

MY MOTHER'S BROTHER

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My mother's younger brother Patrick, who had been married twice, was single again and seeing a woman who wore pantyhose even on the hottest days and high heels to show off her long, lovely legs. "Look at those stems," Patrick would say, and Elaine would stretch out a toe. My mother said Patrick wanted to marry Elaine, but that he shouldn't because Elaine was common. Common or not, I didn't think she'd marry anybody, because at thirty-six she hadn't yet. Thirty-six seemed ancient to me: I was almost nineteen that summer.

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I had nothing to do because I hadn't made any plans. A gray lethargy had come over me in the winter and stubbornly outlasted spring, then all of a sudden it was summertime, and I was home from college. So I hung out in my bedroom all day, drawing and listening to music, alone in the house while my

mother was at work. I would leave my room when I wanted a snack, and to take a periodic dip in the pool.

Often, Uncle Patrick would show up for an afternoon swim, and I would forget myself in the pleasure of lolling around in the water with him, exchanging observations on life. I didn't know what he did for a job. No one had ever told me, and I was self-absorbed enough not to wonder. He didn't ask me what I was doing with myself, and I was grateful for that. There was always a gin and tonic sitting on the edge of the pool, mixed at my mother's bar, which he slowly sipped until the ice cubes rattled and our fingertips were pruney.

One day he brought Elaine. When I got to the pool they were already in it. I was disappointed not to have Uncle Patrick to myself.

"D'you have a boyfriend?" Elaine asked. Her own gin and tonic sweated on the coping next to Patrick's. Her reddish-blond hair was piled on top of her head and she was wearing a full face of makeup. She swam with her head held high out of the water.

"I did," I said. "Not anymore."

She studied me. "You loved him." She said it with a certainty that was both comforting and odd.

“Yes,” I said. Then I was embarrassed. I dove underwater and swam to the end of the pool. “Not really,” I said when I came up for air. “We only dated for a month.”

Elaine looked at Uncle Patrick. “How long have we been dating?”

He smiled and said, “Dating? Dating? Is that what you call it?”

“Well, what do you call it?”

He took her in his arms and danced her through the water. “A love affair, my darling!”

“Oh, stop.” She pretended to slap him and he fell back into the pool. When he surfaced his pale hair was flat on his forehead and water streamed down his face.

“You’re a nice couple,” I said. I had no such opinion – I had no opinion at all – but I wanted to insert myself.

“Oh, no we aren’t,” she said. “Let me tell you why. Your uncle here is of the upper classes, and I am – well, I’m *lowly*.” She said this with humorous satisfaction. I looked at Uncle Patrick. He was smiling at Elaine. “Don’t look at him,” she scolded. “He’s a fool. *I* know what’s what.” She breast stroked off to the center of the pool, a small wake lapping behind her. She turned around and said, “Oh, now, look at you, so woebegone, you’re too pretty to look like

that.” I wanted her to ask me if I was sad. I would have said I wasn’t. Desperately, I needed to confess my unhappiness, but just as desperately I wanted to hide it.

“You know what you’d get a kick out of?” Uncle Patrick said. He wiggled his eyebrows the way he could, one seemingly independent of the other. “Going to the track.”

“I’ve never been,” I said.

“All the more reason.”

The three of us turned at the sound of my mother’s car crunching into the driveway. She got out and waved, then walked across the lawn to the pool. She lost a lot of weight when she and my father divorced, and she looked as straight as a wooden soldier. She was wearing what she usually wore to work, a silk blouse and a pair of slacks with permanent creases down the front of the legs.

“Patrick, I hope you’ll stay for dinner. Hello,” she said to Elaine. Saying hello showed that she was a “lady.” Not calling Elaine by her name, and not explicitly inviting her to dinner, was her way of protesting Elaine’s presence in her pool.

“We were just talking about the three of us going to the races tomorrow,” Elaine said conversationally. I loved how unfazed she was by my mother.

My mother frowned at Uncle Patrick. "Take Sarah to the track?" When she shook her head, her peppery hair didn't move. "No, Patrick."

He winked at me when she glanced away.

"I saw that," she said. She pointed at me. "Absolutely not."

"Okay," I said. It didn't occur to me until later on that I was old enough to do as I pleased.

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Uncle Patrick said he knew of a jockey whose horse bit off his thumb. "Then he spat it out on the ground like a plug of tobacco, and the jockey kept it in a jar of formaldehyde."

