

Spring 2006

IT WAS IN the middle of the night that I wondered whether coming home had been the right decision. My bed-and-breakfast was quiet except for Mother's voice.

"Yooooooooo-hoooooooo," she called. "Anybody home?"

Oh, for a night of uninterrupted sleep. No light showed at the window. For several hours the gentle rain had helped me ignore the chatter that rose from her bedroom like static, but now my mothering instinct kicked in.

On my way through the house, I heard her voice again: "I should be able to figure things out. I shouldn't have to turn to people all the time. I can lie here and pronounce words that make me happy like, for instance, on-o-ma-to-poe-ia . . ." Pleased by the sound of the word, she repeated it, blowing out every other syllable like a smoke ring. I pushed open the bedroom door. The corners of her mouth twitched into a mischievous smile.

"What took you so long?"

"I was asleep."

"I'm hungry."

"It's the middle of the night."

"Hungry," she repeated with apparent disregard for my tone, not as civil as I might have wished. A gaunt hand snaked its way up to pat wisps of gray hair into place. Forgotten were the short braids that hung at either side of her head. The hand swept the wisps up toward the top, where her bun used to be.

My sluggish mind replayed dinner. She had eaten several bites of salmon, a banana, a scoop of vanilla ice cream. I fetched a biscotti coated with chocolate, a treat she could hold herself. In the morning, chocolate would cover hands and face, nightgown and sheets. For the time being all that mattered was more sleep. The chatter quieted down as I entered my room and collapsed on the bed. A verbal mother, surely an advantage in childhood, had become a disadvantage in middle age.

Five hours later, when I brought Mother her breakfast, she was still talking away: "Because that Kathy rarely gets out to eat. She chooses the most inexpensive item on the menu anyway. Oh, here you are. Care to join us at the restaurant?"

"Who else will be there?"

"Nobody else," she said with the exhilaration of a debutante, off to a party. "Your father will pay."

Dad used to escort her to a local eatery every Thursday for the Early Bird Special. I decided to play along. "I'd love to."

Without transition, she mentioned her elder sister. "Helen's been visiting with two children, one on a red tricycle. Who is that darling little boy?"

The question caught me off guard. My mother was not the type of person to make up stories. Nor did she play practical jokes. I scanned the empty bedroom. "What boy? Where?"

"Right at the foot of the bed."

"You must have been dreaming, Mother. Helen's dead."

"Oh, they were here. I recognized the hat."

Recognized the hat. Not surprising. In Washington, DC, where I grew up, Bea had always worn a hat to work. Here's what bothered me. Never would I have recalled a similar detail from one of my own dreams. Come to think of it, Helen did wear hats, secured with hatpins. How could I forget the way she'd lay siege to our front hall, dandruff flakes dotting the collar of a shiny black rayon suit? Helen and Bea had spent long hours arguing. Tall, skinny, and slightly hunchbacked, my aunt favored crimson lipstick. She'd hold a cigarette in her right hand while the left picked tobacco off her lower lip with fastidiousness. Her tone was usually vindictive, her voice whiny.

Helen was still on Bea's mind an hour later. I paused at the bedroom door to listen to the end of another animated conversation.

". . . only Mom might not approve."

The flood of words dried up at the sight of me. This time I had the distinct impression that she had been in conversation with someone. It made sense that Bea was thinking about her elder sister. They'd shared a bedroom in childhood.

"Who were you talking to?"

"Oh, nobody," she warbled like a five-year-old caught with one hand in a cookie jar and not about to risk disapproval.

I had entered the bedroom to change her underwear. An important item in every caregiver's toolbox is diapers, which marketing execs euphemize as briefs. Walk into any drugstore and admire the variety. Different shapes for men and women, different sizes, but also different types of closure. Some offer flaps with adhesive tabs. Some resemble pull-ups for toddlers. I brought home several packages, choosing the brand Serenity, an apt appellation for the mood we hoped to create.

As I put away the baby wipes container, we heard footfalls on the staircase, and both glanced toward the front of the house. My bed-and-breakfast guests were laughing, despite the bad weather, as they set off for Provincetown, armed with umbrellas. The showers were to continue all afternoon.

"It's raining," I said. "We've got folks here from London. I can't help but wish they'd have one good day out of three." Bea raised a hand to her forehead and held it there. The blue veins emphasized her pallor. "When the sky is overcast, Wellfleet loses its sparkle." I tucked the fleece throw up around her neck, the way she liked it. "Pavement, wood shingles, sky, all different shades of gray."

It was hard to tell whether Bea understood or not. She seemed so deep in thought. Was she thinking about my father, who died in November 1999, at the cusp of the new century? The Odyssey Cruise, organized for Vassar friends in 1931? A sonnet by William Shakespeare?

“The pee has a mind of its own,” she said with a frown.

The second brief went on fast and crooked.