

A Line of Light · Denny Hoberman

ON SUNDAY, MERCEDES came to give my grandfather his second shower. This time she brought her daughter, Euxine, who sat with us on the front porch, turning the toes of her black patent leather shoes in, then out, then pigeon-toed in again, scuffing the sand and the gray paint that peeled up in thin curls along the floorboards. Jersey, my older sister, told Euxine right off not to step on the horseshoe crab that was lying on a paper towel next to the front door. It only looks dead, she warned, scratching her initials *EJS* into the porch rail with fingernails that had been manicured, for the first time, the day before with a kit from the five-and-ten. I was thinking about lunch; my grandmother had said we would have to wait until after the shower.

Euxine sat herself on the only beach chair, her small shoulders squared to the jalousie that was kept closed in the mornings to keep the sun out. I had settled on the floor, the porch wall angling its shade across me, and was in the thick of a staring contest with the old she-cat, one up on her since I was practicing peripheral vision and could occupy myself with the sandy road to one side, and the screen door to the other, squinting to make the screen disappear and the edges of the front hall miraculously clear, then letting the *moiré* make a swirl of my grandmother holding the bath towels under her arm, the two plates, with quail painted in a ravished sunset, that hung on the wall, and Mercedes, in her white uniform and white shoes, and dark eyes pinned like bits of a fig to her pale, honey-yellow face.

My grandmother was telling Mercedes that my grandfather hadn't finished with his second breakfast yet. The first nurse had come before he had finished with his first breakfast, and he had felt rushed and had refused the other half of the piece of toast. One piece of toast, she was saying, one piece he won't even finish. My grandmother shook her head the way she does, not really shaking it at all, but resting it on the air at either side, confined somehow by the proximity of walls and air, her eyes focused on the place where the walls met, her thick glasses making her eyes look dim and slightly damp. Mercedes said she would wait. I was sure my grandmother expected no less. The cat lengthened her paws beneath my knee, apparently releasing us both from our dry stare.

—What's gestation mean? Euxine asked, straightening the pleated edge of her cotton skirt, as if the word had been nestled all along in the humid air and only just now disengaged itself from the breeze.

—Gas station? I asked.
—*Juh*station, my sister said, has to do with plants. Grass on a sponge.
—You mean babies, I said.
—My mother says it's the way you get to god.
—What is? asked Jersey.
—*Gesdaytion*, said Euxine.
—Depends, I said.
—On what? my sister asked, quickly skeptical.
—On who checks the oil, I said. Fill 'er up. And all that.
—What a lousy mind you have, Jersey said, touching the tail of the horseshoe crab with her toe.
—Not so full of it as yours, I replied primly.
—My mother says your grandfather has to do it with dying.
Euxine raised her black patent leather shoes, pursing her lips ever so slightly. Her eyes remained pinioned to the tips of her shoes.
—Do what? I asked.
—Same thing I said before, said Euxine.
—That's not what he's doing, I said, getting up from the shade, noticing the way the sudden brightness looked blueish. I considered going for a swim before lunch, but remembered my grandfather's insistence that no one swim alone, as well as the man-o'-wars that dotted the beach. I stood, facing the road, and decided on a walk.
My grandparents' house was at the beach end of a road off the old main artery of this small Florida town. The road had not been paved recently; a gray sand and a tired traffic had pitted and smoothed it until beach, road and shoulder appeared as the extended shadings of each other. I cut across the road, through the tall grass, toward the water. Stepped around a dead blowfish, not yet disintegrated. Broken white shells. Tar. Swollen blue skins of man-o'-wars. A dented beer can. The cry of gulls punctured the brush of the surf.
A man in his bathing trunks stood alone farther down the beach. The waves seemed to articulate themselves around his ankles, to understand that these two little fleshy posts were only a temporary turning point. They reached and receded, now fully wet, now grainy froth. In the distance, slapping against the lazy blue of the sea, the drained blue of the sky, one sailboat tailed another.
—Maadaame Macedonia, I heard my sister call after me, you are wanted urgently by the bedside.
I turned back, resigned to my sister's habit of bordering each of my escapes.

—Gramma wants to know what you did with his vitamin C.

The house, darkened to my sun-bleached sight even with all the drapes pulled to the sides of the windows, was humid and still and smelled of my grandfather's soaps and astringents. I picked up the bottle of vitamin C tablets from the tray of vitamin bottles and handed it to my grandmother who had been pushing them from side to side, her glasses forward on her nose.

