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Photo by Deborah Munro

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**SOUTHERN MAGNOLIAS
&
NORTHERN CLOISTERS**

I.

SOUTHERN MAGNOLIAS

My childhood was, of necessity, hermitic. Sealed off. But that sealed a certain sweetness in. If I write often of reflections—the mirror of the present versus the mirror which captures our past in a looking glass—it could be because I remember that large dining room mirror shattering to a thousand splinters the week before I came down with polio. June 1951. The dark passage of a family through illness marked it. When I get good news—or any news—I’m still like Dickinson, wanting to put a door between the news, and anyone in the outer world. I covet this time. I got used to seeing a woman wear the pants. when we traveled *down South* with the baby in a laundry basket because our father was always stationed as Army psychologist—I ran into communication problems young: I’d get out and tell them “We’re Army, stopped, so can we heat the baby’s formula?” (That was in the days of my Buster Brown haircut, when, asked to pose for my picture, I went running for the Band-Aid box in the bathroom cupboard. I slapped one on either knee.) I ran back to the car. “She doesn’t speak the same language I speak.” “You speak English, Indigo. You know that.” “Well, *she* doesn’t.”

“Be polite,” Mother would bark back. “Now, you be nice to her. I’m about to try and speak with her mother.”

Mother got out, and we met five kids, scrawny, and a big fat lady. They were poor down there in Alabama and ate only starch; bread, potatoes. Such like. All bloated. Early I learned poverty went with a cluster of problems.

Mother, Marcella was *so* kind to those folk, so much the lady with those folk. You wouldn’t know she was the same woman who’d announce periodically, “I’m allergic to my children.” I slept in a bed with five kids slapping at black flies. “Now, you treat them as you would any of your friends,” Mother said. I did. I’ve never known people so poor, so warm, with so little to give but hospitality: that, the South’s, where it *began*.

Rosenblum and his glacial estate were left far behind. What would Israel have felt about such poverty? It wasn’t one of his links to his kingdom. (Although I recall he wasn’t for investing in the Market. He had somewhat of a Socialist background as all intellectuals, American and European, had in those days, the early thirties.)

There was exile too there down South. I remember mud-holes, mud colored mornings and evenings, the magnolia blossoms. Far kinder to us than the harsh summer of ‘48 when the divorce materialized and all of a sudden daddy remarried. The deal was he was to have us for the summer. He picked us up in New Rochelle outside the house with the two orchards in back where Beth and I had played: the apple one and the ragged one. From that moment forth, a new life

began.. we picked a lady up in New York. She wore bright red lipstick, had black bouncy sausage curls like Shirley Temple and was a nurse. That night, we had reached Philadelphia through the Holland Tunnel.

“Indigo, I need to talk to you,” Daddy said after Rachel was asleep. I recall his room and the new lady’s, Anya, was across the hall. Rach and I shared a bed as we were used to doing on the road. (We did this down South all the time.)

“Lynn, that lady’s not just a nurse.”

“Anya?”

“Yes. Honey I want you to know I’ve married Anya. She’s my wife.”

“But Mother’s your—“ I began to blurt. Then realized what divorce truly meant. It sunk into me as sun set over the fire-escapes behind him as he told me. We both sat on wooden chairs hard as church pews. These fire-escapes—they were the only hint of escape around. I gained my feet, stumbled back to our kid’s room, shut the door and immediately climbed into bed to wake Rachel.

“Rachel, wake up. At once! It’s an emergency.”

“What?” she ground the sleep out of her eyes with her five-year-old fist.

“You know that lady daddy brought. She’s not just a nurse-friend. He married her. Anya's his new wife.”

“Sleepy,” she said and went back to sleep.

I immediately sat down at the makeshift desk and brought out the one good pen Mother had sent me away with. Put a stamp on an envelope and began a letter to tell her. But I couldn’t. My feelings were too strong for the words I had to get out. I decided I’d tell her by phone. But I never got to a phone on my own. All that long lonesome summer of forty-eight from New York to Los Angeles, City of the Angels, I had a lump in my throat.

