

A Conscientious Lot

I AM WITH MOM—maybe standing against her leg, pressing my face into her skirt—while she talks to a strange lady. I am crying because the strange lady is in our house, standing on our porch as if it is hers, and we don't live here anymore. "She misses this house," Mom explains to the lady about my tears.

That is almost my earliest memory. The only one I can identify that came earlier is the day we moved: March 30, 1990, when I was three years old. I remember the vehicles piled high with our things, the momentous excitement of the day. But I no longer remember the little farmhouse by the river I cried for.

All my more concrete memories were made in the new house on the new farm, a fifteen-minute drive from the old one. The new house wasn't new, really. It was the same big white farmhouse where my mom grew up, which my great-grandpa had built and my grandpa had added on to. Dad and Mom sold the farm by the river and bought the family farm—with the Holsteins, the hay fields, the pond down the road, and the woods up the road—from Grandpa. Dad put new white siding and pretty, blue shutters on the old farmhouse, and he and Mom remodeled it over the years to suit their tastes.

Grandpa's brother, my great-uncle Perry, died in this house. Sometimes when I'm lying in bed, staring at the crooked cream walls of my bedroom and the bumpy, rippled layers of paint over aged wallpaper over uneven plaster walls, I think of him. It was to this very bedroom, where he lay in bed, weak with pneumonia, that Perry called his little brother Lewis—my grandpa—and the rest of his family to tell them goodbye. "I am going to be with Jesus," he said. He was eighteen years old.

The doctor had come out to the house to see him, but antibiotics were not readily available in those days, and nothing he tried was effective. Perry died only a week after his illness began.

He was courting, and thought to be engaged to, a beautiful young woman named Esther. The night he died, two of Esther's older brothers heard footsteps coming up the stairs outside their bedroom, and a man entered their room. He was dressed in white, one of the brothers said later.

Both brothers were terrified and hid their heads under the covers. They heard the footsteps leave their room and go down the stairs again. Soon they heard the door to the stairs open and their dad call: "Boys! Time to get up and do the chores!"

"Did you come upstairs before you called us?" Esther's brother asked their father later, at the breakfast table. He had not; nor could they find the footprints of any visitor outside in the snow.

I love that my family has its own ghost story. It's fun to tease my nieces, when they come to visit, about Great-Uncle Ghost Perry. In my reimagined account, he lives in our attic and visits his old bedroom now and then. But whether or not he visited Esther's house that long-ago night, I don't actually believe he's

still hanging around. “I am going to be with Jesus,” he told his family, and I think he knew what he was talking about.

• • •

The carpet in our bathroom was green, and used to get squishy sometimes after my younger sister Kathy and I had taken one of our exciting baths. We’d suck our washcloths like teats, the warm water squeezing pleasantly from the soft cloth into our mouths. Sip tiny teacups of hot “tea” straight from the faucet; dare each other to lick our own belly buttons; slide wildly down the slippery, wet back of the tub, splashing into the water like seals.

When we jumped out of the tub, into huge bath towels scrubby warm on our wet skin, our fingers would be as wrinkled as raisins. We’d scrunch into nighties that clung to our damp skin and have our dripping, long, rat-thin hair combed out by Mom before it dried in knots and fluffed around our foreheads. Then sometimes we’d sprawl across the floor with Dad to listen to a story. We’d listen to the pleasant up-and-down rumble of his voice until it slurred and drooped and he’d wake himself with a start and begin to read fresh for a while.

Once two mushrooms grew in the carpet beside the tub. So fascinating—what joy! To have mushrooms in the house! The carpet was taken away soon after that and replaced with shiny new linoleum.

Dora and Jennie and Kathy have been around on this earth forever—at least as far as my memory is concerned—but I remember when Jeffrey was born. I remember walking clustered with my sisters around Mom and Dad down the white-tiled hospital hallway—excitement big in my heart—while

Mom carried the new baby in her arms. A nurse stopped us to exclaim over his squished raspberry face, his mass of black hair. “Oh, he looks just like a boy!”

I’m not sure what a “boy” looks like, but probably the opposite of a flock of quiet, big-eyed girls. Jeffrey was not quiet. “I went in the nursery, and there was one baby squalling for all he was worth,” Dad told us, laughing. “And I looked, and it was Jeffrey. All the other babies were just lying there.”

Jeffrey, and the two boys who followed him, Chad and Benny, changed the tenor of our family.

Granted, I argued fiercely with my sisters. I stampeded through the lawn as the dashing, pawing king of a wild horse band; hauled blankets across the field to the faraway tree line, where my sisters and I built houses and left the blankets to mildew; spanked my dolls until they whimpered tears of repentance and promised never to be bad again. But my sisters and I never thought of running at top speed through the kitchen, dining room, living room, and library—which formed a perfect circular racetrack—screaming at the tops of our voices. We never thought of pummeling each other as we tumbled over couch cushions. And it was the boys’ generation—although Kathy and my youngest sister, Elizabeth, joined in—that instituted mud baths, spit fights, and dirt-clod wars.

We all agreed that Jeffrey, with his grinning brown face and buzzed hair that stuck straight up as if he were being electrified, was the bully. We banded together to protect the innocent, blond-headed younger brothers from his mean-headedness. Kathy, the sister just above him and right below me—a tiny thing with skin and hair so dark people sometimes asked if she were Native American—was the spitfire. “Shy Little Kitten with

the Big, Big Mouth” we sometimes called her, laughing. She seldom said a word away from home, she was so shy—but with us her tongue was loud and her opinions firm, and she could pinch and slap like nobody’s business.

