding head and curly red hair, just like his father's and my mother's. By far the most beautiful child in the whole hospital, maybe in the whole of North Carolina, he was contentedly and drowsily finishing off his bottle. His cheeks were chubby and pink. All those vitamins, and vegetables, and long walks, and pre-natal exercises had produced a lovely baby. So Grantly Dick Read would approve of how carefully I'd followed some



of his instructions. I was beginning to enjoy the role of the new, improved Army wife, the wife who would soon decamp from North Carolina. Although I still felt the small dark space behind my ribs.

DR. JAZZ

“Let me see now, you are 72, right?” My latest gynecologist, Dr. Carter, smiled at me and nodded. She was an attractive, 40ish woman with curly hair; a bright floral dress softened her starched lab coat. “Before we begin, I’d like to get your history.” This “Patient’s Initial Visit” thing was new to me. We were in a tastefully decorated office/parlor kind of room in the Women’s Center

“You want my *whole* OB/GYN history? 60 some years?”

“Yes,” she said brightly. “But let’s start with recently. You haven’t been seen for five years? Haven’t had a mammogram for five years?”

“Right.”

“But you do monthly breast self-exams?”

“No, all I can feel is lumps which makes me paranoid. So I don’t bother. That’s why I’m here today. An expert’s hands are better than mine.” Also I didn’t add, my daughter had nagged me into making an appointment.

She frowned slightly. “You are the first patient I’ve ever had who admitted she doesn’t do self-exams.”

“You may have some patients who lie.”

She frowned more deeply and made another mark on her chart.

I realized I was about to alienate another in a long series of gynecologists, and I’d hoped to make her my final one.

\*

Over twenty years before, my daughter asked how long it had been since I'd seen a gynecologist. She'd been watching a TV special on Ovarian Cancer featuring several celebrities who'd died somewhat glamorous, yet tragic deaths from the disease.

"How long has it been?"

"Oh, about five years."

She looks aghast. "Did you know that by the time you have symptoms of Ovarian cancer it's too late?"

I hadn't thought of my ovaries for years. Are they still ticking away in there, quietly doing whatever they do after retirement? Or have they begun maniacally plotting cell division? No one in our family had had breast cancer or ovarian cancer, as far as I knew.

"Remember Gilda Radnor? Saturday Night Live?" She named a few other eminent women who'd died from the disease. "Have you ever had persistent pain in your stomach? Bloating?"

Of course I had, and was beginning to falter, as she could tell.

"OK. We'll go together then. Have lunch. I'll make the appointments. There's a new guy at the H.M.O., Dr. Jes—some long, unpronounceable middle European name. He's called Dr. Jazz. Supposed to be really good, I heard."

\*

Dr. Jazz, indeed, I thought as I started stripping for the exam. Ms. Bell, the nurse, a kindly woman with a sweet, but vaguely pained expression, helped me up on the table.

"How are you today?" she asked. "Are you here for a specific problem?"

"No, just a five-year check-up and oil change. No problems. Unless Dr.

Jestrrmmm-sk-oo..."

"You can call him Dr. Jazz, everyone does," she said brightly, though she was frowning ever so slightly. I struggled with the huge napkin shaped and textured gown.

Nurse Bell took the vital statistics, ("Let's see now, you are 52?"), my blood pressure (high, but I assured her it was always high when I crossed the threshold of any medical office). Then she pulled over a contraption I'd never seen before in my OB or GYN visits. A mirror, adjustable, about Bell's shoulder level.

"What's that?"

She winced. "You see, Dr. Bell believes in educating his patients about their bodies.

Using the correct names, and so on."

"And the mirror?"

"So he can iden—"

"You've got to be kidding." I laughed. "I know the names of all the parts, really, and know their functions, so Dr. Jazz can skip that part of the procedure. I just want the basic check up. And please tell him that before he gets here. Thanks."

I remembered the difficulty of naming those parts when we had never been told them. "Down there," was the modest, vague, general name used by mothers and nurses in the '50s. Of course we knew all the baby words, and then the slang words for genitals before we were in our teens, but it wasn't until I found some books on reproduction that I learned the official names for the stuff down there (though not the correct pronunciation). So I supposed Dr. Jazz's efforts were well meant, if a bit misplaced. In this day? Hadn't I heard a three year old in the Shoprite inform the world at large from her perch on the

shopping cart: "*I have a vagina. Did you know I have a vagina? My brother has a peanut.*"

"This kid is going to do really well on the SATs someday," I thought, weakly smiling at her beaming parents.

The door to the Exam room opened and Dr. Jazz walked in, his stride officious, yet graceful. I wondered how he managed that in beige clogs. His scrubs—a bad noun for the fitted, lightly starched pale blue uniform he wore—could have been custom made. He studied my chart for a moment, his angular, sallow face and long nose scrunched in concentration. His brown hair was pulled back in a ponytail. A gold chain dangled something at his throat.

"Haven't been in...hmmmm...five years, BP...Do you take Estrogen?"

"No, don't want to. Makes me feel chronically premenstrual."

"You could adjust. Symptoms don't last. Prevent aging..." he frowned, glanced at my face..."Skin still looks good—Estrogen could help keep it that way. Heart attacks, so on."

"Thanks but I..."

"Well, the nurse will give you a prescription on the way out...in case. Pamphlet out in the waiting room."

He sat on the little rolling chair and pulled the mirror-light over.

"Oh, I told Ms. Bell I didn't need the...instructions."

To my amazement, he ignored me and began his little spiel, pointing out by way of the mirror now directly in my line of vision, the parts one by one, and their correct names. He didn't mention any I didn't know. I remembered the time I did a self-exam in

a small mirror when I was twelve. It wasn't easy, from a seated position on the edge of my bed. I'd heard there were three openings down there, though I could see only two. Where was Dr. Jazz back then when I needed him? Back then I guessed he was about two years old.

Jazz finished with the instructions and the exam. I was in good shape, he said, just should come in more often. Lose weight. Get a mammogram. Try the estrogen. He snapped my folder closed and was out the door.

When the nurse came back in, I asked her to tell Dr. Jazz I wanted to see him in his office for a minute. If possible. She handed me a prescription for estrogen and said she'd see if it could be arranged. I might have to wait a while. He was very busy.

I sat on a bench in the hall. I wondered: could it be Dr. Jazz assumed a woman my age was still misinformed about the basic facts of anatomy? Did he think he was setting me free from years of repression from the bad (actually, in my case, totally non-existent) sex education at home and in Catholic schools? Did he think rehearsing names of the genitalia and taking estrogen would lead to a vibrant elderly sex life? Were all women my age frigid? Calm yourself, I thought, hunkering down for what looked like a long wait. Why was I so angry?

During the long wait, I scrolled down the gynecologists I'd met over the years. The first one, when I was twelve. I'd passed out during marching band practice. I weighed about ninety pounds and had just been promoted to first baritone; the position came with the huge golden horn that seemed to weigh fifty pounds. I hadn't eaten breakfast and couldn't admit the prestigious first horn was too heavy—I'd only held it

before while sitting down in band practice. Before I'd been promoted, a tall hefty boy had always been first baritone.

Somehow, I'd ended up in the hospital; because I wasn't sick and because I lived in a "bad" urban neighborhood, someone must have suspected I might be pregnant, so I had my first internal exam. I still can't listen to baritone solos without feeling slightly nauseous. After that, I was transferred to the French Horn Section, a more appropriate place for a skinny girl.

My next gynecologist, when I was nineteen and married, sent me to a psychiatrist. I'd had severe cramps all my menstrual life and wanted to finally learn why. He didn't believe the cramps were as severe as I claimed any more than the high school nurse had. I was so nervous, he asked me how my "marital relationship" was, and didn't believe me when I said great. Two months later I had emergency surgery for a ruptured ovarian cyst. The doctor who operated said I'd probably only become pregnant with great difficulty.

Three months later I was pregnant. My first obstetricians were on an army base, a different one at each visit. I'd never seen the one who showed up the night I went into labor. He was abrupt and irritated when I suggested I'd like to try Natural Childbirth, and knocked me out with whatever drugs they used in those days. I never saw him again.

My next obstetrician was a warm, paternal, teddy bear of a guy. All his patients loved him. I loved him and loved how he assured me he'd take care of me. His eyes actually twinkled behind horn rimmed glasses and he patted me on the shoulder. His distant, unemotional partner delivered my next two babies. But I still loved the Teddy Bear.

I don't remember any of the other gynecologists, or even if I saw one again, up until I had a hysterectomy at forty, which permanently cured me of the lifelong cramps. A very nice doctor of the loveable paternalistic type did that surgery. He was also a very good surgeon, and corrected the adhesions and the brutal scar from the first operation. I was still a sucker for that kind of doctor. After he retired, I'd avoided Ob/Gyns, figuring I'd never have to see one again. What a relief. And now my daughter had ruined my run of good luck.

But all that was beside the point. Dr. Jazz was just the culmination of all my gynecologists who didn't listen. And probably I was still trying to come to terms with being post-menopausal. And what that might mean for my sex life.

Dr. Jazz was sitting behind a big grey desk, fiddling with a big gold pen. He looked up, puzzled.

"Dr. Jazz," I began. "In the past I've had a number of paternalistic, condescending gynecologists, and really resented how they treated women." He smiled tentatively. "And I think you believe that your new, enlightened way of interacting with your patients is a big improvement, but really, you are just as paternalistic, overbearing and deaf to your patients' needs and requests as those old docs were. I asked Ms. Bell to tell you, I told you..." And I detailed specifically what had so upset me. He looked at me, curious, bland, gauging if I could possibly still be having menopausal symptoms. I wasn't sure he heard me.

Then I told the most terrible lie of my life. Even now I can hardly write about it. I wanted to tell him that I gone through that same exploration when I was twelve, and did eventually learn the names—labia, clitoris—but knew that would only make him feel



more justified in his approach. Then I remembered hearing years before about women doing genital self-exams during women's lib group meetings (that may be just an urban legend). I'd tell him I'd been part of such a group, establishing my bona fides as a sexually informed, liberated woman. But when I blurted out the lie, it turned into something very different.

"Listen," Dr. Jazz," I said, "before you took your MCATS, I was a member of a group of liberated women who, after we learned all the names and functions of our genitalia, practiced masturbating at meetings, so we could be free of depending on men for orgasms." Oh, my god. Did I really say that? Where had that come from?

Dr. Jazz was very pale. He got out of his chair, held out his hand and said. "Thank you for sharing your feelings. It's been helpful." He was probably thinking: Frigid. And crazy, too.

I shook his hand, then tried to walk out of his office with dignity. My face was flushed. My feet felt as if I were wearing cement clogs. When I got to the hall, I tore up the prescription for estrogen and threw it on the floor.

\*

And here I was again, a bit nervous because of all the scary ads I'd recently seen. I was grateful that the profession had changed so much, or that medical consultants had somewhere along the way figured out that women had changed and needed a different tone, a more feminine décor. Doctor Carter was trying her best to be pleasant. I had just quoted some new research that said mammograms might not be needed for patients in my age bracket, but I could tell I was going to give in. I sighed, wanting to keep my nice, final gynecologist, and said I'd get the mammogram. I didn't remind her she hadn't

asked if I were sexually active, because the fastest growing group of new AIDS patients was in the so called “senior citizens” group. Maybe there is a pamphlet in the lavender waiting room.

## TWENTY FOUR HOURS IN HECKMONDWIKE

“Why would you want to go to Heckmondwike?” the man asked, as if I were going to spend a brief vacation in Hell. “Do you have relatives there?”

“No. That is, I don’t think so,” I said, reluctantly. But he’d been so helpful, and was staring at me so incredulously, that I finally mumbled, “My great-grandmother’s family came from Heckmondwike, at least I think they did. And since we’re in England, and it’s on the train line....just out of curiosity....”