In Death Valley even though we started out at four a.m. Anya fainted.

We’d been rolling bandages across the country—she taught us how to make Ace bandaged. But we’d never seen a person faint. This was something entirely new.

“Maybe she’s died,” said Rachel.

“No,” I said, “She has fainted.”

“What’s that?”

“A sleep that gets a person between the eyes like a knockout in the ring.”

She blinked and raised her arms. “Keep good care of me, Lynn.”

“I’ll keep care of you, Rachel.”

Our old black Buick with the convertible would be there in the morning. And my sun-blond hair from the divorce winter preceding, hair Anya loved combing calling me Alice in Wonderland. Because Mother had permed it as a gift before our trip, it tangled every night. It pained me when Anyushka, gentle as she tried to be, untangled the knots.

I’d keep care of her till the day I died. God forbid I should drop dead all of a sudden.

We didn’t know what to do. Finally our father told us he’d tell Mother over the phone which he said he did but by now I mistrusted him. There was a fierce polio epidemic. We rented a house belonging to a bee keeper, Anya from Mt Sinai, Daddy, Rach and I lived there. (The big letters "Hollywood" in those drab brown hills lit up many of my dreams that summer.) It was pretty grim till Poppa Louis came. Then, after Aunt Ida got me a toy washing-machine with wringer, I went to everybody’s door in morning and asked, ‘Any laundry?’ Poppa would always produce a pair of his socks, a hanky. But even his Mongolian features, his berry-brown eyes were not as merry that summer as earlier.

We dwelt above the bee farm ten steps down on the concrete. I busied myself by cutting quack advertisements out of the papers, pasting them in a scrap book. Every public place was closed to us: *every single one*. Movies, swimming pools, parks, zoos, you name it. And the summer of ’48 was a scorcher. Doomsday had just about come. Rach and I, we wound up our lullaby dollies each night: Mother gave them to us to help put us to sleep but they only made me more fiercely lonesome. Rach’s played “Twinkle Twinkle little Star,” Mine played “Lullaby and Goodnight.”

For me, it was anything but.

Rach kept getting sick to her stomach. She’d clutch her tummy at dinner and say, “I think I’m going to be sick.” Anyushka would take her gently by the hand. Most often they didn’t make it. Anya was trying hard too. She’d say, “This time we’ll make it, honey,” “No we won’t,” Rach said.

And they didn’t.

We did make one outing. I don’t know how this one was allowed. Oh yes, and one other when our Aunt Ida, tall, exotic, having studied with Martha Graham—the Aunt who was born on a kitchen table in Sheboygan—she booked Rach and me a hairdo at I Magnin in L.A. and let us each choose a toy. So make that two outings: the other was a day trip to MGM Studios, as garishly frightening as the rest of that summer. Finally Daddy let me know he’d seen the writing on the wall.

“Indigo, you and I need to have a serious talk.”

“Right. When?”

“After supper.”

Then he said, “Look, honey, let’s face it. This summer isn’t working. You’re unhappy, I’m unhappy, Anya’s unhappy, and Rachel keeps getting sick.”

“The lowdown, daddy?” I asked, as I’d been taught—by him.

“The lowdown is we’re leaving.

“When?” I asked, in my hands-to-hips attitude. I heard echoes of Poppa Louis’ Yiddish *Nu?*

“So we’re piling into that dusty old convertible in the morning and driving back.”

“All the way back across the United States?”

“All the way to Cleveland, Ohio. there your Mother will take you.”

“Right,” I said. I might as well have been giving him the crisp little salute we were taught to give the American Flag each morning. I was sure to be still unsmiling. I remembered turning back in the house, screen door banging after me. Now what? I had to tell Rachel. I couldn’t find her. She was hiding in Poppa Louis’ room under the covers which she did sometimes in the daytime.