"Why didn't they sew it back on?"

"This was long before things like sewing thumbs back on were possible. You weren't even a twinkle yet." He handed me a program with the page turned to the next race. "Take a look and see what horse catches your eye. Then I'll show you how to bet."

We were inside the clubhouse, high above the track, looking through a vast plate glass window. I could see the crowded grandstands below, where according to Elaine, the riff-raff sat. The clubhouse was air-conditioned and

drinks were served there. It was full of people, but we were shown to a table right away.

On the track, there was a procession of sleek horses. Jockeys perched on their backs like monkeys, wearing garishly colorful shirts.

“Everyone is different,” Elaine said about the shirts. “That’s how you can tell them apart.” She had let her brilliant hair down today, and wore a short skirt, as usual, to show off her legs. She counted out some cash from her wallet and handed it to my Uncle. “Stunning Heart to win, do you mind, Patrick?”

“Stunning Heart it is.”

I chose a horse called Pythagoras because I liked its name. Uncle Patrick and I took an escalator to the betting level and stood in line at a little window to make our bets. There were dozens of windows, long lines at them all. The space was the size of a supermarket, and the floor was littered with torn-up tickets. Closed circuit televisions hung from the ceiling, broadcasting what was happening on the track. It was a weekday afternoon, but most of the bettors were middle-aged men. My uncle wore an open-necked blue shirt and a pair of white trousers, looking as fresh and crisp as a laundered sheet in that worn-out seeming place.

“Win means first, place means second, show means third,” he said. “An exacta is when you bet on the first two winners; a trifecta is the first three.”

We got to the window, and I bet ten dollars on Pythagoras to win. I didn't expect to make any money. Uncle Patrick's bets were complicated, and he made them fast, dealing out bills like cards as he spoke. He bet on several horses at once.

“I like to hedge my bets,” he said.

“But don't you want to have a favorite?”

“Nah. Horses are about as dependable as people. They'll disappoint you most of the time.”

I thought, then, of the least dependable person I knew: the boy I dated for a month. When I told him I loved him, he said he loved me too, and then never spoke to me again. I was proud and disdainful of him to my friends, but when I saw him walking across campus, I felt a longing that I eventually came to understand was less for him than for the kind of mutual devotion that I imagined was the reason for living. Elaine and Uncle Patrick had it, I thought, in spite of the way they talked; I didn't believe my parents ever did. I wondered if I would ever stop feeling disappointed in myself for not having my love returned.

When we got back from making our bets, the horses were being led into the starting gate on the track. Then, all of a sudden, they were running. Elaine clapped and yelled, "They're off!" She sat on the edge of her seat, murmuring, "Come on, come on, come *on!*" Uncle Patrick looked intent, his eyes following the race.

My horse's was number 15; the jockey's shirt was purple and gold. It stayed back with the pack until the first curve, when slowly it moved up to third. I watched with fascination as it gained on the lead, edging through the others to the inside of the track. It continued running in second place on the straightaway and as the horses rounded the final curve. At the very last minute it shot ahead, and crossed the finish line by a nose. Uncle Patrick picked me up like a child and kissed me on both cheeks. People around us were talking and laughing. It was a sudden party.

"I won," I said. "Did I win?"

"Nine to one," Uncle Patrick said. "Do you know how much you'll get?"

"Ninety dollars. Eighty, less my ten."

"You're a winner!" Elaine said.

I burst into tears.

“Aw, honey,” she said. “You’re overexcited. Here have some of this.” She handed me her drink, an inch of dark liquid without ice. I took a sip and made a face. “Bourbon,” she said. “Patrick, get her a rum and Coke.” She waited for my Uncle to go off to the bar before saying, “You’re sensitive, aren’t you? Like him.”

I wiped my nose with a cocktail napkin. It had been a brief shower. “Like who?”

She nodded her head toward the bar. “Patrick. He’s sensitive too.”

“I don’t think I’m so sensitive.”

“That’s what he says, but you are.” She took my hand, turned it over, and traced a long line on my palm. “Your life line is chained,” she said. “Your happiness is ecstasy, maybe too much so, but your sadness is no less than despair.” She turned my hand toward the window to see it better. “You’re very creative. Well, people like you usually are.” She patted my knee. “You’ll feel better before the end of the summer.”

“Is my Uncle creative?”

