



Two of Eve's

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Perhaps it is best to use the seasons to explain that long ago time. Incidents and people early known and early forgotten are nudged back into the conscious mind by strange scenes and essences of things. A naked, gnarled tree to the left of a school play ground calles up visions that no logical mental prodding could. The odor of milk gone sour makes a light impression on the senses that grows into a clear moment of recall. Someone asks: "Do you remember so-and-so?" I do not. And then , in the spring, I see a dark haried girl sitting alone on a step eating a pastry and there is the person I had no earlier recollection of: the little girl who lived next door; her Sunday pleasure is to sit alone in her father's black Buick with the windows rolled up tight, muncing a ragged peice of bread heavy with butter.

So to think of a season sends a flood of memories spilling over me and if I pick them out that way I can tell you what it was like then and something of what happened.

autumn

Nuns went by as quiet as leaves and drunken men with sober eyes sang ballads in the lobby of the Greek Hotel. My sister and I had new brown stockings and, if my father was working, cod liver oil. The adults talked with tired voices about Zick's Coal Company and then there were silent trips in the evening to the railroad where we filled burlap sacks with the tiny pieces of

coal we found there. My sister and I enjoyed few things more than these searches along the tracks. We called the shiny black lumps Midnight Treasure. Because we were cautioned to hurry up and be quiet, the whole thing had the furtiveness and excitement that split us with delight. Walking home we glanced hopefully back to see the great car loads of slag being dumped, red hot and smoking, into the ravine that skirted the steel mill. The roaring mass lit the sky with a dull orange glow that lasted and lasted and lasted. It was hard not to stand still and stare at that bright patch of color surrounded by black. Impossible not to feel a shiver when our feet left gravel and hit layers of dead leaves that whispered underfoot.

But Big Papa would be waiting for us when we returned. Would he draw for our amusement those queer, delicate portraits on tiny pieces of paper? Two little girls with huge eyes and thin arms? So meticulously did he draw that he never forgot to include the neck shadows cast by our heads. We screamed and shrieked with outrage and joy, "Big Papa, we don't look like that!!!"

Or would he play for us on his violin? His eyes closed; his beautiful head weaving to the music he felt but could not read. If, however, he had sold many of his Lucky Hart products, and his soup had been to his taste, he might take from his vest packet a hollow brass vial and slowly extract from it a round, hard dot of chewing gum. One for each of us. The gum he chewed he did not throw away. It had regular stops on a rather long journey. After the flavor had gone he placed it on his wrist; later behind his ear, then into this brass vial and finally, on special occasions and if we begged hard enough, to us. What must have been germ ridden and dirt heavy

was received by us with the tearful gratitude of sinners redeemed and allowed to take into their mouths the body of Jesus Christ.

During one of those autumns he sat down by the stove, cracked some walnuts with his teeth, shook the meat into his mouth and, when he was both full and finished, died.

And it was in the autumn of his death that Mr. Shelby, a roomer, came. His rent made tolerable the gap the loss of Big Papa's pensions checks had made. Mr. Shelby had tiny, even teeth and carried about him the delicious smell of lemon cream. Everything seemed to make him laugh and my mother said he had nice manners because he worked in a hotel.

winter

My mother's hands were large and rough. And when she rubbed the Vick's salve on my chest I was rigid with pain. She took two fingers full of it at a time and did not stop rubbing massaging me until there was just enough left in the bottle to scoop out and press with abandon on my tongue, telling me to swallow. A hot flannel wrapped around my neck and chest finished the damage. I was covered up with heavy quilts and ordered to sweat, which I promptly did. No sweat gland thrives that could withstand my mother's stern injunctions. She frowned so when we were ill I believed she was angry with us for being weak. I always felt too guilty and inadequate at these rub downs to make one squeal of protest. I had caught cold, after all, because I had stood still for three hours knee deep in snow watching the "big kids" slide down a hill. My sister crept in and, seeing my pain, was filled with sorrow. She found a bottle of tiny brown pills in the bathroom and gave me six or eight of them.