“Rachel, I have big news. We’re going back home.”

She smiled for the first time that summer.

In fourth grade I had fit all forty-eight states in the Deep South—where the Confederates had fought against the Feds up North— into the map into the jigsaw puzzle, the second fourth grade, with “rats,” down South. “You’re not the only star in the sky, Indigo,” I heard Mother’s voice warning when I said I bet I could beat all the kids at getting the puzzle pieces of the map in. I’d memorized the shapes and colors of them on cardboard. It was whole different kettle of fish enduring driving across them without air conditioning in the polio-epidemic summer of ’47. That night I went to bed putting, California in, then Arizona—I clutched my stomach: we had to cross Death Valley one more time. Would Rachel be sick again? Would Anyuska faint? Then, all the neatly inserted pieces of the puzzle I began lifting out of the puzzle: Arizona, Nevada. California. Zap zap zap!

I couldn’t sleep that night while daddy’s wife did most of the packing Army-style, rolling things in tight balls: socks, underwear, t-shirts, shorts. Only a few of each, and most of them thread-thin.

A few nights earlier I'd had a frightening experience. I woke with a bad dream and went to Anya and my father's room. He was jumping up and down on top of her.

"I've had a bad dream," I announced.

Anya stopped whatever she was doing and took me by the hand, put me under the sheets and wound the wind up doll: that was all I needed. "Lynn, you've shot up an inch this month, I swear, and you're skinny as a beanpole." I waited till she'd gone back to whatever they were doing to turn the key backward which I'd discovered could cause the lullaby music to quit playing. Then I stuffed it under the covers, and began sobbing. Like summer rain. It was over, my crying jag, as quick as it began.

A few days later I put it together what they'd been doing.

II. NORTHERN CLOISTERS

My hermetic childhood, sealed off one way in the South, Another in North: this time like living in a snowball, bone-carving hours of solitude and silence to vie with those burning in sun by palms, telling sums in hot sun. Life was cloistered that winter when we got back home and Mother moved us to a smaller house in the suburbs. Still New Rochelle. Forever that township whose sisters were Larchmont and Mount Vernon, sky austere as parchment with an historical document. The magnolia-scented history of the South, the tradition-ridden pages of the North were written in our blood by age nine and five. The great exodus—primarily of Jewish intellectuals, lawyers, and doctors—had spread to these suburbs like water into bays. This time our house was tiny: a stucco one Mother found. I found 15 Edna Place infinitely depressing after the light and space and memories—somber as they were—of the house on Lyncroft Road. This was where the forties were to end. The vapid Fifties to be ushered in. Though I had no idea what was to happen to me, I looked at that green house with the stucco finish, tiny cluttered yard right next door to the neighbors, and felt gloom drawn into the very bottom of my lungs. I missed our two orchards, I missed Beth in waves I caught in my throat, my stomach, my solar-plexus—as I was to miss a series of girls throughout my girlhood and adolescence, Connie was the next one—I even thought I missed the war being on and at least the semblance of family life it had given us during those severe early times.

*

Some students in Manhattan would stand outside Greta Garbo's Manhattan apartment hoping for a glimpse of her.

The winter of '47 the divorce had come through. I steeped myself in visions of being Ingrid Bergman's daughter, Bergman in St Joan. This was my comfort food. You can't undo the color of your skin, you can't undo things like this legal arrangement between two parents changing your life for good. Coming back from Florida, I remember as a trip through the map of my emotions. From Southland—symbolically flat, where the vista was the pale Gulf of Mexico which should have been so soothing but which was merely a glass front for our roiled up emotions, a cover-up, I thought we were leaving behind the sadness of carnival forever, the rear-side of the Barnum & bailey Circus, Sarasota their Winter Headquarters where I' seen funshow freaks who had lost it all, men with stumps for legs going on carts, idiotically smiling. We turned our back on it all—though it would never leave my heart—headed determinedly North through the states which lead up into the true land of hope, the Pennsylvania Turnpike, then New York, the Northeast, hilltops, rivers and mountains, New England.

