

*Brief Appearances*

I grew up on a street in New York City very much like a small town in that the people in the neighboring brownstones were long time residents whose families knew each other, sometimes for two generations. Middleclass in the main, most lived traditional lives though I was aware that the man down the street was different. Mr. Garrow was in his forties and a bachelor. A mechanic, his clothes were always oily and dirty. His face too, and as he was small and wiry he looked to me like the troll who lived under a bridge in my book of fairy tales. The neighbor ladies said of him in approval that "Mr. Garrow could fix anything," and in disapproval "that man never takes a bath!" Worse, on occasion when I was in hearing range, they lowered their voices, shook their heads and reported that "another woman spent the night with him."

I never talked to him more than to say hello as I was a shy child and he was a taciturn man. Except for one occasion. One day the handle bar on my tricycle loosened. Noticing Mr. Garrow as he leaned on the iron railing in front of his house musing and tossing crumbs to the sparrows on the sidewalk, I rode back and forth putting just enough pressure on the handle bar so that it slipped each time I came into his view. After a few times he said gruffly, "If you need something fixed why don't you ask?" and then went on to repair it. I remember feeling embarrassed, and caught out, unable to say anything. How was my five year old self to tell him that I had been cautioned many times not "to bother people," and not "to ask for things"?

I was unable to follow his advice to speak up, but he left his mark anyway. His presence stirred an awareness in me of the rich difference he brought to our street. Every evening just at twilight, Mr. Garrow stood by his front steps and tossed bits of Wonder Bread to the pavement. As if called, a large flock of sparrows would materialize, some to my delight even perching on his shoulder. The effect was magical. I knew then that a rich and varied world exists alongside the more apparent one. That there are people who live mysteriously and happily outside the ordinary. So when I started first

grade, I studied the other children and looked for interesting differences. To my satisfaction, I noted on the walk to school two Polish sisters strangely attired in old fashioned dresses and black stockings. And in my class I was pleased to see a Negro girl and a Chinese boy. My only disappointment was that they didn't come in pairs like the children in the picture books called variously "The Albanian Twins" or "The Italian Twins."

I too feed birds now, the same house sparrows that hopped after Wonder Bread as well as the colorful song birds in my garden. As for the human species, I keep a sharp eye out for exotics like Mr. Garrow, but also for the deceptively plain types whose uniqueness will be discovered in time.

Can one sentence spoken to a young child by a scarcely known adult make a lasting impression? When I think about Uncle Lessum I think so. He was not my uncle at all and Lessum was I think his last name. When he married my widowed grandmother, the family decided that I was not to call him Grandpa (perhaps because my father thought it disrespectful to his long deceased father's memory). My grandmother was a beautiful and imperious woman when she married "Uncle," and she divorced him within the year. But for this brief time, I pleased myself, and though I did not call him so, I thought of this sweet man as Grandpa. After all I had no other grandparents except for my unloving grandmother.

Uncle Lessum, gentle and dignified, wore a pince-nez and was said to be a learned man. My parents respectfully referred to him as an "intellectual," rare and different from the rest of us. Certainly my memory of visits to grandmother's house was of his sitting in a Morris chair utterly absorbed in reading *The New York Times*. But once we had a conversation and his one question and comment has stayed with me. Uncle took me for a walk. Delighted with this attention and happy with the beautiful day, I commented on the very clear blue sky. In Socratic fashion Uncle asked me what I meant by "sky," and when I could not answer, he patiently gave me an explanation. An explanation that I did not understand and that contained the word "atmosphere." It didn't matter. What I did grasp was that beyond what I saw and thought I knew lay a complicated and interesting world. That the sky which I drew in first grade as a flat blue space separated from the rest of the picture by a straight line was not the whole story.

I still look at the sky with a child's eye; and the moon and the stars too. But if Uncle's question did not create an interest in astronomy, it helped me recognize myself as an observer and a questioner. Sometimes I even experience the great joy of unraveling some puzzle that was previously a mystery. As mysterious as the sky and the stars are the ephemeral end-of-winter flowers fleetingly beautiful, lasting only long enough to announce that spring is on the way. Long after they are gone, I remember the fragile white spring beauties and trout lilies and the promise they arouse. There are people too in each life that make only brief appearances. Pale figures we remember appreciatively but like the flowers of March, they have vanished. Their gifts remain, for they have illumined some part of our nature to us and helped us to our future.

And so in my memory there is a little girl who seems very like those early flowers, small, delicate, and quiet. She had auburn hair and the translucent skin redheads have. Appropriately her name was Pearl. She was also a modest child and unaware of her grace or the great blessing she bestowed on me.

I had just transferred from a small school that went only to sixth grade. It was a relief for me to go somewhere new and I saw the larger school as a place in which I could start over. I especially longed for a friend, for in my previous school, I was locked into the persona of an unappealing child—poor, shabbily dressed, and socially awkward. I had spent my first four years in the “dumb” class and that tag had stayed with me. It is no surprise that my favorite fairy tales were *The Ugly Duckling* and the *Tin Soldier*. I dreamt of being transformed. I dreamt of being accepted.

For the first few weeks in the new setting, I studied my classmates, determined to find a friend, someone I could play with during recess and who would not be mean. I was drawn to Rosemary, one of those children who was outgoing and lively. She belonged to no clique and was friendly to everyone. Although I made sure to get behind her each time we had to line up for some change in activity, this led only to brief exchanges. However, one day on line, Rosemary, standing between Pearl and me, complained about difficulties with her sewing and our mean sewing teacher. That good Pearl, a proficient seamstress, obligingly offered to help. I said that I too was in trouble so that after school we all trooped off to Pearl's house. Such a pleasant afternoon sitting on a green velvet couch in

that sunny parlor, chatting and sewing, a victrola playing in the background. Pearl's teenage sister's taste ran to Hollywood versions of Rachmaninoff and Tchaikovsky concertos. The movies that year featured numerous versions of struggling composers and fervid pianists. I thought the recordings stirring and the sweet excitement of the music blended with the pleasure I felt in being at last with friends.

That afternoon opened the door to my future. Rosemary and I became friends for life. She was not only warm and loving but a budding intellectual. It was because of her that I went to my first art museum, my first concert and to the elegant Fifth Avenue book store, Brentanos. Together we celebrated our liberation from the old fashioned tastes of our parents and delighted in visiting the Museum of Modern Art, where we saw Picasso's shocking "Guernica." We shared an unusually happy adolescence and stayed close until her death at thirty two.

In Jewish folklore there are said to be ten beneficent souls whose good deeds and timely interventions redeem the world. They are anonymous and inclusive in whom they help. Perhaps there are more than ten, perhaps they appear in everyone's life and one needs only to be open to their blessings. Like Pearl, Uncle Lessum, Mr. Garrow and the flowers of spring, they may be innocent of the gifts they bestow, one of which surely is the warm feeling of gratitude that remains with us long after the gift itself.