Her goodness was later detected and she was whipped with a leather belt and slapped across the face for my cooperation.

It must have happened all through the year that he was with us, but it is only in the winter that I remember those Saturday nights when Mr. Shelby came home from work. He would smilingly greet everybody and climb the stairs to his room. Later, after we had waited in nervous ^{agitation} ~~agitation~~, he would bellow from above, "Shirley Temple! Greta Garbo! ". The two of us would belt up the stairs to his room and, as always, he gave each of us a bag of candy. Glazed orange slices one week. Chocolate mounds with cream centers the next. There were jelly beans, peanut brittle, corn candy, licorice, peppermint squares, chewy green mints, plain blocks of chocolate. Returning down stairs, we politely offered some to everybody, hoping to be refused. Only when the candy was pepper mint were we in danger, because my mother loved it. We were allowed to eat it all, but my sister, who thought of a tomorrow which I did not believe in, ate sparingly and saved hers.

Winter was also the time for eviction notices which my mother, loud with protest and indignation, burned.

Winter was the time when my mother threw buckets of cold water on insurance men and bill collectors. She wrote lengthy letters to President Roosevelt about the quality of relief food: the coffee was bitter, the flour brown, the meal full of weevils, the potatoes gone soft. My father "wrote Numbers" to get \$35.00 once to but a job. He got it and for two months we had chicken on Sunday with Jello for desert. After that Mr. Shelby helped out. From the hotel kitchen he got turkey wings, liver, white oleo, and root beer. He smiled and ~~chuckled~~ ^{away} ~~wasy~~ my mother's thankyou's saying he thought

there would be fish tomorrow.

But mostly we waited for spring when there could be gardens and pork was cheap.

spring

The first ^{twigs} ~~twings~~ are thin and green. They will bend, even into a circle, but will not break. They are bitter to taste and slippery to touch. Instead of the dull pain of a winter strap, these twings, when switched about the legs, leave a stinging sharp pain that lasts long after the whipping ~~is~~ over. Springtime, for me, even now, is touched with an aching undercurrent. My sister stood firm, quiet and tearless when she was switched. I, on the other hand, felt obliged to give the indigent its proper histrionic atmosphere. I ran up stairs, tumbled under beds, screamed, locked myself in closets, ~~trying~~ tried to jump out of windows and once, I know, I fell on my knees, loudly praying to God for succor. He did not hear.

After each whipping I was quiet ^{with} ~~was~~ plans of vengeance. Sometimes I cut open the whelps with a safety pin and strutted bleeding into the kitchen where my mother was. Other times I planned to bite a hole in her thigh when next she turned ~~me~~ over her knee. Because all of these acts of vengeance, actual or imaginary, were fruitless, I sought final balm in Mr. Shelby's room. There it was clean and quiet. The odor of his lemon vanishing cream pervaded the room and there were scores of things to examine. His closet door was covered elbow deep with wonderful ties of every color and design. Black and white checks that reminded me of the Queen's corridor in fairy tale books;

a dark blue with white specks that was like the sky at night. Yellow and red crescents, purple whirls, deep and blossoms and pale blue. I think I knew each one by heart and I had, of course, my favorites. Then there were his magazines. Far back in the recesses of his closet piled on a suitcase were a number of girly magazines with pictures of naked and half naked women. Some ^{with sleepy eyes} fell softly on draped couches. Some held parts of their bodies with their hands—a breast, perhaps, shoved enticingly forward, a pair of panties pulled down to show a chubby pair of buttocks while the owner winked over her shoulder. I sometimes reproduced these poses in the mirror. But the effect was never the same. The magazine ladies were made differently from me. I had nothing to show, nothing to hold and my winks, which I practised studiously, were melancholy failures.

