

The Dressmaker's Dummy · Katharine Andres

THE CHRISTMAS I WAS TWELVE my father took me to New York City. Even then, it seemed strange to take a trip for its own sake. In my family a trip had to count for something. You had to come back with a dress that could only be bought in New York City or a divorce that could only be obtained in Las Vegas. My aunt Anna asked my father if he was strong enough to travel yet. "I'll be fine," he said. "It's a good thing to leave Richmond every five years. It expands the brain cells." Anna drove so slowly to the station that my father fretted about missing the train. "I bet you'll get a speeding ticket coming to pick us up," he said.

I didn't like New York much. We ate lunch at the Plaza Hotel, in a big wood-paneled room where women walk in between the tables modeling dresses. My father laughed at them. He leaned his head back and I saw the loose skin on his neck. Seeing his oldness made me lose my appetite. I waited for him to finish the bottle of white wine and I understood why Aunt Anna had been so unwilling for him to leave Richmond. "Haven't you had enough?" I asked.

"Almost, but not quite enough."

After lunch we walked in the park. I was cold and ran in circles around my father. He stopped and couldn't remember which path led out of the park. Under a bush, I saw a man's shoe. I kicked at it and realized that it was attached to the rest of his body. My father pushed the branches aside and looked in at the man. I stood behind him and he pushed me away. "Is he dead," I asked.

My father leaned down and touched the man's hand. I imagined its dampness.

"I think he is dead," my father said. "We must find a policeman." He seemed to know the way out of the park now. We looked up and down the street and finally saw a policeman.

"It's probably just some fellow who's had too much to drink," he said. "Can you tell me where this was?" He took a pad from his pocket and wrote down the directions my father gave him.

My father told me that the man had probably died of exposure. I liked the sound of that and sometimes when a death was mentioned, I'd nod understandingly and say "exposure?"

"Where do you suppose his family is? Do you think he had children?" I asked.

My father said not to think about it anymore, but whenever anyone asked me about my trip to New York, it was the first thing that came to mind. I was wise enough not to mention it to my quiet aunt, but I could not avoid the subject of the park. I found myself describing lunch at the Plaza and the

walk afterwards. I led my aunt blind-folded around the corpse of the man who seemed to lie in the path of my story.

Just after we returned from that trip, my cousin, Helen, came to visit us. Ever since Anna came to nurse my mother, she had invited various relatives to stay. The big house always seemed empty and my aunt liked to fill the extra places at the dinner table. As soon as one relative left, she'd be on the telephone recruiting another uncle or cousin to fill a chair for a while. Anna had written to Helen's mother and advised her that even a Boston girl could learn a thing or two in Richmond and Helen had come down for a week of vacation.

Helen was fourteen and read the newspaper every day so that she could impress the grown-ups she knew. She worked at impressing me with obscure bits of information about members of the family. "Did you know that when Uncle Bert was young, he was so short everyone thought he was going to be a midget?" or "Aunt Anna almost got married once, but her fiancé ran off at the last minute." I was never able to figure out how she knew these things, but I always believed her. Her stories had the weight and force of real gossip.

My cousin seemed beautiful to me because she was so neat. Her hair fit her head as well as her clothes fit her body. I asked to have my hair cut short like hers and I envied her sharp little nose and straight eyebrows. And as far as I could tell, she envied me nothing at all. When we took her to the museum, she told me that there were better ones in Boston. She criticized my friends, my clothes, and even the color of my father's car. After the first day of her visit, it seemed to me that there was nothing left to talk about. While we sat in the living room with my father and my aunt, we stared at each other. But Aunt Anna looked up from the jigsaw puzzle she was working and told me to take my cousin upstairs and amuse her. "Teach Helen to play cribbage," she suggested.

I led Helen upstairs and into the room my mother had used for sewing.

"No one but me goes into this room," I said to her.

"It's awfully small."

"My mother made dresses here," I explained and I opened the closet door and showed Helen the dressmaker's dummy inside.

"Why do you keep it?" she asked. It was a question I couldn't answer. Some things had been taken away right after my mother died. I remembered the lady from the Salvation Army touching a silk dress and saying to Anna, "Are you sure you want to give these things away?" The pill bottles were gone from the medicine chest and the books that had been on the bed table were returned to the shelf, but I found a ring she had worn on a window sill and I knew that her fur-topped galoshes were still at the back of the hall closet.

"We still have lots of things," I said.

"I should think that you'd want to get rid of all of a person's things. Doesn't it make you sad to see them?" It was almost two years since my mother had died, and as far as I could tell, I didn't feel anything about it anymore. I hardly remembered the time before my mother was sick. It seemed to me that she had always been in bed. Once I bounced on the bed and she sighed. "What is it?" I had asked.

"My bones hurt me," and she had pronounced the word "arthritis" for me. On days when she felt well, my father had taken me to visit her. I would tell her about school or my riding lesson, and then, when she was tired, she would smile at my father over my head, and he would lead me away. What made me sad was the quietness of our house. Sometimes when I finished my homework, I would come downstairs into the living room and after the brightness of my desk lamp, it would seem dark. My father would be sitting in his leather armchair reading some American history book and Anna would be at the card table working on a puzzle. There would be their two separate circles of light and nothing in between. But I wished for siblings, for an Airedale, a television set. I wanted noise and motion, not my mother.