I was the crybaby. Not over physical pain, which I prided myself on handling well. I had heard stories of the courage of Indian braves and imagined myself like them: silent and majestic, bearing cuts and bruises and twisted ankles with calm inner strength. But emotional pain undid me, and the entire family knew that if something was said that hurt my feelings, I would crumple and cry, or maybe go off into a room alone, only to be found later, sobbing into my pillow.

No one wants to be responsible for that.

Unlike my younger siblings, I did not participate in spit fights or slap wars or pinching contests. I felt that if someone hit me, something terrible had been done to my soul. I cried once after I mowed over a dandelion. I think what struck me was that I had done it purposely, had felt *satisfaction* as I cropped its sunny, smiling face. Only afterward was I smitten with guilt when I thought of how its innocent life had been shortened by my unthinking cruelty.

In sibling battles, words were my only weapon, and I used them with all the serious intent of Moses the Lawgiver. But the minute a too-harsh remark was made by my opponent or a personal aspersion cast, I was done, withdrawing into a silent, seething world of pain.

Good thing my parents were loving and my home stable and balanced, or there’s no telling how I might have turned out. Either psychopathic or a mouse, no doubt.

Life is difficult when your emotional antenna picks up every current, and a few noncurrents. Even more difficult if you add that to terrified and awkward and shy.

Once, when we visited a church an hour away, I peed my pants. Thankfully, I cannot reveal how old I was, because I do not remember, but suffice it to say I was past the age of first-grade accidents (which I also experienced) and far, far too old.

After the evening service—held in a white-sided Mennonite church with a brown-carpeted interior and a floor that sloped gently down to the pulpit—I really had to go.

I knew where the bathroom was, but I was waylaid by a couple of friendly young people my age: a girl, tall and willowy, with a bump on her nose, and a boy with curly hair and a squinty grin. We were acquainted, though I didn't know them well. "Nice you could come," they said. "What do you like to do for fun? What grade are you in school?"

And I stood talking to them, my smile growing wider in proportion to my discomfort. Soon I would mention it. Soon. I would say it sorta casually, "Well, I have to go the bathroom now. Be right back." But there wasn't a good stopping place yet.

Or maybe I would say it all embarrassed-like, as I usually said things: "Well—uh—I need to go to the bathroom." Blush. Stumble away. But I would say it for sure. Soon. I hated to interrupt.

And so I waited, just a little bit longer, and then a little bit more, and then—with horror—I felt my bladder open up and everything in it rush down the insides of my close-together legs, soak into my navy-blue dress shoes—but I did not glance down. I stared pleasantly into their faces, a smile fixated on mine.

Surely, surely they had noticed. The change in my face, the dampened circle of carpet around my feet—there was no way they could have missed it. They were only being polite, as dumbfounded as I was horror-struck—none of us willing to mention it.

We moved into their classroom—their school was held in a back room of their church—so they could show me something. I was relieved to let that damp circle of carpet behind. I imagined the cleaning lady, probably one of the mothers, finding it later, or maybe the teacher when she came to school tomorrow.

“What’s this?” one of them would say, sniffing. “It smells like . . . urine?”

“Oh, yes, that’s right where Luci was standing when we talked to her last night,” one of my new friends would say. “She must have peed her pants.”

My shoes, my socks, my panties were damp and sticky. I dared not sit down for fear a spot would show on my dress or soak through to something else. I rode the entire hour home perched on the hard plastic cup holder part of the van, my body rigid, my arm hooked over the back of the seat to support my weight. My siblings slouched comfortably on the seats, sleeping. Thankfully, it was dark, so nobody noticed me.

• • •

We were all of us shy and sensitive, albeit in different ways and to varying degrees. This was to the advantage of our parents, because all of us knew appearances were of the utmost importance.

“Put on your Sunday smiles,” Dad would say when we pulled into church. He was sleek and handsome in his black suit, his

voice jaunty, smiling. So putting on a smile felt like putting on a pretty dress—part of preparing to enter the public.

And we not only dressed our countenances for church; we dressed them for any public appearance. “Stop squishing me,” I might order Kathy while we pulled into the grocery store parking lot. “Move over.”

“You’re the one who’s squishing me,” she might retort, glaring at me. But the moment we stepped from the van into the public sphere of the parking lot, our faces would smooth into adorable shyness, and we were barely able to lift our eyes except for delicate, smiling glances.

“What a lovely family!” people said. “What beautiful brown eyes. How do you do it?”

• • •

No matter how we fought, we never went to bed without making up. We were a conscientious lot—it comes with the territory of shy and sensitive, I guess. There were certain boundaries our consciences could not cross.

One was going to bed without apologizing for our wrongs. What if Jesus came during the night, and we were caught guilty? “Let not the sun go down upon your wrath,” the Bible says, and we took the command seriously.

It got to be a habit with us. We had always said, “Good night, love you,” before we went to bed, went around saying it to every single person or to the group as a whole in a comforting mini-ceremony that assured everyone of well-being.

“I’m sorry I was mean,” someone added once. Maybe they lay in bed and worried over how mean they had been, and then

crept out of bed and to the doorway of another sibling to make it right.

“I’m sorry I was mean too,” that person replied, uneasily aware of their own less-than-stellar actions.

All of us children slept in twos and threes in the four bedrooms that lined the upstairs hallway, and what one heard, we all heard. Soon we were all saying it at bedtime to those we had fought with: “Good night, love you. Sorry for when I was mean.”

And soon we didn’t bother to stop and think about whether we had actually done anything. We said it to everyone as a matter of form—a comforting ritual that assured us any sin, forgotten or unforgotten, that had occurred during the day was all taken care of with these simple words: “Good night, love you. Sorry if I was mean.”