

Couch

Until I was seven, how I loved spending weekends with Aunt Deborah and Uncle Ferd. They called me their “naughtier”—more than a niece, almost a daughter—and I giggled over sounding like “naughty.” Not truly naughty, mind you, but things sure were different at their place. On account of herself, Aunt Deborah was loud and bawdy, so unlike my mousy Mama with her flat, colorless hair, short teeth, and thin shoulders. At Danville Lumber, Aunt Deborah split boards alongside Uncle Ferd and her biceps matched his, though his forearms were the hairiest I’d ever laid eyes on. After work, Aunt Deborah washed up and dressed in a paisley blouse and teased up her jet black hair. Routinely, Uncle Ferd said she had a bosom “any man would love to go fishing in,” clearly pleased he’d set me giggling behind my fingers pressed tight over my mouth.

On a Friday after school, still in my St. Francis uniform, Mama dropped me off at their second story apartment and said she’d be back by Sunday dinner to fetch me. In those days, Mama was pulling extra weekend shifts at Durham Ribbon, working herself so hard she often nodded off at Aunt Deborah’s Formica table on Sunday evenings. As Mama’s limp braids nearly dragged through the pool of butter atop her mashed potatoes, Aunt Deborah would say, “Hold on there, Sissy. Better stretch out on the couch and catch some z’s before we send you and Pammy back on home.” Mama would fumble to the green and white plaid couch where I slept and Aunt Deborah would pull Mama’s shoes off and tucked her under an afghan blanket crocheted by my grandmother.

I never knew Mom Sally, as they called her, who died birthing all ten pounds of baby Aunt Deborah when Uncle Tweety was four years old and Mama was but six and saddled with mothering before her First Communion. Mom Sally’s crocheted blankets, kitchen hot pads, and baby doll clothes spread the smells of acrylic yarn and dust across Danville, from Aunt Deborah

and Uncle Ferd's apartment downtown by the rail station to Uncle Tweety's bungalow on a hill on what used to be called the Black side of town, and still mostly was—I suppose he favored living there so his sweetheart Norena and his mechanic buddies from the shop could visit without neighbors fussing. Smack in between, Mama and me lived with Dorie, who'd been widowed by that war in Viet Nam nobody talked about and “widow” being on the list of words I wasn't supposed to say. Unless I was speaking of the “widow spider,” though occasions were rare when I could work that creature into conversation.

Dorie's husband had been one of my daddy's cousins and these two women who'd lost their men—my daddy being “rootless” and Dorie's man being under a marble headstone—pooled their benefits and locked down a mortgage on a duplex with mildewed windowpanes. A family of racoons lived in the crawlspace, their eyes shining from between the rotten lattice boards under the back stoop.

Anyhow, it was a Friday night at Aunt Deborah and Uncle Ferd's the summer after first grade when I learned to play penny poker and discovered Aunt Deborah's wildness was likely far beyond my mama's imagination. As the sun went down, music cranked up from record players and radios sounding through the neighbors' walls on both sides—even from across the hall where a toddler lived in his pinned, pee-stained diapers—and it seemed not a one favored same record or radio station.

“Turn it up, Sugar,” Uncle Ferd said through toothpicks mashed between his teeth. He'd given up the *coffin nails*—as Aunt Deborah called cigarettes—on account of her asthma, something my mama had whispered to me with a wistfulness known to spill out of lonely women I knew. ‘Cept Dorie, who locked up her heart tighter than a coal stove with no hope of cooking up a diamond.

Aunt Deborah pulled me up by my jumper straps and twirled me from the cracked vinyl chair to the radio on the counter and back across the linoleum floor. Uncle Ferd laughed bits of toothpick onto the discard pile. Big as she was, Aunt Deborah no longer hoisted me on her hip or over her shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

I was piling up pennies like they weren't worth nothing to my favorite kin, and they were purposely losing hand after hand of gin rummy as their empty Pabst cans piled in the sink. By my count—at math I was pretty good—Uncle Ferd was downing three cans for every one of Aunt Deborah's. When he finished one, he let me slurp the remaining bitter, warm dribbles. I knew that was special. Then I'd pull on one of his work boots to stomp the can flat without tearing a hole in my white tights. Aunt Deborah didn't mention the dregs I sipped, the scuffmarks on the linoleum, or the neighbor below tapping their broomstick up to our floor. I got to pitch the cans into the sink, too, so long as I steered clear of the ceramic Mother Mary statuette by the soap dish. She blessed our meatloaf dinners and catfish on Fridays during Lent.