—I didn't even see that, she said apologetically.

I told her it was okay. I could see my grandfather sitting on the edge of his bed, his tatting-white hair matching the white of the untied hospital robe, and his spine, knobbing the length of his back. Mercedes stood in front of him, offering her arm as support. I watched him smile up at her, pushing her arm away. He placed his large, loose-skinned hands on the edge of the bed, his torso leaning forward, to stand.

—He was such a big man, my grandmother said, unscrewing the top of the vitamin bottle. And now. She shook her head slowly, as if the humid air made room, very briefly, for the motion. It makes me sick, she said. To see him now.

I followed her into the bedroom where she handed him the vitamin C tablet and a glass of water. Mercedes, smiling at my grandfather, said that he had insisted he would stand by himself, and that, strong as Johnny Weissmuller, he had.

—There's a deck of cards in the closet, my grandfather said, in his new thread-thin voice. Remember how we used to pull the queen of hearts from your ear? he asked. He put the vitamin on the back of his tongue, took a quick swash of water, and jerked his head back to swallow. You want to learn that one? he asked.

—She doesn't go in for games, my grandmother said, taking the glass of water.

—Yes I do, I told her and walked out of the room.

I sat on the kitchen stool and watched the cat cleaning its hind legs on the mat in front of the sink. I can do it alone, I heard my grandfather say predictably. Then the sound of the shower water being turned on. The female voices, one resilient, one pieced together, pinking the edge of the water. I went back out to the front porch. Euxine and Jersey were bending over the horseshoe crab, poking it with an old clam shell that had at various times been used as an ash tray and an hors d'oeuvre dish. They turned the crab over; the point of the tail had pinned the paper towel, so that the towel flipped as well.

—Did you find them? my sister asked, detaching the paper towel with her thumb and forefinger and crumpling it up.

—What?

—The vitamins.

—They were right where I left them, I said. Right where she left them. Where they belong, I mimicked my grandmother.

My sister shrieked.

—It moved.

—Well what'd you suspect? Euxine asked, pulling the edge of her skirt close to her crotch and backing away.

—But it's practically dead, said my sister.

—Where'd you find this thing anyway? I asked.

—I already said. If I'd of known last night it would do this I sure wouldn't of been the one to carry it up from the beach.

—Who was with you?

—I already said. Nellie. The Jellybean. Don't you listen?

—But her mom told Gramma she's in Kansas.

—Well she got back last night.

It was pointless to challenge her; whatever I might say would only commit Jersey that much more to this version; she would keep to herself what she wanted. I thought back to other vacations when we used to hike the beach together, inventing radio shows, news bulletins, about people that we alone knew. Or the walks in the evenings on the town green, my grandparents holding our sodas while we raced each other around the bandstand, always conscious to let the other one win an equal number of times. The night before, when Jersey had gone out, my grandmother had asked question after question regarding my sister, as if I could fill in what Jersey purposely left an open expanse.

We were sitting around the small glass kitchen table, having pulled in an extra chair from the dining room, our cotton pajamas and light robes swelling with the air from the portable fan. My grandfather was pushing a spoon around a cup, half-filled, of hot milk; my grandmother and I drank Sanka; we sliced a prune danish into neat slivers, cut seedless grapes into small clumps with the silver fruit scissors.

—I always thought, said my grandmother, that blue was her color. But she hasn't worn the dress since you've been down here. Doesn't she like it?

—But it's ninety degrees, I protested in Jersey's stead.

—It's not a heavy dress. It's a summer dress. My grandmother was

quiet a moment, running her finger along the edge of the fruit scissors. Doesn't she have any boyfriends? she asked.

I shrugged my shoulders.

—At your age you don't realize that pretty doesn't last.

I reminded her that she'd promised to teach me how to say *Next year in Israel*. Next year in Israel, I said, come on. And then we'll go.

—Not now. In the morning.

—It's not a good thing, my grandfather said, touching my elbow. You see, we wish our lives away like that. If you say—

—Have more grapes dear, my grandmother interrupted, pushing the bowl toward me.

—I will, I said, making no move.

—I was talking Mother, my grandfather said, enunciating the words as if he found them in a primer. If you were to say, I wish it were a week from now, or, I wish it was summer, or, I wish the Yankees were in spring training—

My grandmother touched her hand to her forehead.