I watched spring come in and leave from Mr. Shelby's window. I took great trouble to leave no trace of having been there. It was a secret place for me and once caught there by him or anyone else, it would be mine no longer. From his window I could see the girl who lived in the next street come and bury her money under our porch for safekeeping. I could see Mr. Dunion sprinkle his flower garden with the manure that he collected every morning in the same place at the same time where the milk man's horse dropped it. His garden, hidden from the public by an ugly grey fence, was on view to me up in that room. It looked like an Easter Egg Basket. So neat and green the grass, so varied the colors and shapes of his flowers. I could see the red house that belonged to the witch and wonder what was beyond the long stretch of railroad track in the distance. I could watch P.J. and Warren tossing a cat high in the air over and over again. From there I could smell the rain in the air before it had fallen, and see the first spring storms. I stood wide eyed before bolts of lightening and watched dandelion heads bend under the

weight of the rain.

summer

I had lain alone for a long time in the tall gras watching the witch's house and squeezing the white foul liquid from the stalks of milkweed. Summer lay like a heavy hand on the back of my neck and took away all energy except that required to think long and shapeless thoughts. Sticky and hot I came home knowing some punishment was in store for me. There was none. The house was quiet with a tension that was occasionally refueled by quick bursts of harangue by my mother. She walked about in her high heels—her hat, which she seldom took off, still on her head—doing household chores in a most disorganized fashion. She swept the porch then put a pot of water on to boil. She ironed one yellow curtain panel and hosed down the porch. She went into the garden and picked three tomatoes and put them on the window sill in the kitchen—then she swept the porch again. All the time alternating between a festering silence and angry abuse, most of which I could not understand. A neighbor lady came in and sat down, without a word, by the door. Filling her bottom lip with acrid snuff from time to time, she listened to my mother's chanting fury and nodded agreement.

From what I could gather, my father had thrown a tricycle at Mr. Shelby's head—or thrown him down the stairs and then the tricycle after him which struck his head. Anyway, Mr. Shelby was gone. I peeped into his room. Except for the odor of lemon vanishing cream, nothing of him was there. I

followed my mother into the back yard and watched her catch a white hen. After knocking it senseless on the fence post, she wrung its neck, chopped off the head and tossed it on the ground. The chicken shivered and leaped about the yard, stupidly unaware that it was dead. Drops of blood spattered on my bare feet. I looked quickly up at my mother to see whether or not I should be afraid. But her eyes—gold flecked, calm, almost dreamy—watched the chicken's dying spasms without fear. She looked tired, very, very tired. Once the hen was still, she carried it into the kitchen, dipped it into the boiling water and picked it clean. I was not afraid to watch.

I ate alone that summer evening. Stewed chicken and fried tomatoes.

When my father and my sister came home I was sent to bed. From the top of the stairs I listened to the quiet that followed my father's words, "The doctor says she 's all right." Then I heard my sister crying, crying. My mother's voice was hard and bitter—stiff with an emotion I have not yet been able to name. She spit the word "rape" out of her mouth like the rotten part of an apple. My sister never stopped crying and I fell asleep with her gasping choking cries in my ears.

Later she came to bed. Creeping silently over me to her side by the wall. It was dawning and I could see her face—wet and puffy. For such a little girl she had the beautiful hands of a woman. They rested now, prettily slender, on the sheet. Every now and then her breath would come shuddering from her chest and die away in a sigh.

I didn't know precisely what rape meant but I knew it was bad—bad like the magazines in Mr. Shelby's room were bad.

But if Mr. Shelby had raped her why had they made her cry? Wasn't he to blame?

I looked again at my sister's hand lying on the sheet. It looked sad. I wanted to touch it, but something--something akin to shame held ~~my~~ back. For a long time I lay there trying to go ahead and touch my sister's hand. I fell asleep still trying. But I think I touched her later, in a dream--or maybe it wasn't a dream. I hope to God it wasn't.

Chloe Wofford Morrison