

Prologue

The blue pitcher I made so many years ago isn't my most perfect piece but it's precious to me. I wasn't new to the pottery wheel when I made it, only to the notion of feeling what shape the clay will sing itself into when my hands listen and guide rather than fight it. (Like my life, which had finally begun taking its own shape at the time.)

As I pick it up now from the hutch near the window that overlooks the bay, I remember the pleasure I took feeling it emerge like a new baby. I shaped a graceful handle, with a place for curling fingers, heel of hand, and thumb to fit naturally; and the glaze fired exactly true: the shade of the ocean when it is pure sapphire, perhaps on a day when ashes are being released at its edge. I'd imagined it as a cream pitcher, a special gift, but it came out too generously sized, so I kept it myself, as a reliquary for my childhood's dried tears.

I did make the cream pitcher though. I've always loved cream, especially the old fashioned kind you can't find anymore. For a little while when I was a child, we used to have a milkman bring whole milk that had to be shaken up to mix the cream in with the skim because it wasn't homogenized. Or you could save the cream by pouring it off the top, like my mother did for her coffee and cereal. I took it as a sign that something fine and good could be saved, although I lost hope many times that such a natural law might apply to me. My brother and I were born to guilt, and we took it on like a mantle. Of course we were innocents. In her own way, perhaps our mother was too, although that's more difficult to see.

I had to wait weeks longer until a lump of clay finally bloomed into the cream pitcher I'd hoped to make. I knew, the way you know something you have already lived, weather in your bones, that it was right. That one I glazed in a joyous array of ascending, blending color: gold and green for the sand and the marsh grass of the solid earth at the bottom, tones of aquamarine for the moving bay and ocean, to a lighter and lighter blue of opening sky. And it has endured, intact and beautiful, on the table in the center of our home.

This isn't a story I thought I'd ever be willing or ready to tell. My mind's eye has retained a run-down glamour image from childhood: me, setting out alone with only a brown bag lunch and babysitting money in search of my father by hitchhiking the country to look for men I resembled. Once I could have set out that way, without baggage, running to him for rescue. (Not that I knew him nor he me, but I idolized the idea of him.) Now, this story is my baggage and to know me, he would have to know what he left me to, and what I did to survive. But the cream pitcher on the table is brim-full; I have had enough very good years that I can bear to seek him out and let come what comes.

And whether I find him or not, this story is part of the heritage I think my children will have a right to know. I hope I do not sound self-justifying as I tell it. I realize there are those who would say I am guilty of murder, and those who would say I am not. There are a few who would say my mother tried to kill me more surely than herself. I've told it without flinching, this story of all that has remained silent but unforgotten where I left it, in the blue pitcher of memory and dried tears.

Chapter 1

She was always crazy. Looking back, I see no doubt about it. It was a deceptive craziness, though, sometimes luminous and joyful. Even when it was, my brother and I knew it was important not to relax. If one of us let down our vigilance, a bottomless pit could open right beneath our feet, eclipsing the ground we'd been foolish enough to trust, and the sickening freefall would begin again.

We blamed ourselves, of course. Mother blamed us, too. In a way, that was best, because we could all be saved if Roger and I only perfected ourselves, and I used to believe that was possible—until the summer after eighth grade, when she went for weeks without speaking to me. I had no idea what I'd done or how to fix it, and bang, one afternoon while I was lying on my bed, this thought came: it's not me. Instead of being relieved, I cried a long time, letting the tat of water against our mildewed shower curtain obscure the sound. I was ill-equipped to deal with the insight, which didn't last anyway. Maybe Mother smelled my doubt of her; she had an uncanny sense of when she'd gone too far, although I can see now she

took full advantage of the vast and open space we gave her, the miles and miles before she reached our edge.

But there was this, too: she had the most wonderful laugh, rich and tinkly at the same time.

My mother had an undisguised preference for male over female, inexplicable considering the relationships she'd had with men. She both worshipped and loathed the memory of her father, who'd died before Roger and I were born, and implied grossly preferential treatment of her brother, Jacob, to whom she hadn't spoken in a good fifteen years. It was all an enigma to me until she and I made a journey to Seattle to see her dying mother. Neither Roger nor I had never so much as met our grandmother before then. Mother had told us the distance from Massachusetts to Seattle was too great for visiting, but we also knew that when Grandmother called, Mother would often end up banging down the phone or pretending to have been disconnected.

My brother and I speculated that we were the children of different fathers. Our discussions on the subject were rare and secretive because Mother gave us to understand that she was a Virgin. Any question that didn't use that tenet as a given would bring quick punishment. As a reward for her purity and devotion, God gave Mother the Truth. It was a serious mistake to disagree with Him through Her. She had elevated her non-male status by having had adequate brains to become the Bride of Christ, as she put it, a position she evidenced by wearing a solitaire pearl on her wedding ring finger. Since He only needed one Bride, the lowliness of my gender was unredeemed.

One time it was better to be a girl, but I couldn't enjoy it. Mother had taken us on an impromptu camping trip, as she did at least once every summer. Each time she found us a new place to trespass; we never went where it was legal to camp, because, she explained, those places had already been discovered and ruined, or, more likely, they hadn't been the best places to begin with or rich people would have already bought them up. Every year we collected treasures from our trip and after we got home we'd make a collage. "Look! A whelk and it's not broken!" one of us would call out as we walked a heads-down souvenir search. "From an eagle!" we'd pronounce a feather fallen from an ordinary gull, and she'd proclaim,

“It’s a keeper and so are you.” Of course, she also regularly threatened to return us to the Goodwill store, where she claimed to have found us on a clearance sale, but she loved us. I know she did. Even now, after all, I remind myself of that. And she had the most wonderful laugh.