About halfway there, I broke out in three types of poison: oak, ivy and sumac. By the time we were in Georgia, staying at a dull turn-of-the century brick building in the middle of some town whose name I can't recall, I'd gone down from the brown hotel room with peeling paint, for a breath of fresh air at five in the evening: the street was still sweltering. People swam and shimmered in the ruthless heat. The scorching street came up to hit me in the face. I did not know this part of the world. Fire-swallowers. The fire which was prejudice, superstition going down the throat as perilously as the fire which was real flame. There I was somewhere in Georgia, slapping at blackflies, standing outside a crumby third-class hotel, just to breathe without feeling my lungs were behind gauze. I thought I was invisible almost pressed flat and lean as I was against the side of this building. Suddenly, out of the blue, a hand reached toward me: it held coin! I, Indigo, was actually being handed coin by a passing stranger. Taken for a street-beggar. Horrified, I took a deep breath and bolted. I beat it so fast my calves were throbbing, up the three flights to our room. I must have looked badly scarred from burns.

My mother cut up her silk underpants to lay on my face. I remember we hung a washline from the ceiling during the heat-wave that seemed to stretch the several thousand miles from Sarasota to Manhattan. It turned rooves into corrugated tin and cardboard. It flattened, then bent and buckled my family members, the two of them. It blistered, it broke red brown in the Southern states, turned green as rich swamps in the mid-Atlantic States and finally cooled to azure, indigo, cobalt as we neared home.

“Indigo,’ Mother said. “You’re a big girl now. I’m thinking of flying you home.”

“Alone?”

“Alone. You’re nine.”

The airlines were in their early days. None of us had ever flown in '48. All the

planes were warplanes.

“You’re in such misery, you’re spreading the mizzables around.”

“I aint.”

I began to talk Southern.

“I’d send to Grandmother’s, Indigo, she could take you to the doctor up East.”

“I don’t want to go home alone ahead of you and Rachel.”

“Let me think it over overnight, Indigo,” she said in her serious voice, lower in pitch. She pulled out a pack of Luckies from the beast-pocket of her shirt and lit up. I waved it off screwing my face. “Your’e looking worse by the moment, that blistering.”

“Don’t be scared.”

“I don’t scare easy.”

Then Rach and I started sassing. We’d had a tin of beans for supper again. Beans on the hot plate. The light was endless and it was cruel. It lit up every mote of dust in that room, every coil of the burner heating. Why did first I then Rach begin to sing

Beans Beans the musical fruit
the more you eat the more you toot.
So eat beans with every meal
the more you eat the better you feel.

Especially I was horsing and horsing, jumping barefoot on those beds with rotten springs. That wild body-energy that took me over at times, turning me into a wild child, *enfant sauvage*, led to my body-ecstasy overcame me and I sprang like a cat from one bed to the other, mine to Rachel’s right across the room with wooden floor, that mean little poor bastard of a room.

“Stop it, Lynn!” Mother raised her voice.

Then more quietly, she mustered her quiet, her thunder guns: “Here you are sick and all. You’ll be the death of me.”

“You’re the death of my childhood!” I yelled..

“Think, just think of the natural bacteria in this room!” she looked scathingly at my bare feet, which were callused and filthy, my hands breaking out now in this *thing, this strange thing*. (“Think of the natural bacteria—as if there were any other kind—was a family phrase. It could bring us to laughter or tears.) I thought of that backbay Georgia doctor in the antiquated office she’d taken me to that

morning who shook his head. He was stumped. “Never seen anything’ like it ma’am. Your girl’s got a cross between poison oak, poison sumac, and poison ivy. She must have bin swimmin’ thru the stuff.”