“You yanks are all alike,” he snarled. “All trying to find some king or duke on your family tree.” He tugged a lock of hair on his forehead and bowed his head slightly. “We Brits know we’re all descended from serfs.”

“No royalty in our family tree. They were probably one of the serf branches.”

He smiled, unconvinced. He knew the type: crazed American genealogist. A few minutes before he’d rescued me from the Huddersfield information desk after I’d asked for the fourth time where I could get the bus to Heckmondwike. Every time, the agent had mumbled something that sounded like “A thah und a gunna thothin.” The stranger had tapped me on the shoulder and, in English clear to me, had offered to interpret. Now he seemed less anxious to help. My husband, a puzzled look on his face, returned from Left Luggage and said, “I put the suitcases in a locker. I couldn’t understand what the clerk was saying—are they speaking English?”

“The Yorkshire dialect,” the man said. “Even the British sometimes have a hard time understanding it.”

“This gentleman offered to show us the way to the bus station,” I explained.

“It’s no trouble—going near there anyway.”

We followed him out of the train station into a town that seemed bleakly familiar. Huddersfield reminded me of Philadelphia, of Society Hill before it was gentrified. On the train, I'd noticed the resemblance, the factories and row houses. The dirt and depressing sky line. Parts of Camden and Philadelphia must have seemed like home to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century immigrants, a grungy duplicate of the familiar. But a place with jobs.

The man from the station walked along with us, still trying to figure out what had brought us to this off-the-track, faintly dismal corner of England. He was, he said, a teacher at the University of Leeds. And what was it, he asked, my great-grandfather had done before he'd emigrated?

"I'm not sure. But his grandfather was a weaver, originally from Holland, or so my grandmother said. His name was Hall, a Quaker maybe."

"Well, there were many cloth and carpet mills in this area in the 19th Century. The man stopped. "I go this way," he said. "Do you see the long, grey building at the bottom of the hill? That's the bus station."

"Thanks. You've been very helpful."

He looked at me slyly. "You haven't, by any chance, heard the joke about the man from Heckmondwike, have you?"

"No. What is it?"

"Oh, I couldn't tell it," he winked at my husband, "in front of a lady." He tugged at his hair and laughed, then abruptly crossed the street.

"What did he say?" my husband asked.

"Something about a man from Heckmondwike. I've got a feeling that my ancestors came from a town that's the English equivalent of Podunk. "Or," I said,

remembering his smirk, “The town may be famous in local limericks. Sort of like being the man from Nantucket.” Harry looked as if he were thinking we should have stayed on the train until we reached York, so I said cheerfully that we were almost there, and it would be interesting.

When we finally got on the right bus, I asked the driver if he would let me know when we got to Heckmondwike. Every head on the bus snapped up and stared at us in a frank if not very friendly way.

“Wha?” I wasn’t sure if the bus driver’s astonishment was at our destination or my accent. “Yatha duth un ton,” he said. I smiled and handed him our tickets. We went to the back of the bus, and for the entire thirty minute ride, two or three people at a time turned around to stare at us. I remembered the two sepia portraits that had hung on my grandmother’s bedroom wall. Her parents. A grim, expressionless man and a woman staring disapproval directly into the camera. This is the place they came from, for sure, I thought. I was beginning to have doubts about our side trip. I hadn’t told my husband how little I knew about the town. The first and only time I’d heard about the place was when I was very small. Some holiday, the house crowded with relatives. Dishes were clattering in the background. Some uncle—which I can’t remember—was telling a story in a booming voice.

“It seems,” said the voice, “That great-grandfather Hall had made a bit of money and out of vanity had decided to trace his family tree. His wife, or his wife’s mother, had been an Alden, and he hoped the family might be connected in some way to the famous “Speak for yourself” John Alden. Perhaps, he thought,” and the voice paused for effect, “they once had been aristocrats. Aristocrats!” Everyone laughed.

Aristocrats, I thought, not quite sure of the meaning of the word. Foreign. Special, perhaps. I'd missed the sly exaggeration in the teller's voice, and didn't know he was spinning an Irish yarn at the expense of the Protestant English side of the family. The genealogist been able to trace the family back to a small village, Heckmondwike. We weren't related to the famous American Aldens. We were related to a small time pirate. And in 1810, his great-grandfather had married a Jew, Rebecca Rosenfeld, in Heckmondwike. "Would you like," the genealogist inquired, "to continue the search?" And then came the punch line.

"And grandpa said he'd search no more, as they'd already found a pirate and a Jew on the family tree, and God only knows what they'd find if they searched back any farther."

More laughter.

But I'd missed the point of the hostile joke entirely: to me it was a wonderful story. A pirate! A Jew! How much better than a stuffed-shirt Alden, who couldn't even speak for himself.

In our South Camden neighborhood, Jews were aloof, mysterious, their children well-dressed, and all, we thought, were rich. They had small families—one or two children—and lived in wonderful apartments (I imagined) behind the pharmacy or grocery store. And their children went to college. Shouldn't that be a very suitable ancestor?

For years afterward I occasionally fantasized about the woman who had married my ancient grandfather. How had she come to be in his town? How did she come to marry him? Did her family disown her? Years later, when I tried to learn more, my

grandmother was dead and no one else in the family remembered the story. Perhaps I'd dreamed it, but if I ever were in England I'd try to find the town. Now we'd been traveling in England for a month, and though I'd asked a number of people if they'd ever heard of a town called Heckmondwike, no one had. I couldn't find it on any of the maps we'd bought, either.

On the train from Scotland we'd met a couple from Australia who were conducting a serious ancestor search. They had charts and copies of birth certificates, and had gone from churchyard to churchyard, record office to record office to document their family history, which at that point, they had traced back to the 17th century. Amazed at their industry and perseverance (this was their third long research trip to England), I told them about my own ancestor who might have come from the perhaps mythical town of Heckmondwike. They urged me to go to the information desk at the next train station, where I would find a copy of a book that listed every town in Great Britain. Startled, I realized how casual I'd been about my search. I said I'd follow their advice. Their lean grey faces flushed; smiling, they started to gather up their assorted maps and charts, convinced we had been converted and joined a fervent band of seekers. It wasn't clear what they'd been seeking, or what I was, either.

The man at the information desk told me yes, there is a Heckmondwike, but the trains hadn't gone there since the Second World War. The town, he said, is near Leeds, not too far from Manchester, on the line from Glasgow to York, the very train we had planned to take the next day. From Huddersfield, we could get a bus to Heckmondwike.

And so, less than two days before our vacation was to end, my husband and I were on a bus trundling past one small drab town after another. Many buildings were

made of a dull, mustardy-yellow stone. From the top of a hill, I could see we were riding down into a huge, oval valley. At the rim was a belt of green, then non-descript towns and housing developments set into the hills that gently sloped into the Spen Valley. I was vaguely disappointed.

Admit it, I thought. The Heckmondwike of your imagination was one of those thatchy villages in the south of England, all sunny and whitewashed. Cows. Cow bells. Admit it: you probably are looking for a duke in the family tree. I realized that the image I'd created of my way back grandmother, the Jewess, was straight out of Sir Walter Scott by way of Hollywood: the young Elizabeth Taylor as Rebecca in *Ivanhoe*. What a disgusting romantic. What a dopey motive for blowing the last day of our vacation. Perhaps the Australians were Mormons seeking the names of ancestors to retroactively baptize; at least they had some clear goal, but if not religious, then something else just as fervent. Now, thanks to my over-active imagination, we were off on a wild village chase instead of spending a day in historic York, a place not to miss, friends assured us.

At the last stop in the valley, the driver said something that included "Ickmmnwaaaaake," so we got off the bus on the town square, a neat patch of green that boasted two war monuments inscribed with the names of villagers who'd died in the two wars. No Halls on the long lists. Perhaps they'd avoided the wars or been very lucky. Or maybe the family had died out or emigrated before the war. Or—hadn't come from this town at all.

"Let's have some lunch," I said hopefully, "at that—uh--pub." We crossed the square to a grungy bar with a splotched sign in the window: Rooms. Inside was dark and bare, but the young woman behind the bar was cheerful. As she had a cockney accent,



one we were familiar with from British television shows, we could understand her. She made us sandwiches and filled mugs with beer.

“So what brings you to Heckmondwike?” she asked. After I’d briefly explained, she told me how she’d come there to stay with a boyfriend. They’d broken up three years before, and she couldn’t wait to get back to London. She nodded toward the back room, where a group of men in dark greasy work clothes were drinking and playing darts. They all looked as grim as the portraits on my grandmother’s wall. “There are no jobs, you see. Practically everyone’s on the dole. The mills are all closed. So ‘ow long will you be staying?”

“We have to leave tomorrow,” my husband said. “Our plane leaves on Sunday.”

The bar maid seemed sorry we wouldn’t be staying longer. “The States,” she said. “I ‘ad a cousin who visited there once. And so what do you do back in the states?” she asked Harry. He ordered beer and lemonade. She set the beer down in front of him, and continued chattering, flirting. Harry smiled and blushed slightly.

When we asked if she could recommend a place to stay, she advised us in a low voice not to rent one of the rooms above the bar. A new bed and breakfast was nearby and she’d heard that it was nice—and very clean. She gave me the number and directed me to a wall phone in the back of the room. While I called the B and B, the men stopped playing darts and stared at me. Surely they must have had a tourist here before, I thought. Heckmondwike has all the gloom and suspicion, if none of the Romantic scenery, of a Transylvanian village.

Following the directions I’d gotten on the phone, we walked from the town square, past closed mills and long rows of brick houses. In a narrow alley between a mill

and battered houses, three small Indian girls were playing barefoot in the gutter; their red and green and gold saris seemed out of place on the cobbled alley. My ancestors probably lived in a house like this, I thought. Not so different from the houses I once lived in. I wondered when they had been built, but when I walked into the alley, an old hunched man with a white stubble beard came to the door of one of the houses and said, "Yah?" I said hello and asked when the houses had been built.

"Dinna. Dinna," he said. A bony, mean-looking dog followed him from the house and began to bark and snarl, so I thanked him and walked back to the main road. "Was he a relative?" my husband asked. About a half mile away, almost hidden by trees tangled in vines and undergrowth, we found the B and B. A small sign, "Heald Hall," pointed up the hill. At the end of a long, curving drive was an ancient building that looked more like a monastery than an inn. "My God," my husband said. "It looks 500 years old."

"This must be the scene where the vampires appear," I said. He didn't smile. A woman opened the front door and waved, "Come in, come in, welcome." She introduced herself as Mrs. Mortha then bustled us through the building, up a narrow staircase half covered with plastic wood paneling. Her husband was a carpenter, and he was converting the building to a not-yet complete Bed and Breakfast. He'd just finished renovating the room we'd be staying in, a typical B and B room with a moderately lumpy, chintz-covered bed and shared bathroom.

"You have no luggage?" Mrs Mortha asked. After we explained that our luggage was in Huddersfield and paid in advance for our room, she invited us to join her for tea. I explained why we had come to the area: to see if this were the place my ancestors had

come from. Mrs. Mortha, an amateur historian, became animatedly enthusiastic about my search. She brought me a phone book for the Spen Valley, and I was amazed to see that the thin book had listings for page after page of Halls. Hall, Abby, to Hall, Z. Hundreds of Halls.

“Well, no doubt the Spen Valley has one of the largest concentrations per capita of Halls in all of England,” I said. So at least part of the story might be true. After all, I could invent the name of a town, or remember it from some obscure book I’d read, but I could hardly populate it with so many Halls. Mrs. Mortha was thrilled. I decided to tell her about the Jewish grandmother, an edited version of the part that seemed least apocryphal. “Of course,” I said, “It’s probably unlikely.”

