

CAMEO

By Evelyn Toynton

My mother wore a white dress once, in an English garden, and was younger than I am now – the evidence is all there still, I have seen the photograph: the Sunday afternoon smile, the glass of what may very well be lemonade on the table beside her, the stockings, surely silk, shimmering gently in the sun. And the garden can only be in England; if I stare very hard at the left-hand corner, narrowing my eyes, I can see the damp oozing out of the grass, enveloping the roses. Or so I tell myself.

I have spent, in fact, more hours than are worth counting examining that photograph, though rarely in daylight; peering anxiously, like a scholar, at that girl in the garden, with her Boticelli mouth split wide into a tomboy's grin, her bobbed hair tucked behind her ear on one side. (Did she wear it like that always, or had she, just a moment before, pushed it back because it got into her mouth when she laughed? There is room here, you see, for scholarly perplexity, and when the great questions must go unanswered, all the little ones become matters for speculation as well.) I am looking for signs of knowledge there, something to tell me that she realized, even then – when the roses were out, and her lover, no doubt, was expected – that the contents of her skull beneath the waved auburn hair would be scattered, disarranged, before too long; there may be in the smile some too-conscious brightness, a glitter of defiance, to be seized on as an omen: evidence that she knew her time was short, there would not be many such Sunday afternoons. And yet, for all my scrutiny, I can find no trace of it. It continues to look, maddeningly, like the smile of someone who might have spent all her life in an English garden.

Two months after the picture was taken, my mother left for America on a boat. She danced every night of the voyage over; her suitcase was full of summer clothes; she had a pigskin dressing case, with her initials on it in gold. It was only a pleasure trip; she had booked her return passage. But in America she met my father, who was solemn and Germanic, not like her at all, and she never went back. He built her a house outside the city, with a

sleeping porch for the summers, that had windows on all three sides; he planted another garden for her, with tulips and daffodils. He read to her from the newspaper in the evenings, and taught her to drive a car.

If anyone suspected, in those years before I was born, that a tumour was growing in my mother's brain, behind her smiling eyes, that in the ridding her of it a minor universe would be destroyed, it was probably my father and not my mother after all. If the future was bearing down on them, from within or without, in their nights on the sleeping porch, he may well have been aware of it. Even today, he is not an optimist.

Consider for a minute the scene in the hospital: the glaring lights, the tuneless hum of some vast machine, the white-garbed figures huddled around a raised table. Imagine the forceps, the green rubber gloves, the murmured orders, the whispers among the nurses. And imagine a pale man on the plastic couch in the waiting room, staring at the clock in the grey church tower opposite. Suppose that it is drizzling outside. Or suppose instead that it is sunny and windy, with dead leaves blowing in the gutters. The man in the waiting room, then, will be thinking about the leaves in his garden, around the sleeping porch, which will need raking. Or he will be thinking of the down on the head of his baby daughter, just six weeks old. But of course he is not thinking of any of those things. He is thinking of his wife, on the operating table. He is thinking of the surgeon's hands.

And was the surgeon, too, thinking of my mother, of the clotted strands of fibre criss-crossing in her brain? Did his mind wander to the garden behind his own house, covered with blown leaves, or a trip he'd just made to a distant country – the chants offered up to a foreign god, in an indecipherable tongue? Was he exhausted, perhaps, in an irritable frame of mind, had he been drinking? For a moment, at any rate, there must have been a trembling in his hands, a movement too sharp to be corrected.

And that moment is fixed, arrested; it cannot be

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undone. We are all of us – my mother, my father and I – caught in it still, frozen in that point in time. The past was severed from the future, and nothing can join them again. My mother was snatched for good from that moment in the garden. The moment, though, exists still – do not forget that. I have seen the photograph. But the girl in the picture is gone. When I visit my mother now, it is plain she does not contain that smiling creature anywhere. Not even when she smiles. Not even when the weather is mild, and they wheel her out into the garden.

For the knife slipped, and pierced through her brain – the tumour had taken years to grow, but the knife took only a minute. The doctors said she would have to go away for a while. They were being polite. She has been away, watched over in a quiet place, for 25 years now. So I cannot ask her what premonitions that girl in the photo had, and my father will not speak of her at all. He has sealed off

the sleeping porch; he has sunk, farther and farther over the years, into silence.

Yet foreboding must have been somewhere in my mother's blood when I was born, for it was passed along the thin cord of flesh to me. I spent the first year of my life crying, they tell me, though the doctors could find nothing wrong. As a child I was frightened of the dark, of sudden noises, of lightning, of the voices of strangers. Even now I will not go to fortune-tellers, though I am sure there is much they could tell me. And it's only with the greatest reluctance that I will celebrate New Year's Eve, be prevailed upon to toast the year ahead. I am distrustful of the rashness in that gesture, affronted by the others who clink their glasses so cheerfully together, unmindful of the dangers. I celebrate the years when they are over. I celebrate survival.

Cars can veer suddenly towards you in the street, if you are not careful; cars can leap up on the pavement, even, knocking over the garbage cans. In a high wind, a plate glass window can shatter sometimes, and slivers of glass tear at the flesh of a passer-by. The sex act itself can be dangerous. I steer away from construction sites. I sit just next to the exit in movie theatres and concert halls, the last seat on the aisle. I leave nothing to chance.

And when a bare white skull dangles in the blackness of my dreams, when the nightmares jerk me awake and my blood is alive with voices, I am on my guard at once: I sit upright in my bed, alert to the nameless horrors that can assail me if I give myself over to sleeping. I turn on the light, I make sure that all the locks are fastened. And if I look at the photograph then, I lose my patience altogether. It is clear it is no accident, what happened to her. She brought it on herself. She was courting disaster, anyone can see that, with her reckless laughter, her lemonade, the way she was dangling her legs, in defiance of all the odds, at the camera. If she had put on a different dress that day, more sensible shoes, if she had worn a hat against the sun, folded her hands in her lap – been, all in all, less exuberant in that garden – the cells of her brain would not have multiplied in that over-abundant growth, or the knife, at least, not slipped in the surgeon's hands. She was flaunting herself heedlessly before fate; she should have known it would exact retribution in the end.

There are times, though, when I'm no longer sure of that. There are times when I almost think that there are no clues, that what happened to her had nothing to do with the stockings and the smile. For it is possible that we are born without the knowledge of how we are going to die. It is possible that a mischievous god from some long-extinct mythology hurled her fate at her out of nothing but boredom, one Sunday long after the photograph was taken. But such thoughts lead nowhere. So I harden my heart against her, and vow to be careful. And the night passes without incident. ♦