—I wish to God we were up north by now, she said.

—That's just it, my grandfather said sadly. You wish us away from this table.

—God willing we should be back before the Passover. She reached for the small yellow enamel pot on the stove, poured my grandfather the rest of the still-warm milk. At least I'll have the children there.

My grandfather got up from the table, the effort to do so timed carefully, not touching the remaining milk.

—I'm going to walk now, he said.

My grandmother reached for the piece of danish left on his plate, broke it in half, put one half on my plate, the other on her own.

—I'm hungry, she said, leaving the danish where it was. You too, you should eat some.

My grandfather passed the kitchen door. The dark robe hugged his pelvic bone as he turned to pace, twice more, the length of the house on his stiff, thin legs.

—Where's your sister?

I shook my head. My grandmother got up from the table. I watched as she followed my grandfather to the end of the hall. Had I ever seen her go so far away before? I didn't know. But against the muteness of her walk, the location of my grandparents' bedroom was newly clear. It was the room we had been invited to scoot into on cool mornings

before the sun had climbed all the way in from the ocean. The shades were always halfway down, and the great Persian rug caught the first band of light. I would kneel and rub the nap one way, my sister the other. A line of light, a line of dark. A line of light against a line of dark. The mauve, dark green and puce threads became, in our hands, two shades each, and under the sun's warm white tongue, four. To me this was as significant as the ocean against the sand, the red and gray zones on the world map in school, the pictures of my grandparents when they were our age, my sister, when she was my age, only a year before.

Jersey returned after my grandfather had gotten into bed, gotten up again, and finally fallen into the light sleep that would last until three in the morning when my grandmother would fix him some weak tea in the kitchen, radio on low, the night sounds and coolness making a sort of frame around the interlude.

—Are you guys still up, she asked with fake hilarity, tossing the wet strings of her hair back from her face. She was holding the horseshoe crab by its tail with one hand, and, in the other hand, balancing the roll of paper towels.

—What'd you take those for? I asked.

—For a picnic, she answered.

My grandmother stood in the doorway, a smile wandering across her mouth as she tried to absorb her relief.

—It's after midnight, she said.

—I know, said Jersey, flouncing from the room.

—Put that thing outside, my grandmother called after her.

Bathroom water was turned on, off, abruptly. I started stacking the dishes, trying not to let the china sound. My grandmother took them from me, placed them in the sink.

—God willing, she said, we'll all be home soon. As she ran the hot water, the lenses of her glasses steamed up like pieces of gray slate.

—Even so, she went on to herself, in that building there are only women.

I could see her lining them up: Mrs. Kaplan, Mrs. Albright, Mrs. Lehman, Mrs. Tars. The women who had lifted my chin year after year to say, She looks just like her Grandpa, while beaming at my grandmother.

—All women. And they smile, my grandmother made a sickened smile with her pale lips, and smile. She shuddered as if a breeze had touched the room, leaving it empty.

—They are all, every one of them, a widow.

—Gramma, I said.

She wiped off the kitchen counter, waited while I brushed my hair before turning out the kitchen light.

—Sleep well honey, she said, kissing me in the hall.

—For chrissake, Jersey whispered from under the sheets as I got into my side of the fold-out bed, it's Saturday night.

I didn't say anything.

—You'd think I was a fool or something. I know how to take care of myself. At least I know that.

She pulled the sheet over her head, shutting me out, silencing herself. I felt the sadness like a small welt, not because my sister was leaving me behind, but because I found myself catching up, and, in doing so, knew I would have to excavate the entire distance between us. It wasn't until the next day that I saw there would be no old coins, no apple seed, nothing to reveal the path to anyone other than ourselves.

—My mother says men want to be harder than women, said Euxine, who was leaning over the beach chair's aluminum arm, tapping the shell of the horseshoe crab.

—Some, said Jersey.

I thought of my grandfather whose eyes would water when he looked at the things closest to him.

—She says you have to have a more sympathetic outlook when you shower a man. Because a man especially wants to be hard.

Jersey, one leg looped over the porch rail, was rubbing the seam of her jeans with one hand, apparently oblivious to the action.

I asked Euxine what she was talking about.

—My mother says the more sympathetic you are, the less hard a man has to be to look hard. She says it takes a long time, a very long time, to see your dying come, and then, when you do, you get very limp. But your grandfather wants to be hard. So my mother has to be extra gentle.

My sister slid off her perch.

