

TIME PASSES

The top drawer had been her mother's. That same dresser now sat in the corner of her own bedroom, dark and massive, its size and bulk overwhelming the tiny space. It had been carted around North America in the years since its creation, and the nicks and scars remained. Built in North Carolina, transported to Winnipeg by her uncle's furniture company, given to her parents as a wedding present in 1939, it traveled with them to Minneapolis, to Kansas, and back east to New Jersey, where it remained during the years of her childhood and young adulthood. After a few years in her loft in New York City when the house was sold, up four flights of stairs and down, it landed here, in the small country cabin. The family had little history, few roots, no heirlooms, and this veneered construction hardly qualified, but it was all she had. It had been full of her mother's lingerie, that top drawer, secret, feminine objects. Did the mother anticipate the daughter's curiosity, the longing, the sifting through the objects in the drawer, the fingering of the soft fabrics, the thrill and anticipation in the search for answers? It's hard to say now, so many years later, as the subject was never discussed.



mother

mother

mother

mother

mother

mother

motherless

Tuesday, January 26, 2006. I am sitting in the hospital room with my mother who broke her hip yesterday. She is muttering and moaning incessantly, speaking rapidly without reflection or enunciation, pausing rarely, words tumbling over each other. On an impulse I begin to write down what she is saying in my note book. She is reaching into the last vestiges of her memory. It sounds like some eerie, stream of consciousness poetry and I am fascinated as I strain to keep up. She calls my name often and seems to have some sense of my presence. Murel I want her to come may I come because it's so wonderful may I go over here to see you. I don't want to die how are you going to let me call you? Please let me do that I want to go home to my mother I have to tell her. May I come over with another friend who's good please tell me you're going to let me go once where's Jack why isn't he here? I have to see him at night will you you darling you're wonderful so wonderful please let me go I want to go can we go can you help me I want to die will you let me die a second of silence I want to die I have to go you're wonderful you look so lovely may I come darling just to see you there coming down you have one yes you do I want to see you you look so beautiful come I'll take you for dinner please let me please let me you're wonderful will you let me come here I want to see you you look beautiful please leave me I'm dying can you leave me I won't take much I want to go now please come I want I want to come down and see everybody murel can I come now I'll have dinner let me go oh it's beautiful I'll die please let me go what's the name of the place I'm going to die murel please let me go and you look so beautiful it goes fast and it's good I can't stand it let me go you're going to let me help you you're wonderful murel are you going to let me come now may I come now may I come now oh good wonderful Oh I'm ready to come my glasses are in my yours are beautiful want to come to my house Oh wonderful I love to see you please Oh I want to get this Oh murel will you let me work it would you let me do it it's very hard is Jack going to come I'm going to die good wonderful I'll take you home you're wonderful beautiful is it all right that that's a nice place I like that color let her see to make sure that's the nicest thing to give them what they want I see them they're lovely fine you're wonderful she's doing it nicely did Jack go too fast he did go too fast I'll use the book and I'll help him it's not all right I want you to come here because you're so wonderful over here just one thing I want to die I don't want to die I want you to come murel I want to die and I want you to come you don't have those they're beautiful murel do you have those beautiful ones let me go there I'm gonna die let me go please oh it's

T I M E

P A S S E S

10/26, trip to Boston: The sky is almost dark now. I spent nine hours on a bus to visit him for three. He sat across from me in the Indian restaurant and talked a blue streak. I was happy to hear his voice, to listen to him speak with excitement about his plans. I miss the daily give-and-take of the family living and interacting together. This is my life with him now, these little snippets of conversation, an occasional phone call late in the evening, when he is going strong and my lights are out. It is so much easier to concentrate when he is here, facing me across the table, while I revel in his youth and contagious excitement. Of course I'm a bit wary and apprehensive as I remind myself of his pattern of preliminary enthusiasm and subsequent regrets, and he tells me I sport a look of dismay. I'm upset by his description of my expression, as I must betray my anxiety. Yet he seems so large and solid to me today, head and shoulders ensconced deep in his hooded sweatshirt. He thinks quickly and speaks even more so, and I relish his exuberance. Here is my child, grown-up. He walks me to the T stop, three steps ahead of me, miss him already.