It was past ten o'clock when Aunt Deborah abandoned our poker game and lay down on the couch. I came to her when she asked me to rub her swollen ankles and sore big toes from suffering men's work boots all her shifts. Uncle Ferd counted my pennies and said I had enough to buy my mama a half-dozen eggs. I wished he hadn't suggested that. I was saving up for a new baby doll since Dorie's snotty nephew pulled an arm off my good one, and on account of the lopsided haircut I'd given her with mama's sewing scissors.

Stretched on the couch, Aunt Deborah drifted off. I sat on the brown carpet leaning back against her middle watching Fantasy Island on their color TV. I guess Uncle Ferd grew bored of stacking my pennies. He tied his work boots back on and said, "Pammy, you keep Auntie company. I won't be but an hour or two." He locked the apartment door quiet behind him.

It was going on eleven and, despite the excitement of watching Fantasy Island, being at Aunt Deborah's, and perhaps due to drops from at least five of Uncle Ferd's beers, I was just wondering where I'd sleep when Aunt Deborah squeezed to the back of the couch cushions and patted a spot for me. In my jumper and tights, I lay down and she snuggled me up. Her forearm around my waist, my head on Mom Sally's crocheted pillow pressed to Aunt D.'s bosom. I dozed through the eleven o'clock news 'til Whit Hansell started in on the weather forecast and Aunt Deborah sat clear up, pulling me up to sitting, too, her strong arm wrapped around me like I was groceries.

"Where's Ferd?" Mascara dotted her cheeks and her teased up-do was mashed flat on one side.

"He said he'd be back." I wriggled and she looked at her arm, perhaps admiring her strength as much as I was resenting it. She blinked, let me go, and reached to unhook her bra under her blouse. She pulled one strap, then the other through her sleeves and flung her brassiere. It landed on the lampshade and she left it there, as if she'd planned the change in décor.

Aunt Deborah started cleaning the kitchen and I cozied under the musty familiar blanket. On the television, Whit Hansell's forecast and the sports recap ended. I laid the pillow over my ear to muffle the late movie. It might not have been scary, but the black and white picture, sharp voices, and dramatic violins told me it wasn't for kids like me neither.

When Uncle Ferd stomped in his boots and the door closed too loud, I peeked from under the pillow. Aunt Deborah sat at the table with my penny stacks. Laughing, Uncle Ferd pulled a beer can from a fresh six-pack and offered it to her. She popped it open, sipped, and spoke so quiet I slid the pillow off my ear to catch her words.

"Getting this beer all you been doing?"

Uncle Ferd said, “Well,” and sat heavy on the couch cushion by my stocking feet to pull off his boots. I pulled my toes back from his behind.

Aunt Deborah crossed her arms across her ample chest. “Well?” she mocked.

Uncle Ferd crooked a finger under a bra strap dangling off the lampshade. Chortling, he twirled the brassiere as he two-stepped towards Aunt D. and she wore that half-smile that came on before she laid a kiss on Uncle Ferd’s splinter-dusted lips. I figured she’d join his dance and they’d totter off to the bedroom, the sounds of their squeaky bedframe and sighs soon to come through the powder blue walls. But then he pushed his arms through the unsecured bra straps, and said, “Lay one on me, Kathy.”

Aunt Deborah stood and pushed his shoulder. “You son of a bitch, you’ve been down at Hidden Treasures, haven’t you?”

How I wished the lamp was off so I could sneak closer. Everyone in Danville, even me and my best friend Mary Catherine knew Hidden Treasures. The nuns at school threatened us little girls with a future of whoredom and eternal damnation if we so much as flirted with any man who wasn’t our God-given husband, let alone jiggled our bodies at strangers for cash money. Mind you, I’d just received my First Communion and was unable to picture having a husband or a body anyone would pay to see jiggling. But fast as a morning rosary, Mary Catherine and I could tell you all about the skinny gals in leggings, high-heeled Candies, and sassy halters tottering home from Hidden Treasures as we pressed against the school bus windowpanes.