—When's lunch, she said rather than asked.

—Go ask, I said.

Euxine looked up as Jersey let the door slam.

—I have a very nice mother, said Euxine.

—I'm sure you do, I said.

Euxine got up, brushed her skirt off prettily, and went in to find Mercedes. I wandered in after her. My grandfather was still sitting on the edge of his bed, his slender legs like a croquet wicket.

—I never knew they could take so much out of you, and you could still live, he was saying to Mercedes, rubbing his hands lightly across his thighs.

Mercedes smiled, touched her daughter's head. Euxine moved closer to her, staring at my grandfather.

—I never knew. My grandfather shook his head, smiling to himself. I was your age, he said, looking at Euxine. The teacher called me down to the principal's office. I must have misbehaved. My teacher told the principal I was an obstreperous type of kid, he said, waving his hand as if airing his thighs. And I was. I looked it up. And the principal said I would have to sit next to my teacher's desk, away from my friends.

My grandfather's eyes were wet, as if what he remembered was now wholly synonymous with what he had lost.

Mercedes smiled. See how well you're doing, she told him.

—Yes, said my grandfather. Thank you.

Brushing her daughter's hair away from her face, Mercedes told him she would be back on Tuesday, and that on Tuesday he'd be even stronger. Not like new, she said. Nothing was like new after you took off the wrapping. But what you'd unwrapped you could use. What good were carrots in a bag? she asked.

—Tuesday? my grandfather asked, his eyes lighting.

—Tuesday, said Mercedes.

My grandmother walked Mercedes and Euxine to the front door, holding it open while Euxine made her mother bend over the horseshoe crab and touch the shell before going down the porch steps.

—Lunch, my grandmother said, pulling the screen door shut, lunch lunch lunch.

I waited for my grandfather to slide his feet into his slippers. He put his hand on my shoulder to walk down the hall to the dining room, let go as he pulled his chair out a slow, determined distance, and sat down, facing the ocean side of the house. The immense pulse that came in, muted, through the closed jalousie, occupied us each for a long while. Plates were passed, glasses filled. My grandfather, staring somewhere not in sight, put his water glass down on the edge of his plate. It rocked and fell.

—Quick, my grandmother said. The paper towels.

—They're in my room, said Jersey. I'll get them.

I was already up from the table, and laughed as my sister chased me down the hall.

—Wait, she called out. Don't touch them. Let me.

I rummaged through the clothes she had dropped at the foot of the unmade bed, found the roll of paper towels. I picked it up; a slit-open foil packet fell from the center of the cardboard tube.

—Don't touch that, said Jersey, standing behind me, catching her breath.

I picked it up. PELLUCID, I sounded out, *For The Ultimate In Pleasure*.

—Put that down, said Jersey.

I turned the foil packet over, then placed it on the bed.

—Who'd you do this with? Nellie The Jellybean?

She took the roll of towels from me and left the room. I was left standing there, looking at the family photographs on the wall above the bed, some of them askew in their frames. There was a picture of my sister and me on either side of my grandmother, standing on the top step of the white bandstand. My grandfather must have taken the photograph. Jersey was smiling at her sneakers. I held my grandmother's left hand. My grandmother's right hand brushed back my sister's bangs, her face open and proud. I walked back to the dining room.

My sister was tearing off squares from the roll of paper towels, centering them over the spilled water. They absorbed the water immediately as she dropped them. I offered to take the wet towels to the kitchen.

—Get the fruit while you're in there, my grandmother directed, the bowl by the sink. It's already washed.

Grapes, bananas, tangelos, pears. I was slow returning from the kitchen, crossing the door jamb, reviewing the way toward thought.

In Florida the sand is gray. The heat rises to the neckline and rests there. The heat and my grandparents' weak eyes. They ask, do we have friends where we are. They ask, do we go out.

I put the bowl on the table. My grandfather reached for a tangelo, sliced it in half. I touched the shiny rice-paper gray of his hands. The cereal grass and the seed. He looked at the window, motioned me to open the jalousie. The sun, having gone past the zenith, no longer reached into the dining room.

—You drive along the road a hundred times, he said, and it is the same road. And then one day—

—Father? asked my grandmother.

My grandfather looked down at his hands, at the veins ribbed like thin-barked twigs, at the white porcelain plate, the stainless steel knife, the tangelo, cut in half.

—And then one day it's a different road. One day, he said, it has trees and little houses and the sky.