“Not at all! Not at all!” She almost shouted. “The largest settlement of Jews in all of Britain is in Leeds, not ten miles from here. There’s a huge Jewish cemetery on the road between here and Leeds—it’s been there for a very long time. And they have wonderful records at the synagogue, or so I’ve heard. And it seems to me there were Quakers in this area.” Mr. Mortha, who was taking a break from some work in the yard, took my husband off to show him a wood working project, and Mrs. Mortha told me the history of Heald Hall. The building had once been a convent, and then, in the 19th century, a school, visited frequently (she said with a flourish) by the Bronte Sisters, friends of the schoolmaster’s young daughter. Charlotte Bronte’s novel *Shirley* was about this area—did I know about the Luddites? The weavers’ rebellion? No? But I must read the book. Very interesting. All about the strikes and so on.

“Have you lived in the area long?” I asked, and was amazed to learn that this local historian and her husband had emigrated only ten years before from Ireland. Soon I had a

list of books and other sources that would help me in my search, and Mrs. Mortha said it was enough information to begin.

“But I only have until tomorrow noon,” I said. “And I probably have learned enough already.” No, no, Mrs. Mortha decided, there was much I could do in a day. I’d better get started. Immediately. I had plenty of time to do some groundwork. And, of course, the next time I was in England.... “Why not start in the churchyard?” she suggested. “They’ve got some wonderful stones. If your family was Episcopalian after they arrived in America, they were probably Anglican here, and gone to the local church. It’s nearby, and you should see the church windows.”

The church she’d recommended was in Liversedge, only a mile off the road that led from Heckmondwike. We followed the small lane that wound up a hill past stucco bungalows that seemed to date from the ‘50s. At a turn in the lane, which had narrowed to a dirt path, we left Liversedge and the 20th century. The church, not visible from the road, was at the top of the hill, surrounded by ancient elm trees. To the left of the path was a sunken pasture enclosed by stone walls, against which incongruously leaned a row of crumbling gravestones. Beyond the enclosed field, the church, a small, beautifully proportioned 19th-century Gothic building was set in the middle of the churchyard. Row after row of identical gravestones filled the grassy lawn that sloped up to the church. We walked along the path, glancing up and down the rows of stones, which were all dated after the 1840s. “Well, a lot of Halls are buried here, that’s for sure. What was your ancestor’s first name?”

“I don’t know, but I doubt if he’d be buried here if he was a Quaker. But maybe he converted. I’m sure there are more Halls in England than there are Smiths in America. It’s a very common name. Let’s see if the church doors are open.”

Finding the doors locked, we walked to the rear of the building, passing more identical gravestones. Odd: all were flat, unadorned except for the scalloped tops. All had identical script. Only the names and dates were different. I couldn’t remember being in another 19th-century graveyard where all the stones were the same, but then again, I hadn’t been in many others. Perhaps this was typical of the period in this part of the country. Behind the church a path led to a small stone cottage. A man was hoeing in a side garden. “That must be the parsonage. Maybe we can get someone there to let us in the church,” I said.

Tall and bony, the man was somewhat formally dressed for gardening. He was wearing an old, dusty black suit and looked like a cross between a scarecrow and Ichabod Crane.

“Hello,” I said in a polite voice, “The church is locked. Would it be possible to see inside?”

“Why?” he snapped. “Who are you?”

We introduced ourselves.

“Reverend Tine,” he said.

“We’re just visiting the area, and Mrs. Mortha at the Bed and Breakfast told us about the church....”

“Can’t unlock it. It’s not used any more. There’s a newer church down the road.”

I decided to start over. “You see, my great-grandfather’s family may have come from this area, and we were looking at the gravestones, and we noticed the windows....”

He stiffened. “We have no records here. They’ve all been sent to York.”

“Records?”

“Church records. Baptisms and so on. Aren’t here anymore. Gone to York, so you are wasting your time here.”

“But we’re not interested in records. We just wanted to see the inside of the church and the windows.”

“They’re half gone, bombed out during the war. Only six of the stained glass left. The rest are plain glass.”

“How sad. They must be very beautiful from inside.” He didn’t respond.

“I saw some old gravestones in the field in front of the churchyard.”

He glared. Wrong thing to say. “Americans. Broke up a lot of the old stones. We had to hide them, out of the way. They were coming in, wanting to look at the church books.” I imagined a horde of ill-clad Americans storming the church door, howling demands.

“That’s awful.”

“Taking rubbings of the stones, wearing down the inscriptions. We have no records here.”

“I understand.” He picked up the hoe and stared at us. The garden was an intense green, with rows of lettuce and tall tomato plants. “Your tomato plants are doing quite well,” I said. “They seem very far along. Much bigger than they’d be in our part of the States in June. What kind are they?”

“Big Girl.”

“Oh, we’re growing Big Girls this year. I planted some before we left. I hope they’re still alive.” My son said he’d water them. I suddenly felt homesick, ready to return after a month of train rides and uncomfortable beds. “Your soil must be very good. We have a lot of clay, but it’s fertile, if it’s worked.”

He began to talk about his garden, pointing out several varieties of tomatoes and peas; then after a pause, he said: “Got to get back to work before the sun’s gone,” and turned away from us.

“Of course, of course. Thank you for your time. And we’re very sorry about the grave stones.”

He mumbled something.

“Goodbye,” we said.

He turned back to us. “Tomorrow there’s to be a wedding at noon. The church will be open then. If you come at 11:30, I’ll let you in, but you can only stay a few minutes.” He went back to his hoeing.

“Thank you. We’ll be there.”

He grunted something, a phrase in the local dialect, and I realized we hadn’t had any problem understanding him. Most of what he’d said sounded like the English spoken in London or on the trains. Yet he also spoke like the ticket agent, the bus driver. I wondered which was his original speech: if he’d learned a different English when he went away to the seminary, or if he’d learned the local dialect when he was sent to this parish. By the time we got back to the Bed and Breakfast, we were tired, and after looking through some of Mrs. Mortha’s scrapbooks, we went to bed early.

The next morning at Mrs. Mortha's suggestion we went to the Saturday market. Carts were lined up in a field off the town square. Farmers were selling produce, jelly, and baked goods, while Indians stood by carts filled with cheap clothing and videos. When I stopped to buy some marmalade, a woman standing next to me asked if I were from Canada. I told her we were from the States. She said, "You sound very Canadian."

"Their accent is similar to ours," I said.

"Are you visiting someone from here?" she asked. "We don't get many Americans." By now I had my little bare bones explanation perfected, and she seemed interested in what I had to say. "Well, have a nice visit," she said, after paying for her jam.

"Thank you. I'm sure we will." She smiled and walked to the next stand.

"Are we just getting used to the speech around here, or is it getting clearer?" I asked my husband.

"Dinna," he said. "Let's get to the church before we're locked out."

Reverend Tine met us in front of the church and hurried us inside. He seemed anxious to show us the baptismal font, and began explaining details of its construction. I realized that he thought we were experts on churches, rather than curious admirers. I nodded, unable to understand the importance of the font, which had originally come from another, much older church. To my surprise, a large statue of the Virgin was in front of the church. It looked very Catholic, like the statues in Italian or Spanish churches. I didn't want to reveal my ignorance of Anglican Mariology, so didn't ask any questions. The stained glass windows glowed in the late morning sun. "Beautiful," I said. "They look Pre-Raphaelite or Art Nouveau. Is that possible?"



“What?”

“Pre-Raphaelite. There’s a date on one—1900. Isn’t that around the time of the Pre-Raphaelites? Or was that earlier? Did they do stained glass?”

“I wouldn’t know about such things,” he said curtly. The church bells began to toll, and he said we had to leave, immediately, before the bridal party arrived. “The church is only opened when one of the old families has a wedding or baptism,” he said. “It hasn’t been opened for a long while. You were lucky to be here today.”

“Lucky,” I said. “Oh, one other question: the grave stones in the churchyard are all the same size. Isn’t that unusual? I don’t think I’ve ever seen a cemetery like it.”

He looked at me for a moment as if he were unwilling to give up some kind of secret. Perhaps he was trying to remember. “The man who donated the land for the church, it was...1830? About then. He gave the land on the condition that all the grave stones in the church yard would be exactly the same. He chose the design, and his stone was the model. The few mausoleums in the back of the field are from an earlier period. And now I must change for the service. Goodbye.”

“Thanks. Thank you again,” I said, feeling as if I were being effusively grateful for his every word and small gesture. I couldn’t wait to be on the bus, the train, the plane, and home again. Walking past the gravestones (rather nice in a grim, elegant way) I wondered why the donor of the land made that condition. A desire for power? An early socialist? Perhaps his grandson had donated the windows, the statue of Mary, the ancient font. It pleased me to think so. And maybe the wedding today was of a descendant returning to the family church. No time to find out.

We returned to the town square to wait for the bus, due in half an hour. I walked around, looking for a stationery shop. One place seemed to be a combination pharmacy, cigar and notions store, so I went in and asked if they had any postcards of the region.

“A what?”

“A postcard. For this area. The kind that”-- I hated to say tourist--“that visitors send home.”

“Ah,” he said, “I think I once saw something like that in the back.” He went to the rear of the store and returned after a few minutes with an old cardboard box filled with dusty cellophane covered writing paper and birthday cards. At the bottom of the box, he found some old postcards. “We don’t have any from here, of course,” he said. “But I have a few for the Yorkshire Dales, that’s not far from here, and it’s a much prettier place.” He showed me a card. It was a map with roads marked in red and rivers in blue and tiny pictures of worthwhile cathedrals and tourist attractions. “Look,” he said, pointing to the very top left of the card. “These are the moors.” He looked at me expectantly. To my embarrassment I hadn’t realized we were near the moors, forgotten that the moors were in Yorkshire. I smiled.

“And look here. This is Leeds.” He pointed to the bottom of the card. “You’d be right about here, now,” and he pointed to a spot about an inch off the bottom of the card. “Heckmondwike is right there,” I said. Empty space. Perhaps he thought I was a lost tourist and was too shy to ask for directions.

“You’ll like it in the Dales. Just stay on this road, due north.”

“We’re going home tonight, unfortunately, but perhaps next time. We came here yesterday....”

“You came to Heckmondwike? But why?”

“Just visiting,” I said. “I’d like to buy those postcards, and some chocolate and cigarettes.” I turned to look at the newspaper rack while he toted up the bill.

When we were on the train to London, my husband asked me if I’d found what I was looking for. I told him I wasn’t sure what I was looking for, but probably my ancestors *had* come from Yorkshire, maybe even Heckmondwike.

“And did you learn anything?”

“Well, my ancestors changed their religion about six times in the past 170 years, every thirty years or so. I guess that’s encouraging.” I hoped he wasn’t thinking of the lost day in York. “Did you mind spending our last day in Heckmondwike?”

“It was interesting.”

“Yes. Interesting. But I’m glad my ancestors left. And as for learning things, I guess you find in a place whatever you bring with you. Though I’m not sure about that. And you can’t really learn much about a town in 24 hours.” We were riding past mile after mile of pasture dotted by stone cottages and cows. A scene worthy of a whole series of postcards.

“Twenty four hours. That’s all we would have had in York. So we didn’t miss much.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Just a famous cathedral.”

“Some fabulous historical treasures. And courteous, friendly people politely eager for our money. Speaking of which, we have only about twenty pounds left.

Probably more than my way back great-grandparents had when they left Heckmondwike.”

Harry smiled. He didn't have to think about the town his English ancestors had sprung from. It had been totally bombed out during the war. Nothing was left, not town or tower. “I just remembered,” he said. “You never did find out about your Jewish grandmother.”