“Indigo?” Mother arched her eyebrows at me. (How did their cranky little Southern doc know I’d gone swimming through grass the week before we left Sarasota? I did it on a dare. I always won.)

I was too miserable in that hot little office with the fans whirring but not cutting the heat any.

I hung my head like a dog.

This must have flashed back in Mother’s mind while I was jumping.

“That settles it! I’m flying you North in the Morning.”

Think of the germs, I said to myself. As a doctor’s kids, we’d learned, You cannot scrub your hands enough times.

“I’m thinking of the natural bacteria in this room,” I slowed the beating of my heart, jumped down off the bed onto the wood floor where I’d driven a splinter into my right foot the night before but not told her—my father was the one good at removing splinters, shard of wood I drove into my running feet constantly.

“I’m thinking,” I said slowly deliberately ignoring by now three types of pain: the pain in the sole of my right foot, the pain in my face, the mounting pain in my heart and mind. All I could focus my soul upon was that I didn’t want to fly North in the morning without them. nor did I want to let on I was scared. I turned the tap on till it ran tepid, down that rusty little runnel in the old battered soapstone sink. The batteries in the radio were shot. It was dead silent in that room.

“What, tell me, Indigo, are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking that the pain’s easing some.”

“Truth?”

“Truth,” I crossed my toes mentally.

She looked at me with that hard look of –you’re my child, not my friend which presently softened to—I’m your mother, you’re my child. That *she* with all she had instilled in us of *pride, self-sufficiency*, should her child seen as beggar. She, above all who taught me, get back on your own two feet, you know who you are—if she should learn this she would be annihilated, or worse, would annihilate.

“Then you won’t need these,” Mother folded the silk panties she’d cut up the night before. “Nor will I ever wear them again,” she said bitterly, I remembered that bitterly. I felt the way I did the day she walked in the door and said, “I’m

allergic to my children.”

I was thinking I could overcome anything by not wanting to fly home in the morning. I began lifting that bronzed knocker I imagined existed at the door of my soul.

The sun had set. The room was bluish-white outlines in black liquid night.

Rachel wriggled under the covers nude except for her cotton underpants, and fell asleep in twenty.

Mother read a Daphne du Maurier mystery novel, and smoked in the window’s last light, blowing out smoke-rings, wearing her man-tailored shirt whose breast pocket always held her Luckies, the sleeves of the blue shirt rolled up below to elbow. It was a trouser role she was playing. Instinctively, I knew that even then. I wondered was she going to come and kiss me goodnight. It was a long time before she rose.

“You asleep?” she called from the window.

“You know I a—not,” I said, beginning to smile through the pain in my cheekbones.

“Well,” she rose, came over, my heart was a trip hammer. “You’re too sore for me to kiss you goodnight, Lynn, but I—“

“You do anyway in your heart and mind.”

“Got it.” She snapped out the lightbulb by the chain.

*

When I was in my forties, Marcelle reminded me. “You remember that trip down South when I cut up my underwear to soothe your blistered face?”

“We were heading back North. How could I forget?”

“Well, that’s when you began be the tough person you are today, Indigo. Don’t ever put your boxing gloves on the shelf.”

I noticed how pale our mother looked then. Last year, she’d got on hands and knees and scraped down one room in the attic of our big old colonial home we bought post war. She said, “The more you scrape, the better things get, Indigo.” She’d told me then about *Pentimento*: “It means scraping away one layer to get at another one.” I’d remember.

Even though she was the death of my childhood, the death of all vibrant fun-loving things in that split-second I cried out as I saw another rip appear in the mattress ticking, and burst feathers had gone flying. . .

From that time of heightened longing and quickened senses in Georgia, down in Dixie, slave-land, that I go in my mind when terrible things happen. Silently lethal things occur in merciless heat. The kind that blinds people and makes objects swim.

