

## Double Days

I would begin awakening, rummaging about in half-sleep, about fifteen minutes before my mother's alarm went off. I was in my attic room, a full floor above my parents' bedroom, but I dreaded the sudden awakening so much that even at that young age I'd developed some sensitive defenses. On rare occasions I would not awaken before her alarm, but then the distant tinkling of it would wake me and I would not be jolted by a creaking stair. Always I would call out quietly that I was awake. Only once was I awakened by my mother's hand, and the novelty of that, of seeing her silhouetted face above me and her dark shape moving away, threw me out of the normal routine of my morning thoughts and onto new ones.

We drove as usual through the absolute dark of early winter morning. But on that morning I thought: She is driving me to my altar boy assignment--it is *my* assignment, not hers--and she has been driving me every other week for nearly a year. It was cold, bitterly, and we had to huddle separately until the car decided to warm. She usually stayed for the 5:30 Mass then, if I had also to serve the 6:15 (because the next boy didn't show up, which happened fairly often), she would leave and come back later to pick me up. I moved out of myself for a moment--which for most children is as rare and gravitous as an out-of-body experience--and wondered at my mother's part in all of this.

"What do you do when we go home?" I asked her.

"When?"

"When I have to serve 6:15. Before you come back for me."

"I have breakfast with your father."

"Ah."

The headlights of the car more often than not fell on snow as we drove up the alley from our house. The light was positively drunk up by the darkness. It was always unnerving to me to face a day that began so close to the bone. Under the circumstances, though, and though I could not have known it then, I could not have had it better. The car started every morning, and I was driven by a sure and loving hand through every desolate

inch of those frozen mornings. In short, I was swathed in dependability, and had to reckon only with the relative agony of early awakening and a twenty minute bout with stiff cold.

I was vaguely aware of a parental pride emanating from the back of the church as I served Mass. I put a lot of energy into precision, pricked for the priest's cues, perfectly elocuted my phonetic Latin. When my mother left after 5:30 Mass on my double-days, as I called those mornings when I had to serve twice, I had to be content with my own pride in my "endurance"--going through that whole ritual a second time.

My worship had nothing to do with the garish plaster statues, the candles, cups, and satin vestments. The only thing that I absorbed during these exercises was the incense that clouded the occasional High Mass. What I worshipped was the esteem it brought me, incarnate in the small but significant expressions on my mother's face, fleet in execution but lasting in effect, and the hale image that I allowed of myself.

The chauffeuring to church continued, but my more unselfish wanderings remained below the surface of my thoughts. Still, I was now ripe for other stimuli of the kind of my mother's waking me. Once, sitting alone in the back yard after dark, I looked up to see my parents coming through the gate. They did not see me, but I saw them easily, mostly because of their white clinical clothing. My father was a dentist, and there for the first time I saw my mother dressed in a nurse's uniform. I questioned her later in the kitchen.

"I'm your father's assistant."

"Ah."

She set about fixing dinner. Afterward, she did the dishes and it was my turn to help. As we were mechanically passing and wiping and stacking, I struggled with a phrase that moments before had pushed itself forward into my mind, demanding to be said.

"Thank you for driving me every morning."

"Oh," she said, "I enjoy it."

I had instinctively expected an anguished look of love to cross her face, for her hands to stop and her eyes to fill. I was disappointed. Enjoy was the word she had used, but she had looked so worn on most of those mornings, hissing in the cold, a little shocked-

looking from too little sleep. So, my first stated recognition of another's love had not produced what I'd thought it would--a gush of gratitude, the long debt at last repaid.

Clearly, though, she was not keeping a debit list. Her each act was offered and the matter dropped. This emerging but still furtive study of my mother went on, and gradually grew in intensity. It was spurred by several startling discoveries.