But I told my cousin that the dressmaker's dummy made me sad and then I opened the drawer of the sewing table and showed her some scraps of material left over from dresses my mother had made. "I remember her wearing them," I lied. Helen leaned forward with her elbows on her knees waiting for me to say more. I arranged the scraps in a pattern on the table top and pretended to have forgotten the conversation. "Do you want to learn cribbage?" I asked. "It's a very good game."

"Tomorrow morning," she said.

"But you wanted to go riding tomorrow."

Helen came over to the table and stood beside me. She picked up a strip of flowered cotton.

"This one is very pretty. I have a shirt almost like it." She paused for the right amount of time and asked, "What was it like when your mother died?" I knew already that I had scored a victory. There was, after all, something Helen wanted to know about and I wanted to be sure to have the perfect story: sensational enough to hold her interest, elastic enough to last me her visit, and sufficiently believable so that she would not try to check the facts with my father or Aunt Anna.

The day my mother died was really very much like other days. I went to school and delivered an oral report on whales. At recess, while I was jumping rope, I saw my father crossing the playground. He beckoned to me and I said to the girl who was turning, "I've got to go. I'll be back in a minute." As I was running off to meet my father, I heard someone say, "Oh, Frances never turns." This was terribly unjust and I turned back to see who had said it. At the same time, my father called my name and I ran over to him. He knelt down and put his arms around me. I felt people looking at

us and tried to edge away. "Hurry up, Daddy," I said to him before he had a chance to speak. I saw from his face that something was wrong, but this was my school, my playground, and I felt that whatever it was couldn't touch me here.

"Listen to me, Frances" my father said, and over his shoulder I watched the jump rope turning. I moved my head up and down judging when the best moment to run in would be and my father said, "Darling, Mother died this morning." He took my hand and we went into the school building. It was empty because it was still recess. My father said, "Take me to your classroom," and I led him through the long hall to Mrs. Henderson's room. I stood behind him embarrassed while he explained what had happened. Mrs. Henderson kissed my cheek and promised my father that the school would do all it could to help me adjust. He thanked her and we went home.

When we got there, Aunt Anna kissed me too, but she was busy putting away the bunches of flowers that had been arriving all morning and she didn't stop to talk. She pulled my father into the den and I went upstairs to put away my school books. At the top of the stairs, I stopped. The door to my mother's room was closed. I looked downstairs to be sure that no one was watching and I opened the door and went in. I was shaking with nervousness. I expected there to be the shape of a body on the bed with the sheet pulled up over the face or at least an open coffin, but I was too late. The sheets were rumpled and there was a red silk dressing gown at the end of the bed as though someone had just gotten up. I put on a silver bracelet that was lying on the bureau and I took a scarf from the drawer and tied it around my head. I looked at myself in the mirror and then at the drawing of my mother on the wall by the window. As I was hunting for lipstick, Aunt Anna came in. "What are you doing, Frances," she said.

"Nothing," I took off the scarf and put it back in the drawer, but I kept the bracelet in my pocket. "Come with me," she ordered. I followed her around the house, but she didn't seem to be going anywhere. In the early afternoon, my father, my aunt, and I sat in the living room like three people idly waiting to see the dentist. I think we sat there until it was too dark to read and then Aunt Anna made canned soup for dinner. I was too young to go to the funeral and for me the events ended with Anna's white hand pouring soup into three bowls. But I had learned that death was supposed to rip through the house like a tornado. "Haven't you ever known anyone who died?" I asked Helen. She shook her head.

"Only in the movies."

"That doesn't count. I'll tell you what happened. My mother was suddenly very sick with pneumonia. We always had to tiptoe in the house and be careful about slamming doors. A trained nurse came and sat by her bed all day, and once when she was out of the room, my mother told me that she was a big brute and forced her to eat when she wasn't hungry."

Helen's mouth was slightly open as if she were about to ask a question,

but she waited politely for me to go on.

"Every day I went in to see my mother. The doctor said to make her laugh. I'd tell her everything funny I could think of, and still, she looked sad. And then one day the nurse stood in front of the door and said, 'You can't go in.' I asked my father why and he said that she was too tired. Then for a long time she was tired every day, but finally my father said I could go in and I said, 'You mean she isn't tired anymore?' and he didn't answer. I went in and sat down on my mother's bed and she wouldn't open her eyes. Her hands were completely white and the bed was all neat as if she hadn't moved at all in a long time. The nurse said, 'Kiss your mother,' and then I left."

"Was that the last time you saw her?" Helen asked. I thought for a moment.

"Almost," I said. "Would you like to hear the rest? There isn't much." Helen nodded.

"The next day when I came home from school, the coffin was in the living room and it was still open." Helen put her hands over her ears and said,

"Stop."

"Okay, but just one thing. Practically all of our relatives came and the women would look inside and then turn away crying. Every single one of them."

"And didn't you cry?" Helen asked.

"I never cry," I said sternly. "I suppose you would have cried though." She was cornered. I had the sense of ending neatly, driving a point home, and a strong, good sense of possession; here in my room I had told my story, and my cousin had swallowed it. I felt closer to her now. When she thought of mothers and death and coffins, she would think of me.

"I have another story," I said. "Would you like to hear it?"

"Is it about something awful?"

"It's about a man I saw in Central Park, in New York City."