SHE STUMBLES OUT OF THE BEDROOM HALF ASLEEP, REACHING FOR HER GLASSES AND THEN FOCUSING ON THE TABLE STREWN WITH DIRTY DISHES, DRIED FOOD AND RICE KERNELS FROM LAST NIGHT'S DINNER. SHE PICKS UP YESTERDAY'S NEWSPAPER, HALF READ, PUTS IT ON THE RECYCLING PILE, COMES BACK AND GATHERS UP THE DISHES, STACKING AS MANY AS SHE CAN HANDLE, AND SETS THEM IN THE SINK WITH A LOUD CLANK. SHE PUTS THE NAPKINS IN THEIR NAPKIN HOLDERS AND MOVES THEM TO THE BUTCHER BLOCK. SHE PICKS UP A CHOPSTICK OFF THE FLOOR AND THROWS IT INTO THE SINK, MOVING BACK AND FORTH AND AROUND THE TABLE, ATTEMPTING TO BE EFFICIENT WITH HER STEPS. SHE PUTS A POTHOLDER AWAY, TAKES *THE ILLUSTRATED SHERLOCK HOLMES* TO T'S DESK ALONG WITH A CRUMPLED PAIR OF S'S PANTS SHE FINDS DRAPED OVER A CHAIR, WHICH SHE DEPOSITS ON HIS BED ALONG THE WAY. SHE PUTS ANOTHER POTHOLDER IN ITS PLACE AND SETS THE BOTTLE OF TAMARI SAUCE IN THE REFRIGERATOR, MOVES THE HALF-EMPTY BOWL OF STRAWBERRIES TO THE BUTCHER BLOCK, PICKS UP HER SET OF PENCILS, MOVES IT TO THE STACK OF PAPERS SHE IS COPYING FROM, PUTS THE PORTABLE PHONE BACK IN ITS CRADLE, THROWS THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART PLAN INTO THE PAPER RECYCLING BIN AND THE EMPTY PLASTIC WATER BOTTLE INTO THE OTHER BIN IN ONE TRIP. SHE TAKES S'S EXERCISE BAND OFF THE CHAIR AND DUMPS IT ON HIS BED, SETS DOWN T'S GLASSES ON TOP OF THE SHERLOCK HOLMES BOOK. SHE SETS THE WATER PITCHER IN THE SINK AND TURNS ON THE WATER TO FILL IT UP, GOES BACK TO THE TABLE, PICKS UP A DEAD LEAF FROM THE FLOWERS THE FRENCH GUEST BROUGHT, MOVES BACK TO THE SINK, TURNS OFF THE WATER, REACHES UNDERNEATH THE PILE OF DISHES FOR THE SPONGE, WETS IT UNDER THE FAUCET AND WRINGS IT OUT, BRINGS IT BACK TO THE TABLE. THE FOOD IS ENCRUSTED AND IT TAKES SOME HEAVY SCRUBBING TO LOOSEN IT. SHE FINISHES SCRUBBING, TAKES THE SPONGE BACK TO THE SINK, RETURNS TO THE TABLE, ORGANIZES THE CHAIRS AROUND IT, BENDS DOWN TO PICK UP A FORK, A RANDOM PIECE OF PAPER, DEPOSITS ONE IN THE SINK AND THE OTHER IN THE GARBAGE, THEN HEADS FOR THE BROOM.

