

My Shoelaces · James Laughlin

—from “Byways”

My life has been a series of untied shoelaces. “Tie up your laces, dear, before we go to Granny’s,” my mother says, “Granny doesn’t like untidy little boys.” I didn’t do it. Granny is an old wet hen. She spends her days lying on the upstairs sitting room sofa, giving orders to the servants, who are a bunch of lazy Irish, except for Thomas the butler who sneaks me the Sunday funny papers, which are forbidden at home. I read them with Thomas in the pantry and he gives me ginger ale.

People always warn that I’ll trip over my untied shoelaces and have a bad fall. That only happened once. We were in New York visiting various relatives. I tripped and fell right in front of the Vanderbilt Hotel. It was a bad one. I was cut so deep I had to be taken to the hospital emergency room and have stitches. This made us late getting to Aunt Patty’s lunch party at the Vanderbilt which put her in a pet. What I did in the hotel dining room made her furious. It was the first time I had ever had an oyster. It tasted horrible and I spat it out right on the floor. Mother took

me up to Aunt Patty's bedroom and gave me the hairbrush. And that was the end of the ten dollar goldpieces that used to come from Aunt Patty every Christmas.

I won't bore you with any more shoelace stories, except for one. We were in London on one of our summer trips "to acquire cultivation" as they called it. Mother was off in the country visiting a school friend, so my brother and I were alone with father. He said he was tired of the Burlington Hotel dining room, he would take us to his club. That's what he called it, "his club." It was a house in Bulstrode Street, nothing that would tell you from the outside it was anything but some family's house. A butler let us in and took us to the second floor in a small elevator. We were greeted in the sitting room by a handsome lady who looked somewhat like the Queen. All dressed up. She and father seemed to be friends. They kissed. We didn't sit down but the queen lady went out and came back with the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. "This is Winifred," the Queen said, she'll entertain you young men for half an hour. Then she and father went off somewhere. Winifred was a princess for sure, she was wearing a rather scanty

dress but it was made of gold.
This was many years ago but
I can still see how lovely she was.
And she was nice. “What will it be,
gentlemen,” she asked, “chess or
checkers?” Neither of us had ever
heard of chess, so we said checkers.
As she was going to get the checkers
set she noticed my untied shoelace.
“Dear me,” she said, “your man doesn’t
take very good care of you, does he?”
And, if you’ll believe it (I still
can’t) this gorgeous princess knelt
right down on the floor beside me
and did up not one, but redid both
of my laces. Then we played checkers
and the butler brought us ginger
and bitters, as he called it. I
suppose I should have been embarrassed,
but I wasn’t. I’ll never forget her
or our visit to the house in
Bulstrode Street.