My grandmother, who lived with our family of parents and four children following my grandfather's death, would often come into my room to talk to me. She and I were very close, but not because of any stellar qualities of mine; the fact was, she was a saintly soul, truly bewildered at any evidence of wrong--in a word, dense to the short-comings of a bratty kid like me. But, besides her natural affection for anything that breathed, we did have a lot in common. We both had idolized grandfather; we both "felt deeply" about things--at first only within the constraining parameters of religiosity. We were sentimentalists. (She was fond of telling, and I of hearing, a story about her father who, as a night watchman at the St. Louis train station, had one night broken up an attempted robbery. One of the fleeing criminals had wheeled about and fired a small-caliber pistol at great-grandfather. The slug hit him in the chest and he fell to the ground. A crowd gathered and, curious at the lack of blood, discovered that the bullet had struck square in the middle of a religious medal!) Lastly, we both held her daughter in awe.

On one of her visits, grandmother brought a scrapbook along which she had decided I was ready to see. It seemed that Mom had asked that none of the children see it, presumably so she would remain just "Mom" to us. The album was full of newspaper clippings, mostly reviews, and all positive. Mom had been on the stage! I read the items eagerly while grandmother gave a running monologue of succinct, whispered footnotes. I learned that our mother and her life-long friend, Betty Mac, had once worked as telephone operators, nights, to get money for college. During the late-night lulls, the two of them scribbled out lip-singing routines on their phone pads, secretly slipping them back and forth to each other. These slips were gathered into polished routines, which were sprung from time to time on gatherings of co-eds at St. Mark's and later Webster College. In their junior year of college the two plugged in their last wire. They peddled themselves to the big hotels, and after being turned down by lesser establishments were picked up by St.

Louis's biggest plum, the Chase Park Plaza Hotel. Their show was simple: They lip-sang the stars' latest numbers, while doing some neo-vaudeville routines. One picture caught her in a bowler hat, jabbing a cane into the air. All this stuff went over extremely well, for the second rank of St. Louis's genuine sophisticates took in big hotel shows. In the midst of the post-war recession, this show of pluck and American know-how (patching disparate elements into a workable whole) was very reassuring to those who could afford to spend money on dinner at the Chase Park Plaza. In retrospect, I see that the press was alert to good copy: Telephone Operators Make Connection!

Grandmother swore me to secrecy, slipped the sacred volume into her nightdress, and went off to her room, leaving me cruelly bottled up with a thousand questions that only Mom could answer.

The unconscious symbiosis between my mother and me was at an end. Perhaps that is what she had feared would happen if her "past" leaked out. She need not have worried; she had not reckoned on how pride in another can fuel love, though it might be temporarily confusing. My motives became more purified now. In place of strict need was a desire to understand and, later, to emulate another.

My grandmother's confidences were not the only leaks. As my father's practice became established, Mom was more and more at home. I do not know if it was because she had been restless, or because word got out that she might be more available, but suddenly there were visitors and phone calls from church and school organizations. She got drafted steadily for planning committees for student talent shows and church and school fundraisers.

I started to overhear people talking about us children. Couldn't one of us do the solo? Surely, as her progeny, we would have talent enough. Mom, I know, brought considerable constraint to bear, but one by one we ended up doing something or other. My younger sister Julie put on pink leotards and rabbit ears and, in a line with twenty-three other little girls, did the bunny bop for the matinee audience of the huge Mississippi River excursion ship, Admiral. My brother Steve, only six at the time and dressed like Huck Finn, sang to an audience in a hotel function room. In the photograph, he looks cool as a pro, one

hand in pocket and left foot tapping, but right in the middle of the song he had met Mom's eye and when he gave her a wink and a little wave the audience laughed with delight. That unexpected roar startled him, and he burst into tears. A genuine trooper, he finished the song. At the age of ten I found myself singing "It's Only a Paper Moon" at a Cub Scout benefit, while standing behind a huge yellow replica. I could barely get my chin over it. Two years later as a twelve-year-old I did some fancy footwork as a dancing slave in a play based on the life of Stephen Foster. (This was 1959, but just to be safe I probably shouldn't run for public office.) I learned from that play that Foster had once chased off a rude dinner guest at a plantation where he was staying. The whole play was based on that stirring event.