“Yes, but he’s never done anything with it. Now, don’t you tell him I read your palm.”

“Why?” I thought it was thrilling; I wished I could do it.

“It was how we met, you know. He came to me for a reading. That’s right, I’m a professional palm reader and psychic. I bet you never would have guessed it.”

“Never,” I said. “What does his palm say?”

“That’s none of your beeswax.”

Uncle Patrick returned with my drink, and we planned our bets for the following race. I didn’t say anything about Elaine reading my palm. I was glad she saw that sadness was in me. Being physically marked by the proof of it made me feel less ashamed. Patrick’s pile of tickets lay on the table, all of them torn in half.

I touched them. “Didn’t you win anything, Uncle Patrick?”

“There’s always the next race,” he said.

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I was lucky and won two more races. Uncle Patrick said there were people who had a knack. Later when I asked to go to the track again, he refused, and said, “Now you’ve got a taste for winning, and that’s a dangerous thing.” I didn’t see how feeling like a winner could be bad. I was exhilarated for an entire day before I sank into gloom again. Uncle Patrick didn’t come around for a week after that. When I saw him again, he looked pale.

“You’ve been going to the track without me, haven’t you,” I accused. He smiled and sipped his gin and tonic, giving nothing away. Beneath the water, our bodies looked bloated and white. My mother walked up from the house. It was Sunday, and she was wearing her church dress, a lavender sheath, but had come out of the house barefooted.

“What, no Elaine today?” she said to Uncle Patrick.

“No Elaine,” he said.

I was surprised when she said nothing else except, “Dinner at seven if you want to stay,” and walked back across the lawn to the house.

I swam a lap and crawled up the steps. I sat at the top with my feet in the pool. It was a broiling day within a series of broiling days; I could hardly breathe through the humidity. Uncle Patrick leaned up against the coping, waist high in the water, dunking his head every now and then.

“Do you love Elaine?” I said.

“That’s an awfully personal question,” he said.

“Whatever.”

“Sure I love her.”

“Are you going to marry her?”

He shook his head no.

“Because she’s common?”

He laughed at that. “You’re mother’s been talking to you. No, Elaine is about as common as a twenty carat diamond. I’m not going to marry her because she won’t have me.”

I didn’t know what he meant. “But she does have you.”

“She doesn’t want to have me forever.”

“Why?”

“Why didn’t your beau want you?” he said. “Your month-long love. What happened there?”

I was surprised he remembered that brief conversation; I hadn’t thought he was listening. “He didn’t want me because I loved him. No, because I wanted him to love me.” I pulled up my knees and crossed my arms over them. “Recently, I realized that what I want more than anything in life is to be in love. Pathetic, huh?”

“No, not at all. That’s what everyone wants.”

He pushed away from the side and floated on his back. I wanted him to tell me something wise. He floated for so long that I felt compelled to ask, “Uncle Patrick, are you all right?”

“No,” he said.

I was silent then. I didn't think he would tell me why, even if I wanted to know.

Finally, he swam down to the bottom of the pool, and hung there like a goldfish for what seemed like a long time. When he surfaced, he said, "How long was that, do you think?"

"I don't know. A minute?"

He took off his big steel watch and gave it to me. "Time me, okay? I used to do this when I was a kid." Down he went. I watched the second hand tick.

"Forty-three seconds," I said when he came up.

"Now you try it," he said.

I gave him the watch and dove, blowing air bubbles out of my nostrils. Uncle Patrick's legs looked sliced from his body; my hair floated like seaweed in front of my face. I stayed down until I couldn't stand it anymore, and beat his time by six seconds.

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I found Elaine's place a half a block west of the bus stop on a street of identical brick row houses. I rang the bell and waited a long time, sweating in the sun. I was about to turn around and go home when I finally heard a noise.

Her long robe looked like something out of a costume trunk, cobalt velvet with a braided gold sash. Her hair fell in damp tendrils from a topknot, and there were beads of moisture on her neck. I realized she'd been taking a bath.

"It's me, Sarah."

She smiled. "I can see it's you, Sarah. How in the world did you find me?"

"I'm so sorry, I should have called. I don't know why I didn't. I looked you up. I took a bus."

"A city bus?" She seemed amused. "Well, good for you, I bet that was a first." She was right, I'd never taken a city bus before, and figuring out the route had been a puzzle. She showed me into a front room that was bright with paintings on almost every inch of the walls, paintings of flowers and people and animals and fruit, landscapes, seascapes, portraits, foreign places. Looking at them all gave me a pain behind my eyes.