“Next time.” I'd probably never return. I'd probably never know if there was a Jewish grandmother, and if she'd really eloped across the moors with my dashing way-back grandfather, a little known leader of the Luddite rebellion. I'd never even learn the joke about the man from Heckmondwike. And that was OK. Somehow, the shabby and sullen--or was it reserved?--village with its strains of low humor, poverty and high romanticism seemed, for the time being at least, to be heritage enough.

## COMING INTO THE STORY: A PROFILE WITH FAMILY

Michael Patrick Maressi was sitting upright in a folding chair watching the crowd of relatives gather in clusters. They were all related to him somehow. His uncle Bill, a great-uncle Bill, second cousin Bills. He'd forgotten who most of them were, he told me: they'd changed since he'd been at the annual O'Connell reunion five years before. The afternoon was too hot, too humid. Dozens of screaming kids were jumping off the pier into the lake. He tried to smile as second and third cousins came up to him and said: "You're Mike, right? I'm Jim, good to see you again," though which of the horde of Jims the speaker was, was never clear. The older generations of the family hadn't been very creative with names—Joe, John, Bill, Ed. Big Ed, Little Ed, Cousin Ed, Uncle Ed. He was one of the many Mikes. Of course they all knew him right away, though he'd been only thirteen the last time he was there. In a crowd of blondes and brunettes he was hard to miss. Slight, with skin a dark golden brown, straight onyx-black hair and a high bridged nose, he looked more like an Aztec prince than a member of the tall, blonde O'Connell family. He was, I calculated, one half Hindu Indian (by way of the Caribbean), one fourth Italian (Sicilian), and one fourth Irish/English. Though everyone would be uncomfortable if I mentioned that.

His red haired grandmother Mary Jane, who'd died years before, was great-Uncle Bill's sister. She was one of the reasons he was here today, he told me—she'd nagged him and made him promise to stay close with her family; a cousin also had found him recently on face book and urged him to come to the reunion. The family hadn't heard anything about him for years, had lost touch. He sat rigidly, slowly eating barbecued chicken and potato salad. On the patio were tables crowded with trays and bowls of

picnic food. The friend who dropped Mike off wouldn't be back. He'd need a lift to the Pike to catch a bus to Atlantic City. Mike hadn't remembered me, but recognized my daughter, Mimi. She'd always longed for lots of cousins, so came every year to the O'Connell reunion. Years before, Mary Jane had brought Mike to Mimi's house to swim and play with her kids in the summer.

"So, you're my second cousin, right?" Mimi asked Mike. She was fascinated by genealogy. They spoke briefly—she was in a rush. This year she had to leave after staying only an hour. She was going to meet friends in AC at 4:00 pm and offered Mike a ride back, if he could leave early. He seemed grateful for the ride--and the excuse.

The next day Mimi told me that on the way to the shore, Mike told her he was about to become homeless, had been technically homeless for three years and out of work for four months. Because he'd been working under the table, he wasn't eligible for Unemployment. He'd been on his own since he was sixteen, when his grandmother Par Patel had developed dementia and been taken back to the island by relatives. Since then, he'd been bunking with friends, sleeping in basements and on couches, working when he could. Mimi invited him to spend the day with her family—he'd be there Tuesday, she told me. Could we help him?

"But what do we know about him?" I asked.

"He's family."

I spoke with him briefly the day he visited Mimi, was sorry to hear about his problems, and when he left, gave him \$20.00 and my phone number. I asked him to call if he couldn't find a place to stay, to let us know if any of the possible places he was investigating had worked out. He was reluctant to go to the shelter for homeless

adolescents in Atlantic City and was waiting to hear from a Job Corp placement he'd applied for. He was asking around and said he'd be OK. He looked about fifteen, scrawny for a kid of nineteen.

I was hoping he wouldn't call.

Two days later a Mrs. Bateman called and said she'd found the paper with my phone number on the couch Mike had been sleeping on. He'd been staying with her and her sons for several months. "Look," she said, "Mike has no place to go. We're moving on Thursday, going to North Jersey to stay with relatives, so he'll be on the street then."

She went on to tell me how she'd lost her business, lost her house, and had to move. "I have an idea, though," she said, "My younger son doesn't want to come with us, and I've found a small, cheap apartment for him. If your family could contribute \$300.00 a month, he and Mike could live together. I could also contribute something each month."

I explained I wasn't really a close relative and not sure that any of his aunts or uncles could help him. His closest relative, Uncle Joe, was out of work. But maybe Mike could stay at Joe's house temporarily. I could check into it. "How old is your son?" I asked her.

"Sixteen."

"Is he in school?" No, she said. He'd dropped out. Had no job. And, as I later learned, had a major drug habit.

"You know, Mrs. Bateman, I appreciate your concern, but I think getting the boys an apartment is an impractical, no, a really bad idea. Two young guys with rent to pay,

no source of income: how will they live? And how can you just leave your son behind when you move?"

She huffed a bit and then asked if Mike could stay with us for a couple of days. Mike is a great kid, very neat, she told me, no trouble, always helped around the house. I asked her to have Mike get in touch with me.

When he called, I invited him to stay with us temporarily, a week or so until he could get things sorted out. He had a lot of family in this area, and maybe one of them could put him up for a while.

"How are we related?" my husband, Harry, asked.

"My first cousin twice removed; Mike is my dead cousin's grandson; my daughter's first cousin once removed, my grandchildren's third cousin." Before the reunion I hadn't seen him in more than seven years.

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After I'd told him what I'd learned, Harry agreed Mike deserved a chance, so we asked him to stay for a while. The first few weeks Mike lived with us, he was miserable. Withdrawn, silent, he spoke for long hours on his cell phone, slept late every morning. He seemed depressed. Sullen. But he was quiet, no trouble. Meticulously clean, he kept his room in order—it was the neatest room in the house—was polite, his speaking voice almost accentless, as if he'd been listening to television and radio announcers for years and soaking up their pronunciation and speech patterns. On weekends he'd take off for Atlantic City, stay away for several days, never called to let us know where he was. There was nothing for him to do in a small town with no business center, no friends. He needed to get a job.



My cousin Bill O'Connell and I conferred, decided to see what could be done to help him get a job. Bill and his many children had lots of union connections. After a couple of weeks, we'd come up with nothing. We hadn't found any place for him to stay, either. Mary Jane's son, Mike's Uncle Jim, the closest relative, couldn't take him in. Only Bill lived in the area. His other brothers lived far away, were retired, and had large families of their own. Bill and his wife had raised nine children, and were raising a granddaughter, who was Mike's age. They had retired to a small house with two bedrooms: they couldn't take Mike. None of Mike's father's relatives could be located. Dead, moved away, not interested? The Job Corps seemed iffy (supposedly the promised jobs were often not available at the end of the training period, the recruits heavy on former addicts). The one job Bill had located through a union honcho, a friend of his son-in-law, fizzled out. Mike needed a driver's license, a car. He had neither. His primary mode of transportation was his skateboard. Enlisting in the Army or the National Guard wasn't possible: he had tattoos on his hands; hand and/or facial tats barred applicants from the Services. The economy was so bad that college graduates were enlisting, so tattooed kids with a GED were out of luck.

Mike's arrival caused a stir within our immediate family. They responded to him in ways that reflected my own complicated feelings: Mimi was sure we had to rescue Mike. Her husband was non-committal; a retired FBI agent, he was more than suspicious about Mike's supposedly minor record. Their children accepted Mike immediately: he was family, someone to hang with. Rick, our oldest son, thought we were Mike's last hope. Someone had to help. Chris, the second son, was alarmed: who is this kid? Can we believe his story? How's he been supporting himself? How is this your

responsibility, anyway? What's he doing to help himself? Is this fair to dad?" Cousin Bill said be careful. Set limits on how long he can stay. I wondered if he knew more about Mike than he had told us. I was in an MFA program and scheduled to teach a course and take one. How could I deal with Mike and his many problems?

Mike searched on-line—it turned out he was skilled on the computer; he found listings and applied for 23 jobs. Nothing, not even an interview. We took him for a county ID, a necessary step for getting Welfare, which we'd begun to see as perhaps the last, necessary step. Chris said he could get him a job cleaning buses; they were hiring at Public Service where he had an in, but Mike had a record in Atlantic City for misdemeanors, one for a fight; any record of violence would knock him out of the Public Service applicant pool. He'd have to get his record expunged before he could be hired. That would cost hundreds of dollars. There were homeless shelters for adolescents in Atlantic City and Camden, but Mike said he'd rather live on the streets. When my daughter asked him what job he'd like to eventually get, he said maybe he could get something like stocking shelves at Walmart. He'd worked at a restaurant washing dishes when he was thirteen, moving up to bus boy; he'd worked under the table at Subway, so he'd try places like that near our home. She asked him what his dream job would be, if nothing stood in the way, what he wanted to be when he was a little kid. He said, "When I was in grade school I wanted to be a botanist. I always loved science. It was one of my best subjects." He smiled and his face brightened.

"Well, for that you'll have to go back to school. Have you thought about college?"

He glared at her: "Fat chance." He stood up, pushing back the wooden kitchen chair. "I need a cigarette." He went to the back porch; we followed.

"Did you ever think of applying to a Community College?" Mimi asked.

"Look, this is the story: I come from nothing, I am nothing, I'll always be nothing."

"Oh, Mike. That's not true."

"You know about my mom and dad?" He left the porch and grabbed his skateboard. "I need to get more cigarettes."

Would college be a possibility? Mike had earned his G.E.D. while working nights at a restaurant. Didn't that show some kind of ambition and determination?

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This was part of the story I already knew: when Mike was seven, he was staying the weekend with his grandmother Mary Jane O'Connell Maressa in Hammonton. They were going to pick up his father and shop for school clothes. When they got to his dad's trailer, which was one of three parked at the edge of a corn field, for once the radio wasn't blaring. Jack didn't answer the door, but Mary Jane had a key: they'd wait inside until her son got back. Jack was slumped at the kitchen table, a hypodermic needle stuck in his left arm, which was stretched out between a bottle of ketchup and the sugar bowl. He'd been dead for several days. When Mike started to gag from the smell, his grandmother shoved him out the door and called 911, though she knew it was no use. That was the last time he saw his father. The casket was sealed at the funeral.

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The first time I remember seeing Mike was at his father's funeral. He was a tiny kid, bright, chattering. His small, dark, bewildered mother and grandmother in faded saris were lost in a crowd of Mike's father's and grandmother's families. Someone, one of his father's aunts, I think, told me Mike was very smart, doing really well in school. What will happen to him, she wondered. Maybe they'd all go back to the island.

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After he'd been with us a few weeks, Mike told us what he remembered about that time, about his confusion and panic. Not long after his father's death, Mike set two fires, one across the street from where he and his grandmother were living, and one in the field behind the motel where his mother worked when she was sober. It was his first encounter with the police. His grandmother promised the police he'd be kept in, that he'd never set another fire. No charges were filed. But she couldn't keep him in. Family gossip had it that Mike was on the streets after his father died, staying out late, skateboarding with his friends, hanging out on the Board walk, stealing change from the fountain at the Trump Casino. Scrounging for coins and lost valuables on the beach for hours and hours. But he never skipped school.

His eyes sparkle when he talks about those years. "I loved going to Atlantic City. I was out until late at night, even when my bike only had training wheels."

"But weren't you punished?" I asked.

"My mother was out, or out of it on her bed. My grandmother was working late. And I was the man of the house. I couldn't listen to her: I had to have control."

"But you weren't even ten."

"I had to be the man."

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He knew little about his American Grandmother's family. Whatever Mary Jane had once told him was lost. So I told Mike my version of the O'Connell family story, trying to give him a context.