Even more serious leaks developed. Mom herself came out into the open. My eighth grade teacher announced one day that Mrs. Reid would be teaching us a "creativity class," and five minutes later my mother arrived. I had not been warned. I immediately became the fool that children can spontaneously become in such circumstances. Mother directed us to concoct a story, each adding something as the spirit moved us to what the last person said. I hogged the floor as often as I could, yakking in a red-faced rush, and was most responsible for making the collective story increasingly more fabulous. In the end I was out-trumped by a kid who said that the protagonist, whom I had made suffer through some ridiculous crises, "woke up and found that it was all a dream."

I was very ashamed at myself afterwards, and stayed in my room alternately blushing and blanching at the memory of my behavior. Gradually it came to me that Mom had never appeared displeased or embarrassed with me; in fact, she had, with little supportive chuckles and expert looks, covered for me. If any of my classmates had used her face as an indicator, they certainly would not have guessed at the measure of my idiocy. In time, I assimilated the whole thing as a lesson learned.

I learned something else too from Mom's covering for me. She was, I could now clearly see, a pro. She could think on her feet. She could outwit disaster. These little seeds of understanding her professionalism grew and grew within me. She was a repository of certain types of rare knowledge--and she lived right in my own house! I began to consult her about everything. I wrote short stories and poems and she willingly criticized them. It

was announced at one of my Cub Scout meetings that there would be a contest for the best costume at the annual Halloween Party. Naturally I consulted my mother.

She and I sat at the kitchen table, planning and thinking. I employed the shotgun approach: an owl? a witch? Mom was more discriminating. From time to time she looked at me, and I felt as dispassionately assessed as I would have by any casting director. Perhaps because I was little more than skin and bones, the idea of a scarecrow came to her.

She sewed together a patched-up sheath of a costume and, on the night of the contest, stuffed me into it. She put a pole down my back, and one through my sleeves across my shoulders. She put straw up my pants cuffs and shirt sleeves and tied them fast with rope. Then she set to work on my face. She powdered it white, blackened around the eyes, and drew "stitches" with an eyebrow pencil. She stitched up my mouth too. A straw hat completed it. When I looked into the mirror, I was amazed at the results. Next to my transformed face, my mother's shone.

At the Cub Scout party at the school gymnasium we were made to walk in a ring before the judges, so that three finalists could be selected. I was the first chosen, then two others. We were arranged in a line before the crowd. On my right was a fairly decent ogre; on my left, a boy stood in a bathrobe and wore a mop head for a wig. Below the hem of the robe his bare legs extended into high heel shoes. As each of us was indicated, the assembled scouts and guests were to show their approval with applause. The ogre got a good hand. I got an excellent hand. When the boy in the bathrobe was indicated, he struck a saucy pose and opened the robe: He was wearing a girl's swimsuit! The room full of Cub Scouts let out a primal shriek. I was crushed when the prize went to that boy in the swimsuit. I never did get completely over it. Shouldn't craft have won over cunning? Shouldn't the judges have known the difference between admiring applause and the howls of sexually anxious pre-adolescents.

Regardless, it was another occasion for going home shame-faced and embarrassed. I had come a ways though. It was for my mother I felt bad--all that loving effort, our secret shared excitement. She sought me out in the bathroom where I was hiding and where we had done all of our marvelous preparations. My stitches were askew from crying. She got

the story out of me, told me not to worry. She plunked down on the edge of the bathroom and said, "A swimsuit, huh?" She thought for a moment, then suddenly brightened and shook her fist in the air. "But hey! We were *runner-up!*" I will gladly finish second in anything if someone will only come up afterwards and say those words as she did.

My parents now live on the island of Guam, where my father is in charge of dental public health. I saw my mother recently, during one of her flights to and from, and took her all around Boston. That night, at the airport, she talked excitedly about her new career in the jewelry business. She had roped together the island's bored government wives and founded a little jewelry-making enterprise which was just beginning to turn a profit. As she talked, I realized how much she had given up when she married. I'm sure to her it was a matter of greater goods, as when she said she enjoyed driving me to Mass, but still there was so much drudge and drear. When she was my father's assistant, she came home to a second job of cooking, laundry, mending. Then there were more and more children. Late at night, when she at last sat down in front of the TV, she would often fall fast asleep. How much more demanding were her double-days.

Still, her talents and energies leaked out into more moments than I've recorded here--and now this jewelry business.