*

I lay awake till I swore it was the midnight—not the ten p.m. train slicing the night.

I knew she wouldn't be flying me home alone in the morning. I imagined by the time we crossed the New York state line my skin would be clear and smooth as a newborn. That was the turn of events crises always took in my life. Except for one. But that was three years later. I would be twelve then.

No radio played. The batteries had given up the ghost.

It was blackout like the war.

I wondered about my father.

Now we had the divorce formally would the two be split like a knife.

All that drive home I was to imagine we hauled a small casket in the trunk of the car: it was glass, it contained my childhood. During that momentous, yet monotonous drive when hills were anonymous like rain, and the town which is so memorable for my having been taken for a began the sole time in my life—the town forever remains without name, during that drive I grew by leaps and bounds.. Mother always at-the-wheel, in command, up through sweltering Tennessee, up into the North Atlantic states, it was visible in my mind's eye, every time I blinked: yes, the death of my childhood in a casket of bright light formally laid within.

That very night when I'd been taken for a beggar and told no one—as I felt my body-panic coming on in a wave, calmed myself thinking of all the episodes where I was strong, Rachel less so, and our Mother's predictions wrong.

It began with Lox and sturgeon are too strong rich for a little kid's stomach. But Poppa brought them all the time. I'd whittle away at the chunk left in the fridge after we were served our dinner or breakfast helpings.

Oh yeah?—I thought: Not this kid. SO I'd take an extra bit of each when poppa brought them over and I was four or five. Then we graduated to plum pudding.

“Girls” she'd say again, sometimes breaking down and laughing at herself, “This is far too rich for a child's stomach.” My ears perked. I smiled at her from one side of my mouth. I got myself into a brief feverish sleep—my face was

blistering and burning—realizing how few times she'd lied to us, our mother. Thinking of Mother and Father. How they were dissolved forever as a team. thinking of the two of them, two black construction paper silhouettes like those we made in first grade when I was even more lonesome, when the war was still on. Then suddenly something shifted, maybe Rachel in her sleep, maybe only another hotel guest coming in late in the hall but I wakened and couldn't get to sleep again. I dreaded seeing the blue light of dawn. The first birdcall. But sometimes that's the way it happened.

*

I didn't tell her someone had thought I was a beggar. It had never occurred to me to look in the mirror. I thought I was my same old *belle-laide* dirty blonde.

I pulled on my hermithood again.

I as the Prisoner of Zenda I dreamed.

I was blond Ingrid Bergman, St Joan.

. . .The shape of the black typewriter, the old Royal Underwood, would ghostly loom: was in and out of my dreams as it was on the long drive through our Dixie States (that were Death) up into the North (which was life.) This was the confederacy against the Union, but the Union after the dissolution had welded our nation—that long, heart-rending, blistering drive home. We were going back to the Union. Those glossy Southern mornings, those white, cruel noons.

What of those boys stopping outside Garbo's apartment in Manhattan? Did they never, ever get a glimpse of her radiance?

Me as beggar one more terrifying second flashed through my mind, then I zapped it by this transcendent power I'd developed by age nine to mentally stop things dead in their paths.

I went to sleep alongside Rachel thinking of my life as a doorknocker, a sombre heavy one, of bronze with a woman's face. It was with this heavy knocker that the visitor must knock to enter the door of my house, my soul. The light was dusty till way past twilight outside that window in a hotel someplace in Georgia. The flies clung to the vivid yellow, oily flypaper suspended from the ceiling, the one lightbulb shone over the old clothing hung by the line I hadn't read about Skid Row. Not yet. When I did I pictured it flowing out from, beginning in that room. When Rachel reached her hand out to mine I caught her hand, then slipped back into bed, and noticed when I woke way past midnight so intense was the pain in my ace, observed I did, that Mother, and Rach wrapped up in their pale bedsheets as though the sheets were water looked like two drowned persons. Once I closed my eyes, I likely looked the same.