When in 1880 Bill O'Connell eloped with red-haired Sarah Winston, her English Episcopalian family had cast her out. He was an Irish immigrant. Catholic. Beyond the pale. She was a 2<sup>nd</sup> generation American. Much later, when Bill became wealthy, Sarah's family had accepted him, welcomed into the fold the couple and their nine children (two others had died in infancy) and one adopted son, a street kid who'd been found living in their barn. Six of their children had red hair. That hair, diabetes, fertility, tall sons, alcoholism, a spattering of twins in each new generation, some red-haired twins, (his own grandmother had given birth to still born twin daughters), a tendency to develop tics and depression, a strain of braininess, brilliance, even, especially in math and engineering, and artistic talent (musicians, painters, and writers) were genetic markers in the family. Lost sons who left the family after events that were never spoken of, and outcasts—limited usually to one family member cutting off another—were also part of the story. Three of my mother's oldest brothers (his great-grand uncles) had run away to New Orleans after graduating from college—two business men and a jazz musician; only one ever returned. Why? That story is lost, though an aunt hinted it had something to do with her father's drinking. Self outcasts, I guessed.

I had always been intrigued by my family's history and their views of religion and each other. My red-haired mother was seen by her relatives as both brainy and artistic, an

outspoken, eccentric (from their point of view) woman and therefore somewhat suspect, looked down on subtly: "Oh, that's just Mary, you know the...the character."

So the family had started with William O'Connell, son of an immigrant, falling in love with Sara, daughter of a second generation English-Americans, and persuading her to run away with him. Mike liked the story. It helped to locate him in the overwhelming mass of relatives. Maybe he liked the idea that way back another mismatched pair of lovers had upset their families by marrying outside their group. Like his own parents. Most important: he hadn't come from nothing. No family is perfect, but he had ancestors who were interesting, survivors.

Mike shared stories of his family, Hindus who'd come to the Island from India in the 1920's and prospered. There were politicians and accountants on that side of his family. His mother had been an accountant before she became an alcoholic. He'd spent a summer on the island when he was a small child. In his memory, it was a paradise, where fruit hung on trees in the back yard, and where, he now believed, the residents lived a more natural life, uncontaminated by American values, demonic technology, money, a place dominated by the rich and corrupt politicians. If he could get the money, he'd return to the island. He had dual citizenship, and could get a free education and medical care there, find his grandmother. I refrained from reminding him that he'd been supported by Welfare and his father's corrupt Social Security benefits since he was born, that he was obsessed by his cell phone and computer, part of the American technology he despised.

Now this great-great-great grandson of my great grandfather was here, with one suitcase, two large plastic bags, and lots of baggage.

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Mike had been lucky in his grandmothers. When he was born, Parul Patel came to the U.S. to help her alcoholic daughter. Parul worked cleaning hotel rooms and doing fine needlework. She had obtained legal guardianship of Mike when he was an infant and raised him strictly, tried to instill pride in him. He was a Hindu, and must therefore study hard and get an education. His mother had obtained an accounting degree back home before she got messed up, and his relatives were professionals. Hindus did not go on Welfare. They went to Temple regularly. They did well in school. She told him about the family connections. When her daughter's health deteriorated, Parul cared for her as well. She rented an expensive apartment in a small town outside Atlantic City so that Mike could go to a good school. Somehow, with Mike's Social Security benefits and Ruby's long work hours, they survived. When he didn't do well in school, she told him he was stupid, retarded. There were fifteen other grandchildren back home, she said, and all of them were more worthy of her time and energy than he was. She would go back to help with those children, and what would happen to him then?

His grandmother Mary Jane O'Connell, a widow, cared for Mike on weekends. She had an administrative job with the County. She supplied her only grandchild with books, clothing, treats, toys and love and tried to teach him how to be an American. She was intensely proud of the child who, at the end of a difficult life, was her only bright hope.

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Mary Jane died when Mike was ten; since then I'd seen him rarely at the annual family gathering, usually with his uncle Jim. But I'd seen him frequently in the several

years before Mary Jane died. He was around the age of our grandson, and would sometimes visit my house or my daughter's with his grandmother and swim with the other kids in the pool, while Mary Jane went to a nearby hospital for treatment. Cancer, her second bout, had spread from her lungs to her liver. One afternoon we sat next to the pool, Mary Jane looking surprisingly well, despite grueling chemotherapy. Her red hair had fallen out and she was experimenting with wigs: a curly brown one, and now, a platinum shag cut, which made her look very glamorous. I felt sad at how her life had turned out, how hard it had been. How cheerful she always tried to be. Mike dove off the board, followed by screaming cousins.

We'd been talking about the mysteries of red hair, how it was inherited, which I'd read about and thought I understood. None of our red-haired cousins had had red-haired kids. Gradually the trait was being bred out. Mary Jane's children were all dark haired, like their father. Now she had one grandchild, this darker-haired, darker-skinned child. Only I and a brown haired cousin had a red-headed kid. I was telling her what I'd read about recessive genes, how I could explain carriers of genes, but couldn't understand how all the various shades of red hair in the family came about: orange, copper, strawberry, rusty, almost pink. How did that happen?

"Do you think Mike'll be all right?" she abruptly asked.

I didn't even try at that point to say she'd be better soon; we didn't talk about the cancer. "He'll be fine," I told her. "His grandmother Patel will care for him. There are tons of people who love him. It's a huge family."

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When he first came to stay with us, we'd told Mike that we didn't care what he'd had to do to survive. That was the past. But he had to promise to not get involved with



anything illegal, to always tell us the truth. Those were the conditions for staying with us. He agreed. One afternoon he brought a paper bag down from his room. He wanted to share his family papers with me. “There’s something here I think about all the time. I found it in my grandmother’s papers after she left. I must have read them a thousand times, but I still don’t understand what happened.” He was, as usual, expressionless, tense.

“Do you want me to read the papers?”

“Yes. They feel important to me.” He handed me one packet from the small pile of papers. They were reports from the Child Study Team at his school. I said I’d read them and get back to him.

The reports from the Child study team, one taken when Mike was in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, and the other in the 9<sup>th</sup> documented the beginning of his academic problems. The first one would have thrilled parents from the suburbs. Mike had been tested twice and had an IQ score of 125 on one and 138 on the other. He had been referred to the team because he had difficulty with attention and concentration, was getting A’s and F’s in his classes. The report noted his family problems in blunt detail and suggested, in light of his very superior cognitive skills, he be challenged academically with socio-emotional supports, tutoring and counseling, and be given other (non-specified) things that would help him develop his talents in art and music. There was no record that those suggestions were followed.

The second report tried to investigate the continuing disparity between Mike’s abilities and his achievement. In high school he still wasn’t working to potential. He had been categorized as eligible for Special Education and Related Services, Category: II-

Specific Learn Disabled. The report noted his father's death from drug abuse and his mother's alcoholism, his grandmother's absence for a months-long visit to her native Island. Mike was living with a classmate's family temporarily. As a result of the report, Mike was transferred from the Intellectually Gifted program to lower level classes and the learning disabled classes for the classes he was failing, math and history. "With the retarded kids, the crazy ones," he told me.

Two months after he was transferred from the Intellectually Gifted program, he set a fire in the tiled bathroom near his homeroom, and was transferred to an alternative high school.

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He had been going through his bag of "papers" looking for his father's death certificate. Eventually he let me look at all of his records—he'd said this was part of his promise to always tell us the truth and not hide anything from us in exchange for our help. I could tell he was hurt by the invasion of his family secrets by the Study Team, but also proud of the verification that he was smart, very smart. That seemed to be the thing he clung to, the asset that could help him get a better life.

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My husband and I had agreed Mike could stay with us for a while to get his life straightened out. He would work for us three hours a week helping Harry to clear the yard of overgrown vines and brush to pay for his room and board, and if he worked longer hours, he'd be paid for the extra time. But he needed some other source of income. He was adamant: no Welfare. He always paid his own way. Three weeks after

he came to stay with us, he sat down to breakfast, especially withdrawn and silent. Couldn't eat. Something wrong, I asked.

He was in pain, he said, had been for weeks. A tooth had broken off. "My God, why didn't you tell us? You'll have to get it taken care of," I said. "It'll get worse if you delay."

That's when we discovered there was no place for an indigent person to go for dental care. After calling several places listed in the phone book, I called a nearby dentist my son had used. He'd given Rick a break on dental work when he was unemployed, allowing him to pay off his bill with weekly payments. I called him for information, and was told by his receptionist that there was no free community emergency dental care. I explained Mike's situation, and the receptionist said to bring him in, and the doctor would look at the tooth and tell us how much of an emergency it was. No charge. There was a nearby clinic that might do the work, but the fee would be at least \$100.00 dollars, just for their preliminary examination. She thought Dr. Zell would look at him for free. Just come in at 11:00 a.m.

After Dr. Zell looked at Mike's tooth and took x-rays, he came back to the reception area and told me that the root had to come out immediately, there was a bad infection, Mike needed antibiotics. He'd probably been in pain for weeks. Hadn't he complained? No, I said.

I agreed that Zell could go ahead with the work, which involved oral surgery. He did the work—it took a long time--gave Mike a week's worth of antibiotics, and charged only \$75.00 dollars. I paid the bill and added it to Mike's IOU account.

That night he agreed to apply for Welfare.

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8:15 a.m., the time for Mike's Social Services appointment, and the letter warned that lateness would result in a cancelled appointment. We'd been lost in a maze of corridors. A series of bored guards directed us to the beige waiting room in the 600 Market Street Building; at the front was a roped-off area with lines of people waiting for an appointment. The line ended at a long, high counter topped by a glass barrier with six windows, behind which sat the three clerks who checked paper work and directed applicants to the largest part of the room which was filled with 81 hard plastic and steel chairs, most of which were already filled. He finally reached one of the windows and handed the clerk his new Camden County I.D. card. The woman behind the glass scowled slightly, stamped papers, entered numbers and told him to take a seat and wait until someone called his name. A sad-faced, youngish guard moved to the front row of chairs, smiled apologetically and addressed the 8:00 and 8:15 arrivals: "I'd like to remind you that your appointment was to check in and get a time to meet with the counselor. Since some appointments last longer than others, it could be one or two hours [a low groan from the back of the room]--or more--before you are seen. Another muffled groan. Most of those waiting were stoic but relaxed, as if they'd been here before. They stared straight ahead. Others seem nervous, uncomfortable. Many of those in the chairs looked at us curiously, an older white woman with a mixed-race kid.

Mike looked around, then stared straight ahead, expressionless. The guard made the appointment announcement again. "You can't go in with me," Mike whispered. "I'm over eighteen."

"Do you have all your paper work?" He nodded. I could tell he was nervous. I was nervous too. I remembered how I felt applying for unemployment fifty years before. For our family, that was almost as bad as being on Welfare. No one ever took anything from the government. Things had changed, but I could feel the tension and embarrassment in the room from those here for the first time. I couldn't help feeling—what? I repressed my discomfort. To the left of the counters were double doors, from which issued, every five to ten minutes, a counselor who called out a name over the PA mike. When the door opened, everyone looked up. A hugely pregnant counselor said into the PA system: "Mr. Bastone. Mr. Bastone." No one answers. "Is there a Mr. Bastone here?" Someone shouted out from the back of the room "I think he went to the bathroom." She frowned, went back behind the double doors. In the huge room behind the doors is a hive of small cubicles, each holding a counselor. The tiny office nearest the double doors has a sign: #37, Hughes.

The waiting room is fairly quiet at first, but after an hour, there's a low mumble, and the counselors have to shout out the names. "Mr. Bastone?"

"Awww...give up on him already—go to the next person," someone from the last row shouts.