I CAN RUN. I'M QUITE A GOOD RUNNER, ACTUALLY. MY RED RUNNING SHOES ARE SLEEK, WITH PINK STRIPES ON THE SIDES. MY DAUGHTER DOESN'T LIKE THAT COLOR COMBINATION, BUT I MUST NOT BE THE ONLY ONE WHO DOES BECAUSE, AFTER ALL, SOMEONE MANUFACTURED THEM. AFTER I PUT ON THE SHOES I ATTACH THE LITTLE WINGS TO MY ANKLES. THEY'RE QUITE SMALL, THE FEATHERS SILKY WHITE AND INVISIBLE. NO ONE KNOWS WHAT MAKES ME GO SO FAST AND GLIDE SO SMOOTHLY, BARELY MOVING MY LEGS. I COVER A LOT OF DISTANCE THIS WAY. LET'S SEE, IF I LEAVE AROUND MIDNIGHT I'LL BE WEST OF PENNSYLVANIA BY DAWN. I WON'T STAY THERE THOUGH. I'LL GO EVEN FARTHER, SO THEY CAN'T TRACK ME DOWN. OF COURSE THEY MIGHT NOT EVEN TRY, ALTHOUGH THAT THOUGHT MAKES ME SHUDDER. I'LL SET MYSELF UP ONCE I GET THERE, IN A LITTLE TOWN IN NEBRASKA, ONE I DROVE THROUGH ONCE, WITH BRIGHT GREEN HILLS, CLEAR SKIES AND SHARP SHADOWS. THE CLOUDS ARE ENDLESS, WHITE AND COTTONY, AND THE TOWN IS NOT SO UGLY. AS A MATTER OF FACT THE MAIN STREET IS QUITE CHARMING. I'LL SHOW UP JUST LIKE THAT, I'LL WALK INTO THE LUNCHEONETTE, CARRYING MY SUITCASE. I'VE ALWAYS INTENDED TO BRING MY GRANDFATHER'S STRAW SUITCASE. IT'S SMALL AND FIRM, WITH A LATCH THAT SNAPS SHUT, AND STILL IN GOOD SHAPE DESPITE ITS AGE. I HAVEN'T BROUGHT MUCH, A FEW CHANGES OF UNDERWEAR, A NIGHTGOWN, MY TOOTHBRUSH AND THE NOTEBOOKS. BUT I CAN ALWAYS GO TO WALMART. I BET THERE'S ONE ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE HILL. I WALK INTO THE LUNCHEONETTE AND ASK ABOUT THE APARTMENT FOR RENT SIGN IN THE WINDOW. I'M GUIDED TO A MAN SITTING AT THE COUNTER. HE'S THE PERFECT GRIZZLY OLD FARMER, WHO HAPPENS TO CONVENIENTLY OWN THE BUILDING. I SIT DOWN NEXT TO HIM AT THE COUNTER. COFFEE, I SAY, MILK AND SUGAR, LOTS OF SUGAR. HE LIKES THAT, FOR SOME REASON. HE LAUGHS, A LOW THROATY GUFFAW. I MOVE IN THAT SAME DAY. THE PLACE NEEDS PAINTING BUT AS THERE'S NO PAINT STORE IN TOWN, I TAKE A FEW DAYS TO SCRUB IT DOWN. IT DOESN'T LOOK SO BAD WHEN I'M FINISHED. I GET A JOB IN THE LUNCHEONETTE, OF COURSE. IT'S ALL PART OF THE PLAN. I FALL SOMEWHAT EASILY INTO MY NEW LIFE. NO ONE KNOWS WHO I AM, OR WHERE I'M FROM, AND THEY DON'T ASK. I'M NOT SUCH A GOOD WAITRESS AT FIRST. BUT AS THE LUNCHEONETTE IS NEVER CROWDED, I HAVE TIME TO PRACTICE, AND BEFORE LONG I CAN BALANCE TWO OR THREE PLATES AT A TIME. IT'S QUITE AN ACCOMPLISHMENT, IF I DO SAY SO MYSELF. *TIME PASSES*. HOW MUCH TIME REALLY? IT'S HARD TO SAY, IT COULD BE A FEW MONTHS, OR YEARS. LOOKING BACK, IT SEEMS FOREVER, ALTHOUGH I DON'T FEEL MUCH OLDER. I'M SURROUNDED BY THE SILENCE I CREATED. IT *IS* WHAT I WANTED. AN ENDING? COULD IT BE POSSIBLE THAT SOMEONE WHO KNOWS ME WALKS INTO THE LUNCHEONETTE? A PHONE CALL? HAVE THEY TRACKED ME DOWN? OR IS IT MY OWN LONGING? DOES A WOMAN, A MOTHER, REALLY LEAVE THIS WAY? BECAUSE WHEN SHE LEAVES THEM BEHIND, ARE THEY NOT STILL, ALWAYS WITH HER? I BEND DOWN AND PUT ON MY RUNNING SHOES. THEY'RE BLUE, MUCH SIMPLER THAN MY OLD ONES, NO STRIPE. I TIE ON THE WINGS. ALTHOUGH THEY HAVEN'T BEEN USED SINCE I CAME HERE, THEY'RE INTACT. THEY KNOW WHAT TO DO. THE WIND WHISTLES IN MY EARS AS I MOVE SWIFTLY ALONG. I MEAN TO GO WEST BUT SOMEHOW I AM COMING BACK WHERE I STARTED. I AM HIGHER THAN I WAS BEFORE AND CAN SEE MORE OF THE LANDSCAPE, GREAT VISTAS STRETCHING OUT BEFORE ME. THE EAST COAST IS REALLY BEAUTIFUL FROM THIS HEIGHT. WHAT IF THEY SLAM THE DOOR IN MY FACE? WELL OF COURSE I CAN RUN. I'M A GOOD RUNNER, ACTUALLY, ALTHOUGH I'VE NEVER RUN THE MARATHON. IT JUST FEELS THAT WAY.



Domesticity into art

Since my daughter was very young she has been fascinated with napkins and dish towels. First, she learned to place them on the floor and smooth them, eliminating every last wrinkle. From age one till twenty months or so she played a game of conceptual order and disorder. As soon as she learned to say the word “napin” she wanted them all; all the napkins and dish towels were spread out, smoothed and arranged around the house in spontaneous configurations, some bespeaking order, others chaos. We tiptoed carefully in order not to disturb the designs. As she grew, the napkins took on additional functions. She became interested in folding them. “Corner to corner,” I told her. They were both beds and covers for dolls and animals.

The interest seemed to have a domestic basis, as she enjoyed folding the clothes with me. And then I examined my own interest in folding clothes. Although I shy away from domestic activities in my feminist design for disarray, clothes folding keeps its hold on me. I love to fold all the clothes, to see them neatly stacked in piles, sorted by category and on their way to the dresser. I love to iron, watching wrinkles melt away and crisp creases appear. Tanya, now four, has become interested in the relationship between the pattern on each individual cloth and its placement in the overall configuration. The napkins keep their hold on her, too.

Art into domesticity

TIME PASSES