Uncle Ferd dropped the brassiere on the counter and sighed as he stepped towards the fridge. I sat up as the sound of a footballer getting rammed on the field popped through both my ears. Aunt Deborah pulled her arm back and swung again and this time Uncle Ferd caught her

fist, his biceps big as hers. They locked in tight. He was backing out of the kitchen, and she was pounding his shoulder with her left arm, and he would not let her right arm go. I shrank against the corner cushions as he stumbled over his boots and she bit his hand 'til blood dripped into a white square of the couch's plaid cover.

Uncle Ferd let go, screaming curses unknown to my forbidden words list and I memorized each new swear. He ran out the door, blood streaming down his arm. Aunt Deborah threw his work boots out behind him, spat blood, and slammed the door shut. I swear she couldn't see me, like I was nothing but a bit of scrap paper. I might have been as pale.

In the bathroom, Aunt Deborah bawled and cursed—only familiar curses, sadly. The water ran so hard the pipes pinged between the walls. Before shutting the bedroom door, her bathrobe tied tight, she called out, “Pammy, go to sleep.”

I left the lamp on 'til the morning sun streamed through the kitchen window over the glistening Mother Mary. I called my house and told Dorie to pick me up, saying my Aunt Deborah was sick. Dorie asked for the address and I set down the receiver and stepped around balled-up tissues to Aunt Deborah's bed. She wrote her address down on an empty tissue box from her bedside table and printed in capital letters like I wasn't already reading cursive. I gave Dorie the address and waited for her on the curb outdoors, hoping I'd see Uncle Ferd before I left. First off, I was worried he'd bleed to death, which I'd imagined was how Dorie's husband died in Viet Nam since no one told me otherwise. And second, I knew all those dirty tissues on Aunt Deborah's floor meant she cared for him, even if she was so mad she had to sock him in the stomach. But before he returned, Dorie came for me in her rattling station wagon and I lugged the passenger door shut with both hands. When I realized I'd left my penny stacks, I didn't ask Dorie to go back. The way she grumbled, she probably wouldn't have anyhow.

Next I saw Uncle Ferd was the Fourth of July at Uncle Tweety's house up on the hill overlooking the fireworks. Mama and Dorie kept me from crushing the Pabst cans he drained. Wasted dribbles spilt into the patchy yard and a jagged, pink scar curved through the dark hair on the back of his hand and I flinched when Norena handed her newborn baby to Aunt Deborah. Still, when she called me over to hold my baby cousin in my lap on a lawn chair, I slipped into my own echo of the women's cooing.

For years after, I rarely saw Aunt Deborah and Uncle Ferd. On Christmas and Easter, they'd join us at church and, same as before, he held doors for her, offered his arm, and she'd take it. She looked strong as ever, though maybe skinnier. Her cancer wasn't known until I was in high school. When a surgeon removed one of her breasts, all I could think about was men finding yet a different way of fishing through her bosom.

Until Aunt Deborah's end, before I was briefly married and became a mama myself, Uncle Ferd cared for her. He never remarried. He did return to cigarettes. I overheard him tell Uncle Tweety, if he never again tasted a toothpick, that'd be his version of Heaven.

You'd think with my own kids' rootless father long gone, I might hold the memory of Aunt Deborah's fury in higher regard. But when my mama dragged home that weekend, I begged her not to leave me at Aunt Deborah's again. To this day I hold the fear of a woman who'd unleash all that compacted, unsaid anger. The same fire I sensed smoldering under my mama's bent shoulders, Dorie's gruffness, and stoking the teacher nuns' sharp words. All those lonely women and their power over us cornered girls fueling into our Hail Marys any whiff of distraught, our fear of damnation, our forbidden words. What if all those ladies—the stooped and the bawdy, and girls in jumpers and white tights, too—let loose our tongues and stood up for ourselves, wouldn't we all break open? Scares me to this living day.

For Uncle Ferd, I felt sorry. Having to buy new work boots every time Aunt Deborah burst out the burdens she could no longer hold. After she was laid under a cement cross and Mama and I brought him Sunday dinners, he'd watch TV between quiet powder blue walls, sitting on cushions still stained with his own blood. Never even bought a new couch.