"Mr. Bastone?" she calls again. A tiny girl in a stroller pipes up: "Mir ditone?" and a few laughs encourage her to repeat a version of every name that is called out after that. No one minds, because the heavy boredom must be even harder for a little kid.

At 9:45 a new group of applicants wended their way through the ropes, waiting to move up to one of the windows. In the chair in front of the Michael, someone in a lumpy sweat suit slumped in the uncomfortable chair, face half-covered with the jacket's hood.

Two chairs down a vivacious woman was talking with a young, well-dressed couple; their baby is asleep in a stroller. Suddenly, she leaned over, and patted the arm of the person in the bulky jacket. "Marlene, that you? Why you covering your face?" Marlene sat up a bit, looked embarrassed.

"It's me, Cecile—from the school office."

Marlene grunted, tried to turn away.

"What happened? I thought you found that good job. Don't feel ashamed. Look at me, I got laid off." Marlene blushed and shoved the hood back. The man in front of Cecile said to Marlene, "I was laid off in January." He paused. "I never in my life thought I'd end up here." She mumbled something.

A man stepped up to the mike. "Marlene Watkins? Marlene." The girl pulled the hoodie closer and excused her way through the aisle.

By then all the chairs were taken. Most of those in the room were Hispanic or Black. Maybe nine Whites and three Indians (a family) were there, which pretty much reflects Camden population demographics. A tall white man, balding, glasses, came in the door, looked around, bewildered. Everyone stared at him, wondering. Has he come to the wrong place? Interviewing for a job as a counselor? His pale yellow shirt was starched, his pants neatly pressed. He was carrying a briefcase. He went to the roped off line, spoke to a woman behind the glass, handed her papers. Then he walked back to the front of the room, took a vacant seat in the front row. Maybe he's here to find out about medical benefits for a relative. This reception area is for new applicants and those already on Welfare who have a problem of some kind. Some problems take longer than others.

At 11:20, Michael's name was called. He was lucky, the backlog had just begun, and he'd only been waiting two and a half hours. He followed the counselor. That morning I'd parked in the Rutgers parking lot, pointing out the building I where I taught. I tried to explain how he could eventually go to Rutgers and get a degree, if he first got through a Community College. There were loans, people who could help. I didn't think he believed me.

He came out from the interview fifteen minutes later. The Counselor, who seemed friendly, went over his paperwork and asked him some questions. He'd hear in a few days. Because he has a place to stay, isn't totally destitute, he's not considered an emergency. In any case, there's no room for him at any of the homeless shelters. When he comes back he'll learn about Work Fare and food stamps.

We left through the main lobby, past the glass murals that were almost burning in sunlight pouring through the windows. This was the main entrance, the one we couldn't find that morning. The room is large, half-circular; three walls are covered with murals made of glittering, multi-colored glass tiles that portray scenes from Camden, past and present: the Coriell Cancer Center (which is a relative new-comer to town) the famous doctor who started the Center; Walt Whitman, his house, RCA (gone) Campbell Soup (almost all gone), other famous sites, famous native sons and daughters, neighborhood kids. There's a kind of cheerful brassiness to the images, whose intent seems to be to make visitors to the building proud of their home town, which had at the time one of the highest murder rates in the nation and one of the highest unemployment rates (16.3%) in the nation (the national average was then 6.9%), and where the number of jobs available in the city had decreased since 2009 by 47%.

It was 12:15 p.m.—not bad, only four hours. About fifteen people were standing outside, smoking or waiting for something. Michael lit a cigarette. A man leaned over: "You spare me one, bro?" The look Michael gave him was frightening, and the man backed away, his palms up and out. A few minutes later a tiny, very pretty woman in tight jeans came over and asked Michael for a light. Close up her face was grey under the makeup, finely lined. He lit her cigarette from his. She leaned in close and puffed, stared into his face. "Thanks, Baby," she said. He watched her, expressionless

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Two weeks later, Mike get a letter: he'd been approved for the minimum Welfare grant--\$119.00 per month (he doesn't get a housing allowance because he's living with us, relatives, and in any case, there's no housing available), and \$200.00 per month for food. They failed to send his Medicare card or explain that he was eligible for Charity Care; it will be months before he learns he has medical coverage.

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The Welfare office appointment took more than half a day, as did the dental appointment. Almost every problem we tried to help Mike solve took hours or days of searching for information, trying to find offices, trying to locate forms, death certificates and other kinds of information that could help Mike get out of the morass of a life lived off the grid. I had returned to school, was teaching a course, and didn't have much time left to carve out of my life. Mike was like a ghost wandering from the kitchen to his room, smoking on the porch. He was passive, willing to do whatever we suggested, grateful in a detached way. He spent a lot of time at my daughter's house, talking with her, hanging out with the kids who gathered there. I didn't know how to deal with him



and was afraid of becoming too attached. He needed a mother, a grandmother, someone to love him without reservation. I was filled with reservations.

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What Mike brought with him: a tiny TV set. An expensive skateboard. A cell phone that carried a two-year contract for a payment of \$100.00 dollars a month. (He was one month in arrears.) Tee shirts and jeans, sneakers, a jacket. A file with his passport, school records, his GED record and certificate (which he'd earned while working part time) his father's army discharge papers, his mother's passport and other documents he'd collected over the years.

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When his grandmother Parul, whom he'd been caring for, became impossible to manage (she'd become incontinent, begun to wander), Mike called one of her American nephews, asked for help. Mike had no money for rent. Their landlord allowed them to stay in the apartment without charge for a month until Mike could figure out what to do. They were broke, as Ruby and his mother hadn't been able to work, and Mike's Social Security benefits had ended three months before, when, on his sixteenth birthday, he dropped out of high school. He hadn't been aware of that regulation.

Par's nephew came two weeks later and told Mike she would be sent back to The Islands to stay with family. He gave Mike twenty dollars and told him good luck. Mike arranged for his mother to stay at a shelter and took her there. He had a part-time job at a restaurant and moved in with a friend.

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A list of Mike's crimes, misdemeanors and debts:

Jay Walking, fine \$50.00, not paid.

Harassment, \$250.00. Until the fines are paid, there's a warrant for his arrest in Atlantic City.

He owes a "huge" bill, he can't remember the exact amount, to Atlantic City Hospital for emergency care for an injury he received in a fight.

Our son in law, the retired FBI agent was going to try to help him get the record expunged. He suspects there may be additional charges.

I contacted Charity Care to negotiate the hospital bill. Most of the bill may be paid for by this emergency fund, a Federal Program. Mike had never heard of that program. We finally learned Mike was covered by Medicaid for Doctor's visits and prescriptions. He still hadn't received a card from the Welfare Office.

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Mike's friend Carl, whose mother is also an addict, tells me more about their childhood: "Mike was always the smart one," he said. "He never studied, pulled good grades if he half tried. He was a crazy skate boarder, took all kinds of risks. He got to be really good. And we did do all the stuff he said. When we were in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, he started selling weed, bought it from some supplier. Mike was so small he looked about nine. No one ever suspected him, riding around on his skate board. He never got caught. He gave money to his grandmother, bought cool clothes and food. He smoked some, and shared with friends. When he was in high school, he sold cocaine. I don't know where he got the stuff, maybe someone who knew his father? But every kind of drug was available at our high school. He just switched from using, to supplying and using. Once he sold my

mother some cocaine, and she overdosed, almost died. Right after that she left us and went to New Orleans to try and get straight, though she never did. That scared him. I think he looked around and saw how his mom and mine was destroying their kids. Maybe he was afraid of dying like his father did. So he stopped, just stopped. Never used again. Or sold again. He was like a legend: he never once got caught. Never. And he just stopped.”

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One Saturday afternoon in late October we ordered Chinese takeout, a reward for the hard work of clearing an overgrown part of the yard. The kitchen table was cluttered with containers and bowls, way too much food; we'd be eating it for days, but all the yard workers got to order their favorite. Cartons of ribs, sweet and sour pork, Maypo shrimp, and egg roll, were passed from hand to hand. Mike, Harry, Mimi and her family, and Eric, our oldest, were jammed around the table, laughing about the afternoon's big adventure: an enormous possum had been living behind an overgrown butterfly bush, and when Harry and Mike cut the plant back, the animal had peered out at them, hissing and baring serious teeth. It had stalked off slowly, turning and hissing every few feet. The relative bravado and flinching expressions of those nearest the possum were subject to hilarious discussion. The possum incident lead to the story of the possum that had lived under the patio roof at their childhood home, and anecdotes about various wildlife and reptiles they'd owned as kids.

Then I shoved all the fortune cookies to the center of the table—Harry usually got two or three for everyone. "OK, listen up everyone, it's time for the fortunes." I turned to Mike: "This is something we do every time we get Chinese. I'll show you.

First you think of a question you want answered. Then you stare at the cookies, or wave your hands over them until one of them vibrates at you."

Mike looked puzzled. "One of the cookies can answer your question, but you have to figure out which," I said. "Look." I waved my hands dramatically over the cellophane wrapped cookies. "Ah, MMMMmmmmmm. Speak to me, oh Fu Manchu. Which one has the answer? Ah, this one. Got it, Mike? Think of a question, and choose a cookie for the answer. Here, I'll show you."

I opened the fortune cookie wrapper. "My question was, will I ever get my geraniums dug up before the frost. And, according to the fortune, the answer is: 'Kindness is appreciated by those closest to you.' Hmmm. I guess that means you all should help me dig the plants out tomorrow." And though everyone else felt the game was dopey, they all grabbed a cookie, with or without the drama. None of the messages were remotely connected with the questions, but I thought the fun was in trying to twist the answer into a positive response, and the family indulged me.

"Damn, I hate these goody two-shoes-fortunes. Why can't they say something like the horoscopes in the newspapers?" Harry asked. Most of the slips of paper had Confucian homilies, though occasionally one promised something more than philosophy: "Great wealth will come if you work hard." Always a qualifier.

"Mike what did your fortune say?" Dee asked.

After a pause, he said: "Honor is more valuable than gold." Rick laughed: "Gold is more honorable than egg rolls."

"And what was your question, Mike?"

Mike looked down and hesitated. The overhead light shone on his black hair.

I said hurriedly, "You don't have to say the question, it's just a game."

"Oh, go on, Mike, tell her, or she'll nag you."

"No, no, you don't have tell that part," I said.

Mike looked at his plate. "I asked, 'When will I ever be happy?'"

I blushed. After a few seconds, I said, "That's a great question. I ask it at least once a year."

No one spoke. Then I started clearing the table. Holding up the last unopened fortune cookie, I said, "I bet Confucius say on this one: 'Men should help clear the table.'"

Everyone got up and started to carry dishes to the sink. Mike went out to the patio to smoke.

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I stayed inside to help with the dishes. I was touched by Mike's question, which had seemed sincere. What would he do? Could we help? It seemed to me that the answer to Mike's problems might be to get him in college. He had a high school diploma of sorts, and was really smart. But what kind of effort would college take? He was still almost feral. He'd learned to survive by being manipulative and clever. He hadn't been in school for four years. And when he was there he hadn't done any work. But he'd read constantly. Mostly trash on the internet, terrorist junk and government plots to make Americans slaves to financial something or other involving Geithner. He was addicted to Red Bull and cigarettes, spent long hours on his cell phone and on the internet, researching God knows what. What in his life had prepared him for college? His life was almost unbearably complicated. He'd recently learned that his mother had been

taken from the homeless shelter unconscious. She was in a hospital in Atlantic City, and not expected to live.

I felt depressed. In what way was Mike our problem? There were other, closer relatives who hadn't stepped in to help him, so why should we? I realized that if we hadn't taken him in, if we'd heard ten years from now that Mike had died of an overdose, I'd feel really sad and guilty, and wish I'd tried to help him. Maybe even give money to some charity as a kind of reparation, or repentance. And that would be so much easier.