All in all, I hated camping, but I pretended to like it because it was God’s Great Outdoors and it would have added another flaw to the list she kept on me if I didn’t like laying my bony body down on God’s Great Hard-As-Rocks Rocks and hearing Mother remind us of the Rock of Ages on which we should rest our lives. We didn’t have a tent or anything. Three thin sleeping bags, a couple of dented pots, paper plates, ancient utensils stolen from various diners, matches, and a red plaid plastic table cloth constituted our equipment. Mother said a tent would spoil the view of God’s Great Starry Heavens. To myself, I added that it would also spoil the feast enjoyed by God’s Great Mosquito Plague, but I would never have been dumb enough to say it out loud. The thought was a grimy smudge of rebellion on my soul, and I was amazed she didn’t notice and purify me again.

This particular trip involved a drive of two hours south into Rhode Island, to the oceanfront estates of Newport. She figured that by parking on a kind of no-man’s-land on the obscure boundary between two huge properties, we could unobtrusively carry our gear onto the enormous cliffs and climb down, out of sight from the main houses, onto lower rocks where cozy sandy nests were revealed between them when the tide withdrew. Now it seems absurd to even contemplate, but I guess security systems weren’t so nearly perfect in 1969.

I was too nervous to enjoy the scenery. There was a catch to the plans Mother made. If some disaster befell us, such as being arrested, she’d be furious because, she’d say, she had been testing our good sense by inserting a flaw into the plan. By not finding it, we would have proven again that her lessons had gone unlearned, she had Cast Pearls Among Swine. On the other hand, questioning the wisdom of a scheme was to certify Lack Of Faith, a major sin and stupid to boot; we knew that much.

We set up camp just as she’d imagined, on a huge fairly flat rock above a tiny spit of sand, below the cliffs and the manicured lawns and formal gardens that spread from elegant verandahs toward the sea. Finding driftwood was the first task she

set us to, and not a simple one. There isn't a lot of vegetation on those cliffs, and she was not happy with the skimpy pile we amassed. At some point we must have satisfied her, and she began working to get a fire started. We had to remember to praise the results profusely or we'd have displayed Lack Of Appreciation, another major sin. The wood fought back; there wasn't enough kindling and nothing we'd found was adequately dry. Roger might have contributed to the green wood problem by sneaking onto a lawn and uprooting a small tree. He sometimes did things like that when we were desperate, and I didn't say anything. We helped each other out that much, at least. Mother finally got a small blaze started, pale-appearing against the brilliant blue sky, and I breathed again. It was only late afternoon, too early for supper.

"We'll take a treasure walk." She tended to announce her decisions. "Watch your step."

We set out, climbing from one level of rocks to another when necessary, along the jagged shore guarding the back of Newport's spectacular mansions.

"Children," she exclaimed, her face animated and ecstatic, "You see? God's riches are ours. We don't need money." (Thank goodness we're not tainted with filthy lucre, observed a dangerous whisper in my mind.) But then Mother began to sing, Amazing grace! how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see." Her fine, strong contralto wove itself into the noise of waves stunned by their meeting with cliffs, and as always, I was immediately reconverted to every word She had ever spoken. Her face was sun-gilt, and what she said about being the Bride of Christ had to be true, I was positive, or no way would God let her be so beautiful. She put her arm around me and hugged me to her, and I thought I would die then and there of pure happiness.

And all the signs were good, that was the thing. When we were in front of one estate, two big, short-haired dogs came charging out at us, barking ferociously, and I thought we'd done it, we'd failed another test. But Mother waved cheerily at the man who came out after the dogs. "Yoo hoo, how are you this beautiful day," she called, just as though we belonged there, and kept right on going. The man

waved back and whistled for the dogs who went to him reluctantly, whining their disappointment at being denied fresh kill.

We went on a little farther, and the three of us sat on the rocks of a small promontory, a melon sun spilling color over the edge of our world and sea. My goosebumped skin smoothed out, and Mother said my hair was a glorious titian. A great peacefulness settled over us, each with our arms wrapped around our knees, and time slowed for our gratitude the way it does when you're by the water, your dry soul soaking up its magnitude and kindness. Mother rubbed my back and I wriggled into the crook of her arm and put my head in the hollow between her shoulder and cushy chest. We were all mostly quiet, but every now and then, something would pop into her mind and she'd say it and laugh, full and real and utterly joyous. She had the most wonderful laugh. I know I've said that, but it's still true. Even when we had no idea what she was talking about, her laugh would make us laugh with her.

It grew chilly as the sun continued to sink, and Mother said we needed to get back to camp. Roger and I hurried along, eager not to let anything interrupt the good feeling. When reached the small campsite where we'd built the fireplace, a circle of stones in the middle of the flat rock by which we'd left our bedrolls and cooking equipment, Mother's face changed. Neither Roger nor I caught it quickly enough, and neither of us, even when we did see the change, knew what had gone wrong. Mother pointed angrily at the area and shouted, "How could you have let this happen?"

Roger and I looked at each other anxiously after each of us had taken a quick inventory. Nothing appeared to be missing.