

I.

2002

I WAIT IN THE LIBRARY OF PAULINE'S ASSISTED LIVING residence. Newspapers drape over a wooden rack; a gas fire burns politely. Residents are reading in wing chairs, women wearing pearls, a single strand each, men with a natty look of willed self-respect, jackets sporting the elbow patches of former academics. Ordinarily I'd be on the first plane out of Boston after my reading, glad to be winging back to California where the past casts no shadows, away from the stories that my mother and aunts poured into me while I—a preternaturally interested child—was soaking up material for the books I'd write from the perspective of middle-age.

Instead I've driven out to a western suburb through an old scuffed landscape, teeth gritted, to visit the last aunt. I haven't seen Pauline in years, and I'm not at all sure how I feel about it now. But there's no time to reflect—the elevator door opens and there she is, gray hair coiled in an immaculate French twist, navy suit and crisp white blouse; her pillar-of-the-community look. She stops, calls my name, and opens her arms wide.

I step into her embrace and out of it—perhaps too quickly.

“Can I possibly tell you,” she says, “how much it means to me to have you back in my life?”

I have had my reasons for staying away.

Eager for me to see her apartment, Pauline takes me along a corridor, her gait brisk, past low sideboards with sprays of artificial orchids in majolica vases. On a shelf beside her door, Pauline has placed a bowl of Hershey's Kisses, on offer to passersby. I

unwrap the silver foil, eat one Kiss and pocket two more, nervous and irritated to recognize in myself a vestigial desire to impress my aunt—to show this person whose approval I should no longer care about that I too have risen in the world.

On a low bench set under the windows Pauline has displayed her prized possession, an elaborate dollhouse she and her husband made together, a replica of the house where they'd once lived. In its master bedroom, Pauline has turned a scrap of flowered chintz into a canopy for a four-poster bed; in the corner of the living room, the lid of a piano remains perpetually propped open. On her coffee table are the latest books for her book club—Amos Oz's latest novel, Alice Munro's stories—and the books written by us, the cousins: Dan, a novelist; Pauline's son, a historian; and myself, a writer of memoir. The five sisters of my mother's family didn't turn out many children, but they were prolific in giving birth to words; in my generation, three of the four of us are writers.

Pauline goes to the kitchen and opens a cupboard, asking what kind of tea I'd like. This is the moment to ask the question I've brought with me: "What was wrong with all of you?" But there's no way that I can ask that directly, so I introduce the subject with another question that I hope she'll find flattering.

"Isn't it strange," I say. "So many people in our family are brilliant—look at you. And yet we've had so much mental illness? Look at Bennie ..."

Pauline slides the kettle over to an unlit burner as though putting it on hold and ignites with the passion of a lifetime.

"My sisters lied," she says. "My brother was not insane. Bennie was lied about day and night."

She slides the kettle back to the heat, where it begins to whistle.

"Pauline," I say, "he was schizophrenic."

I watch as she struggles to lift the kettle, take it from her and pour with my own unsteady hand. Pauline has overturned everything I've believed all my life.

I take a sip of the tea, so hot it burns my tongue. Good—it keeps me from saying what I want to say.

“Bennie was never the way my sisters made him out to be. I knew my brother for who he was, we played together for years. He never lost touch with reality.”

“Why would anyone lie about him?”

“It was my sister Minna. She encouraged my other sisters to say terrible things about Bennie. They all went along with her.”

Pauline must have seen disbelief written across my face.

“I know, Minna was your special friend. She understood you, she encouraged you. You needed someone who could give you a different perspective from your parents who—I hate to say this, but it’s true—were very limited people.”

Inside I recoil at her accusations of Minna, and now this jab at my parents cloaked in sympathy for me but diminishing them nonetheless. Yes, they were limited in some ways, but we all are. And besides, their lives had dignity and it’s not for Pauline to take it away.

“Minna had it in for me because Leon, her so-called great love, liked me too much.”

Pauline is going on while I figure out the years since she and Minna had competed for Leon’s attention, more than sixty . . .

“I never thought Bennie should have had the lobotomy,” she says. “He would have grown out of it.”

“He couldn’t have grown out of it, Pauline,” I say. “He tried to kill people.”

“That’s what you grew up hearing. They all lied.”

I can’t go on. It’s awful. I manage to divert her attention, ask about her son and his family, what she thinks of the books she has been reading, anything that gets her off track.

It’s time for me to leave. She hands me a parting gift, a little china shoe that suggests something a Fragonard woman on a swing might wear. I don’t care for its pastel rosettes, or for its evidence of Pauline’s will to miniaturize. Besides it would always remind

me of this crazy conversation. I try to come up with a reason not to take it: “It will break, Pauline. I’m going all the way to California.”

From a drawer of neatly rolled up stockings, Pauline takes out a black velvet pouch, folding it back to show me that it’s lined with white satin quilting. She inserts the shoe.

“It will be safe,” she says, drawing the strings tight. “When you look at it, remember me.”

ON THE WAY out I stop by her door and pocket a handful of chocolate Kisses. I walk through the hushed library and out of the residence, its buildings painted white with black shutters conjuring a New England town arrayed around a perfectly tended ersatz village green. I cross over toward my car, stepping on the grass as I go.

In the parking lot I stand still, appalled at what she has just told me. What shall I do about her accusations?

My first inclination is to let sleeping dogs do what they're supposed to—stay narcotized, even if they're twitching with bad dreams.

Would there be a way for me to get at the truth? If I were to try, I'd have to begin by going back to a time before I was born. I'd have to rely on stories told to me by my mother and other aunts, especially Minna, herself suspect in Pauline's view. And I'd have to supplement them with my imagination, which I'd hope would be scrupulous—as close as possible to the stories as I've heard them—but which would inevitably lean toward fiction.

Pauline, though, is intelligent and seductive.

Insidious, too, with her aura of certainty.

What if there were truth in what she said?

What if I've been living with an illusion of goodness and kindness? What if everything was different from what I'd believed?

My first thought—to let sleeping dogs do what they're supposed to do?

Ha! Impossible. Dogs don't stay asleep.

Time to get up, sniff, go back, bark.