In what sense was he family? What is family? I felt furious that my daughter had gotten us involved. It was decades since we'd had a teenage kid in the house, and I hadn't done so well with my own children—though they all turned out ok eventually. I could feel my blood pressure creeping up. I thought again of my cousin Mary Jane sitting in the sun that day, thought of her years before that, not yet four, running on the truck platform, laughing and shouting, "Poison, poison." A cheerful, easygoing kid. She'd been like a sister, not a cousin. She'd had a tough life and had always been kind and good. She would have given him the affection Mike needed. And she'd slowly, bravely, patiently died of cancer, confident that she would be finally released into Heaven. Damn, I hated all the saintly women in our family.

Could Mike change? He seemed to hate Jews, Blacks, Hispanics, and, ironically, "towelheads." Couldn't he see the irony of playing with Neo-Nazi ideas? Did he believe that stuff? Or was it, as my daughter believed, just adolescent bravado, shock-the-elders rant? I was tired of all this. Was he consciously or unconsciously using us, conning us--

conning himself? Staring out the window, I could see the red glow of Mike's cigarette. What did we have to offer him? He needed love, and had needed it for years.

I wiped the table and wrung out the dish rag. I hadn't yet finished writing the essay due that week, or marking my students' papers. Now there were two red glows out there. My granddaughter was smoking with Mike.

My grandparents, having crossed religious and ethnic barriers so long ago, would be amazed at these descendants: between Mike and our granddaughter, the various strains: Hindu, Italian, Irish, English, Danish, French, Scotch, Polish, and that Puritan couple who stepped off the boat in 17th Century New England, the Pinkhams. How did they get on the family tree? Had any of their genetic material been handed down? What branches of that tree ended, barren, or cut off too soon? Well, at least not our branch.

Who survives, who falls by the way? And how are any of us responsible?

I closed the dish washer door. Three more months, I thought, if Harry is willing, we'll try three more months. I went to my desk and pulled out my unfinished essay assignment, the stack of ungraded student papers. I started making a list of things Mike would need to do to apply to the local community college.

## I DON'T WANT TO PLAY IN YOUR YARD

It's taken me an hour and a half to bathe, dress, feed her, trying to ignore the urine stink from the rug in front of her bed, then get her down the leaf littered path through the front yard, walking very slowly, to the car. Now she slouches in the front seat, pulling at the seat belt. "Got to go to the bathroom," she mumbles. "I'm hungry." I feel the irritation, a hot fringe on the back of my neck. Try to be pleasant, cheerful, I think. "Don't you remember—you had that nice sandwich an hour ago."

"Didn't," she says firmly.

"We'll be there soon, and after the doctor's we can go to the diner: crab cakes, made the way you used to." A sudden smile on her sunken face. Her short term memory's gone, zapped by a series of strokes. What happened five minutes ago is gone. Fifty years ago she remembers. We're driving past the town where she grew up. She points to the old YMCA building. That's the hospital where Rita's baby died."

"Is it?"

"Yes. The other twin lived. What was his name?" She's told me this story a hundred times. "What was his name?" she insists. Cousin Harry, I think, Harry—your brother's name.

Meanly, I tell her: "I forget." A few years back she could fill me in on family history, and that's how we connected. She'd tell me stories, I'd write them down. Now I'm the part time head nurse and organizer of her care, Miss Ratchett, scullery maid and bookkeeper. One of the slaveys who clean up the shit. And the back up, when any of the others can't make a shift. You wanted to do this, I remind myself. But somehow it seemed, what?—noble when I wanted to do help her avoid the nursing home, before I'd



had to clean the rug once too often. Why? Why not a nursing home? Because I'd promised her she wouldn't ever have to go to one. Because neither of us could afford the fortune it would cost to keep her in a nice one. And the charity ones were disgusting. So we'd jury rigged a system for her care, my family, my brother's, a part time care giver, visiting nurses, meals on wheels. But when the arrangements broke down, like today, unexpectedly, I'd take up the slack.

"My father had a farm here," she says, Cleverly? She knows the old stories of lost family wealth can snag me.

"And a chauffeur once drove you to school." I pat her hand on the seat next to me. Fragments of her old personality are still there. She used to cuss like a dock worker. Occasionally that self reaches up through the fog. "Take my advice, Dar," she'll say, "Don't ever grow old."

"What's the alternative," I answer, sliding easily into the second banana role. Once she made me promise I'd never let her suffer. I asked if she meant I should kill her, if for example she was dying of cancer. According to her beliefs, wasn't that a mortal sin? "Oh, you could always confess it." She cocked her head and laughed. "But suicide's a mortal sin, and I wouldn't get a chance to repent."

"So it's OK if I commit a mortal sin and a capital crime and have to throw myself on the mercy of the court?"

"Well," she answered, "you might get away with it--you've always had that innocent looking face, who would suspect you. And I don't want to go to Hell." I suspect she doesn't believe any of that religious stuff any longer, but she's almost Jesuitical, calculating her chances of salvation versus mine. As for my getting caught and

serving time? Oh, a slight miscalculation on my part, or a big dopey one, too much insulin. Everyone knows how terrified I am to give injections.

But such macabre teasing is long gone. We can't discuss the pro's and con's of mercy killing any more.

Trying to push away thoughts of capitol crime, I search for something non-irritating, non-nagging to say. Some music that's been cruising my brain all week tunes back in. What is it? "Mom, do you remember a song grandma used to sing when I was little? Something about an apple tree and a rain barrel?"

Fiercely she stares out the window, then suddenly begins to sing in a perfectly pitched, clear, earnest voice.

: I don't want to play in your yard  
I don't like you anymore.  
You'll be sorry when you see me  
sliding down our cellar door.

Astonished, I glance at her. In that instant her profile seems to shift from crone to the gappy beaked look of baby birds we'd find fallen from their nests; then it changes to the rapt expression of a kindergartner anxious to please. When she's finished three choruses and turned to me for approval, I praise her: What a memory! Does she remember "Camp Town Races," another of my grandmother's favorites. Soon we're singing way too loud for a mild autumn ride with the car windows down.

Camp Town races five miles long  
Doo Dah! Doo Dah!  
Camp Town Races five miles long  
Oh, de doo dah day.

By the time we reached the doctor's we've run through a medley of old Stephen Foster songs. The office isn't crowded, we get through the check-up quickly, and for once mom

has no complaints, doesn't harass the doctor. He's relieved and is extra nice to her.

She's past the stage when she tried to be winsome and childishly charming, showing off, past the stage of angry refusals. We head for the restaurant.

"Hey, mom, what was that hilarious one gran used to sing? An old tear jerker about a man on a train whose kid is acting up and someone tells him to get his mother?" She looks at me, puzzled. "You know, the one about the bad boy on the train?" I can see my grandmother, red massive arms pile driving through starch and steam, tears blurring her face. She loved those old sad songs—and I did too, and would cry with her, stung by the quick grief of a four year old torn between the idea that mothers' mothers go on forever, huge pillars behind the ironing board, and the other notion: mothers in some old fairy tales and songs could die.

We're at a red light. A car pulls next to us. "Got it," I say and begin to sing in a loud mock baritone. A man in the car next to us stares open mouthed. My mother frowns. Then I shift into a soprano trill:

'Oh, where is his mother, go take him to her  
One wo-o-o-man so-of-of-oftly says' Then  
back to the booming baritone:  
'Oh, I wish that I could, was the man's sad reply,  
But she's DEAD in the co-o-o-oach AHEAD!'

I laugh—too loud. My mother looks at me sternly. "I never liked that one." Chastened, I return to a vaguely melancholy "Santa Lucia."

By the time we've eaten at her favorite diner (all the things *not* on her diet—crab cakes, French fries, pie with ice cream, coffee and real sugar and cream) the nagging voice of the health care aide buzzes in my ear: what will her blood sugar be? How could you be so neglectful?

I've had it, am exhausted, and have two chapters to read and a class to prepare. I pull into her driveway and think of the long walk down the crumbling sidewalk, through the yard littered with slippery leaves.

"Did you like the crab cakes?" I ask her.

She squints. "Did I have cake? What kind?"

"Strawberry short cake," I lie, "like the kind Gran used to make, with the strawberry meringue icing."

My mother smiles. "I loved that cake." She pats my hand. "I had a good time today."

I brush a crumb from her cheek. "I had a good time, too."

## NOW I LAY ME DOWN

My mother was getting ready to die, was trying to help me accept that fact, but I resisted, denied all the evidence that was so clear to her. For months she tried to get me to go through the grey metal box, and at last, reluctantly, I did.

I read her will, my grandmother's will, old death certificates, letters, and the crumbling brown deed for a plot of graves in a Catholic cemetery in Philadelphia. More like a tract of graves, a development of graves. My grandfather, who had eleven children, wanted to make sure that they all had a place to rest for all eternity (next to him), just as, before he died, he purchased a small business for each of the older sons—whether they wanted it or not.

My grandmother left the graves in my mother's care, and now the remaining 28 graves are mine to tend. My grandparents, their two small children, a black sheep uncle, my cousin's stillborn twin, and my father are buried there, and, several years after she gave me the box, my mother was also. No one else in the family has seemed interested in being buried there—the cemetery, once in the countryside, is now in the middle of a slum, and though I've pointed out how well kept the graves are, and how unlikely it is that we'd be mugged after we're stowed six feet under, so far, no takers. The family has scattered, and some, divorced or "fallen away" from the Church, are no longer eligible to be buried in consecrated ground.

Why don't you sell the graves?" I asked, but my mother's quick hot anger made me back down. Like it or not, I became the guardian of the last bit of my grandfather's cemetery estate.

There's more to it: I knew that I was expected to be the cemetery salesman to my generation. My mother wished all her children would be buried near her, snug as we used to be when all five of us used to lay in her bed (three youngest next to her, two of us at the bottom of the bed rubbing her chronically aching feet) listening to her read *Treasure Island* or Poe. I understood her need, and am frightened by the small sliver of desire that stirs in me also—the desire to finally lie next to my husband, and gather our children around us, as if we could, with some fierce parental shield, protect them, even after we are dead. Perhaps this is just some benign genetic remnant of my grandfather's cold will.

My mother chose me as caretaker because I am her oldest, but also because I am fascinated by cemeteries and have been since years ago she took us picnicking in the graveyards that were only a few blocks from our Trenton home. Ever since, I've been a cemetery *aficionado* and search them out wherever I go, to the dismay of friends and relatives, who think it's a morbid hobby.

Such an interest wouldn't have been thought morbid in my grandfather's lifetime, when visits to the cemetery were a frequent Sunday pastime. Of course, they were much more interesting places to visit then, with elaborate marble monuments, flowers and shrubs, and shady paths on which the family could stroll.

Cemeteries have in recent years become bland suburbs, expanses of lawn marked with discreet copper plaques that mark each resident's property. Increased maintenance costs and depletion of "eternal care funds" have led to the banning of large, old-fashioned monuments, plants and trees. The cities of the dead are a new regimented democracy, a low-maintenance democracy bought at the cost of individuality, at the loss of one final chance to buy a monument that's quirky, personal, or in bad taste. Even the new condo-

mausoleums are simply above ground equivalents of the new lawn-cemeteries. Row after row of shelves with identical markers line the mausoleum, like official faux-marble file cabinets for the dead. And whenever I'm in one of those marble mini-apartment complexes, all I can think about is how the sanitary arrangements work. Aren't the bodies decaying in there? What about the stink and slime? Does a corpse occasionally explode?

No way I'll be stashed in one of those places.