"I love art," she said. "It's my passion. Or maybe a sickness!" She laughed. "If I see a painting I like, I must have it." She sat down on a white loveseat. There were matching armchairs on either side of it. The carpet was white, as well; all the color hung on the walls. She patted the sofa, and I sat down next to her. She took my hand and examined my palm. "Oh, you'll find love. Not soon, so keep that in mind. Don't go throwing your heart away to just anyone."

“Uncle Patrick loves you,” I said. It was what I’d really come about. “But he says you won’t marry him. Is it because you think he’s high class? The only person who cares about that sort of thing is my mother.”

“Oh, that has nothing to do with it. Loving someone isn’t always a reason to marry. Whether Patrick and I love each other or not isn’t the point. Of course, I love him, but I know we’re not meant for each other.” She unwound her topknot and let her hair down. I was conscious again of having interrupted her bath. “Let’s talk about your life, honey. I can tell you’re feeling better.”

It was true. The darkness had lifted. I couldn’t imagine why I had loved the boy; when I thought of him now, I was astonished by his mediocrity. In a few weeks I would go back to college and take up my real life again. The summer seemed like a fitful dream, disappearing behind the light.

“You’ll feel dark again,” Elaine warned. “Hopefully not for a long time. But you will suffer from it on and off all your life.”

“But why?” I said.

She shrugged. “Feeling is equally a gift and a curse. Most people don’t feel very much. Your senses cut you like a knife, and I’m sorry to say they always will.”

“That day at the races, you said that I’m like Uncle Patrick.”

She nodded. "But you're stronger."

She showed me out before I wanted to go. I decided to walk home instead of figuring out the buses, trudging through neighborhoods where women sat on narrow stoops, and teenagers lingered aimlessly at dim corner stores. These were blocks I'd never seen. Litter skittered down sidewalks, and the trees were spindly and few; the tar on the streets had melted to taffy in the heat, bearing the impressions of tires. I walked a long time before I knew where I was, and I reached home in the early evening as the crickets took up their throb. I was so hot and sweaty that I waded into the pool with my clothes on. Gazing up at a cloudy moon in a sky that was losing its light, I listened to my mother humming a tune in the house. She saw me and came out.

"Did you ever hear of a bathing suit?" she said. But she was smiling, and so was I.

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I found him floating face down a couple of inches below the surface, and for a moment I thought he was fooling around: I laughed and said his name. What bravery made me swim to him and take him by the hand? I pulled him to the shallow end and anchored his body on the steps. I called my mother at

work, and Elaine. I sat with him until the ambulance came, then I had to let him go.

I told my mother and Elaine about our game. "We tried to stay underwater for as long as we could. I timed him; he timed me. He said he did it when he was a kid." We sat at the kitchen table, Elaine and my mother across from me. The room was unfairly cheerful and bright, yellow paint and checkered linoleum. "I know it sounds silly, but we had fun. The more you do it the longer you can go. We'd push it until the last second. Uncle Patrick stayed under too long, that was how he drowned." I thought I made all the sense in the world, yet even as I insisted, a finger of doubt touched my mind.

"He was in debt," my mother said. It was the first complete sentence she'd uttered. Shock and grief had turned her to stone. Uncle Patrick was her only relative. "You knew he was," she said to Elaine, both a statement and a question.

Elaine nodded. "He would never say how much."

"He always needed money," my mother said. She sounded like she was talking to herself. "I gave him thousands over the years. I would have given him anything he asked for. He knew he could come to me. I don't know why he didn't."

“He was both the happiest and the saddest man I’ve ever met,” Elaine said.

“I don’t think it had anything to do with money.”

I felt like putting my hands over my ears. “It was an accident,” I said through my teeth. The paramedics had given my mother his watch, and it lay on the yellow tablecloth between us. I picked it up. “We timed each other with this.”

As she looked at me, she appeared to awaken. “He adored you, Sarah.”

“He did,” Elaine said.

“You saw this was going to happen,” I said. “You saw it in his palm.”

She didn’t deny it. Instead, she said, “Do you think I could have saved him, Sarah? Don’t you think if I could, I would have?”

“Of course,” I said, and my mother nodded.

We all would have saved him if we could.

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