"Where would you like to be buried?" I'll ask my husband cheerfully. If pressed, he'll say: "Throw my ashes someplace on Star Island. Or dump them in the back yard." I admire such nonchalance.

I've given the matter a lot more thought. When we visit cemeteries we've never seen before, I'm always searching for that perfect resting place, the way other people look for a perfect retirement village. Wherever we go, on vacation or business, I look for small, out-of-the-way graveyards; the really famous ones are usually a disappointment. But Highgate Cemetery in London (burial ground for the rich and famous—and rich and forgotten—Victorians) wasn't totally disappointing. My favorite monument there is a kind of huge Macy's Thanksgiving day parade head of Karl Marx. But that's in an annex to the original Highgate, which can be seen only by appointment on a guided tour. Our guide, M. Gwynedd, a Tory dragon, no doubt the widow of a midrange government official, whisked us through the cemetery neither we nor our ancestors would have been eligible to enter, her scornful look implied. But we did get to see parts of the reclaimed cemetery, full of wonderful odd, sentimental monuments (a stone lion, weeping marble maidens and lots of bad poetry). Highgate fairly shouts: "Me! Me! I was important."

Meanwhile the scientist Michael Farraday (the wrong religion: he wasn't an Anglican) lies just outside the cemetery's official city limits, but within the gates, beneath a modest marker. Perhaps fearing we'd leave sweat or worse on the gravestones if not carefully watched, our prickly guide (grey suit, sensible shoes, lips a compressed blade) marched us past monuments as if we were slum children on a field trip to the British Museum. A dedicated committee was restoring Highgate from the depredations of the bad old days when it was abandoned to vines, weed trees, horror film makers, and a coven of desecrating witches. Our guide seemed to feel her role was to guard the gates from all barbarians: Americans, the lower orders, and perhaps the cruising gay men who seem to be a fixture at British cemeteries.

Brompton cemetery, if less well-known, is a much friendlier London site. Located between Kensington and Chelsea, it has not been abandoned; though it's overgrown, pedestrians use the main path as an avenue from one part of the city to another. There we could wander around, take photographs, or just sit on a bench and think. At the entrance to Brompton, in a glass case, is a 19th century poster which explains the rules for burial: No grave openings on Sundays or holidays, except in periods of epidemic.

In the really old cemeteries the lives of our grandparents and further back ancestors become real: in Brompton we saw row after row of markers for the First World War dead. An entire family wiped out from cholera. A young Parisian girl who died away from home, buried, 1867, among strangers. Or were they her English cousins? Examined closely, cemeteries teach us history, sociology, religion. At least, that's the educational explanation I give my friends.



The truth is more complicated.

Once, while walking through Brompton, I noticed that a mausoleum had been vandalized. A hole, about the size of a quarter was in one leaded window at eye level; a larger hole had been smashed high on an opposite window. Many of the other mausoleums in that area are like empty chapels surrounded by graves; others have sealed vaults set into the walls behind grated or glass doors. There was no name or other writing on the rather severe front of the vandalized building, which was about ten by twelve feet. The wooden door was sealed. Curious, I peered in the small hole. At first, I couldn't see anything. A narrow ray of light from the other window barely lit the dim interior. When my eye adjusted to the light, I saw, about two feet from the window—and my eye—a beautifully carved wood casket. I jumped back, feeling as if I'd accidentally walked in on someone in his bath, or been transported to a scary scene of a vampire movie. It was, I realized with amusement, the last thing I'd expected to see.

The most beautiful cemetery I've ever stumbled upon is on Isla Mujeres, a Mexican island off the Yucatan. About a block from the beach, surrounded by stone walls and trees with leathery round leaves, the graveyard is set in white sand. Tiny white, pink or blue buildings, like tabernacles or dolls' houses are set on the graves. Behind the graves, row after row of white cement Virgins and saints and crosses. The white-on-white square is splashed by an occasional green shrub and red flowers. Behind the houses' glass or wrought iron doors are offerings: flowers and food and mysterious paper bags. The faint cries of village children and the hiss of surf float over the walls. In the center of the graveyard, a child's grave is lined with white horses and the house is

covered with blue floral tiles. Behind the iron grille: toys and red flowers. Grief carefully fashioned this grave.

The perfect resting place, I decided. But not for me. The connection between living and dead there seemed so close, so strong, so based on rituals and beliefs I couldn't understand, I could never rest in the churchyard of Santa Ana. Buried there, I'd be the neglected alien, always waiting, but not as the dead there seemed to wait under the sand, quietly, soulless, attentive, shyly waiting for villagers, or a token, or offerings I didn't know how to accept or give.

So far I haven't found the perfect cemetery but have imagined one that's made up of the best parts of all the cemeteries I've ever visited. What I'm looking for is a graveyard about three miles out of town, at the end of a dusty road lined with oak trees. Surrounded with stone walls, the non-denominational cemetery is on land that varies from section to section, some hills, some valleys, some flat land, some gently rolling hills. The roads are laid out in graceful loops, allowing visitors to become pleasantly lost on a weekend stroll. (Bikers and joggers are banned, though walkers are encouraged.) Drinking water and bathrooms are available in a pavilion near the center of the grounds.

On Sundays, people from the area come to picnic, or to show friends the display of spring or summer flowers. Once a year on a holiday in May or June, families come for an all-day visit. They trim the grass and shrubs and clear away weeds that have grown since the last time they were here. The youngest child in the family helps plant annuals—geraniums, marigolds, petunias, or impatiens, if the graves are in a shady place. The older children scrub the stones.

After tending the graves, the family has a picnic. Benches line the paths and gazebos are placed conveniently around the grounds, but most people choose to picnic at the gravesites. Many baskets of food—lemonade, May wine, fried chicken, salads, pies and fresh pastries are consumed, then the family packs away the plates and sprinkles crumbs and wine on the graves to attract the birds. The last of the chicken is stripped from the bones and left near the water fountain for the family of feral cats who guard the monuments. Then the family visits the field stone, vaguely Congregational chapel for a memorial service. Set on a hill, the chapel is about the size of an elegant garage. Inside, white-washed walls are set in old wood beams. Polished benches, a wooden lectern, an ancient organ and an excellent stereo system (hidden behind a wood grille) are the only furnishings. Two candles and a bowl of roses are on the sill of an arched, stained glass window. The caretaker, who lives in a cottage outside the cemetery, admits them to the building, and an uncle tips him generously. Every year, one person from each generation chooses a musical selection, which the young techie cousin has committed to tape. The music is usually secular, or uplifting—but it could be religious, though nothing as foreboding as the "Dies Irae."

One year, an old aunt chose selections from Strauss's *Last Songs*, Kiri Te Kanawa's version. Her hip college student great niece chose a selection from Philip Glass's "Liquid Days," with its thrum and vocal plaint:

If you had no name  
 If you had no history  
 If you had no books  
 If you had no family  
 If it were only you

Naked on the grass...

(And here the children giggled and the oldest aunt frowned.)

Would you be then...  
And now I'm freezing...freezing  
Sleep...sleep...sleep....

Then the children's choice, a folk rock version of "Amazing Grace."

The oldest members of the family then tell brief, interesting stories about their childhoods and about their own parents. The children do not squirm or fidget. Their parents begin to cry a bit, but don't try to hide their tears. The service is a muted echo of the last time they gathered for the opening of a new grave, and they all remembered the grief of that day.

After the service, the family strolls the grounds greeting old friends, noting new monuments, and exclaiming over their old favorites: sentimental saints, stylized columns, an elaborate depiction of the spirit escaping the tomb, and a marble pallet on which a young girl has fallen into stony sleep. On top of a high, almost inaccessible rocky hill is an obelisk 40 feet high, erected in the 19th century by the family of an obscure, saintly ancestor who labored among the poor as minister/physician. Since no one of the ancient family has survived, some of the young men in the group climb the hill and clear away ivy, which had begun to obscure the minister's name and the name of the man who erected the monument in 1880. The family rests for a while and debates once again how the obelisk was taken to the top of the hill. One cousin suggests that a small railroad was constructed to haul it to the top, but no one knows for sure.

Resuming their walk, they discuss the inscriptions to be placed on their own gravestones, and the advisability of having photographs sealed in glass as part of the monument. Discussing the epitaphs for the stone occupies most of the walk, and the

older members of the group are amused by the children's choices, which change from year to year. The parent of the newest baby in the family recorded the epitaphs and all are bound to honor each other's choices. This might seem like a sad discussion, but the adults are so matter-of-fact and humorous in their choices, that they seemed to be choosing the perfect words for a post card.

Humorous, quirky, outrageous, adolescent, solemn, depressed, the epitaphs they choose are much more interesting than the sanctimonious ones on most monuments. The words are so honest and true, that walking along the paths and reading the inscriptions on their stones will be like hearing voice after voice in a long, astonishing poem.

Well, that's all fantasy. Such a place never existed. Behind the fantasy is the wish that graves will always be tended and visited, graveyards will always stay where they are (and we know that some are built over, that an occasional 18th century body or bodies are found during excavations under Philadelphia and other city roads and lots). The Office of Catholic Cemeteries of Philadelphia seems, however, to be doing a good preservation job so far. So, despite my “fallen away” status, I may have to finagle a grave in grandfather’s plot after all. While I'm working out the details, I have a few grave-ish business matters to take care of.

Reading my grandmother's papers I discovered that the family plot originally had stones at the four corners at the edges of the gravesite and copper pipes or chains linked from stone to stone. A large inscribed monument was in the middle of the plot. The copper was stripped—stolen--from the grave site during the Second World War, when metal was at a premium. And at the cemetery officials' request, in the 1950s (my

grandmother approved) the stone was also removed, as Holy Sepulture was converting to the copper plaque system. My grandmother, mother and father have the small plaques on their graves. I discovered, in the process of my research, that since the grave site is so large, we are still legally entitled to have a large monument placed there. Of course, there are barriers—we'd have to come up with \$5,000.00 for a base for the stone, some other kind of fee, and pay again for perpetual care (grandad's certificate of perpetual care can't be located). So a big stone would be very expensive. The Office of Catholic Cemeteries, Dioceses of Philadelphia isn't going to make things easy. Still, I can't help imagining an imposing slab flanked by statues of saints now dropped from the church's official saint roll: maybe St. Dorothy, or Saint Patrick. Or a saint I'd once invented in for an art class: St. Darcy, Patron Saint Of Bad Housewives.

Probably more fantasy. Maybe it would be easier to go back to my search for the perfect resting place.

But the cemetery I can't find doesn't really have to be exactly as I described it, though it should, no matter where it is, or what the size, be like it in some way. One hot August day, my seven-year-old daughter and I stumbled on a grave site while exploring an island off the coast of Maine. It was in a small cove near the bare, gull-infested cliffs. We almost missed the tiny, vestibule-sized graveyard, as the steps down to it were covered by bay shrubs and wild roses. At the bottom of the natural stone steps were three small markers. The graves were neatly trimmed and a glass jar was filled with faded flowers. Beyond the markers stood a shoulder high monument covered with text. In 1862, three sisters, Mattie, 10 years old, Millie, 8, and Sadie, 6, died within a month. (Whooping cough? Black Diphtheria? I wondered.) The stone bore the date of death and

last words of the sisters: Millie: January 14th: "I am going to Jesus." Mattie, January 18th: "We shall meet in Heaven." Sadie, February 8th: "I don't want to die."

When I read the blurred inscriptions to my daughter, she thought for a while and then said: "I believe the last one, don't you?"

"Yes," I agreed, "I believe that one."

We put fresh flowers in the jar and then returned to our crumbling hotel. The rest of the day we spent with her father and brothers, playing and eating. We stayed up so long, that, when the cool wind began to blow late that evening, we went almost willingly to our uncomfortable beds.