

2012

# Layaway

Tricia Milnamow  
*CUNY City College*

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://academicworks.cuny.edu/cc\\_etds\\_theses](http://academicworks.cuny.edu/cc_etds_theses)



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#), and the [Poetry Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Milnamow, Tricia, "Layaway" (2012). *CUNY Academic Works*.  
[http://academicworks.cuny.edu/cc\\_etds\\_theses/450](http://academicworks.cuny.edu/cc_etds_theses/450)

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the City College of New York at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact [AcademicWorks@cuny.edu](mailto:AcademicWorks@cuny.edu).

Layaway

By: Tricia Milnamow

Advisor: David Groff

May 3, 2012

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Fine  
Arts of the City College of the City University  
of New York

## Prologue

In these hard economic times, I've noticed Kmart ads on television proudly offering layaway. What intrigues me about these commercials is the layaway option is presented as a fun, albeit budget-conscious choice. The born-of-necessity, "thank God there is layaway" paradigm the already conversant would recognize is not depicted. Instead, the newly minted doers of layaway are upwardly mobile, middle-class people with houses and yards (one must presume they aren't a few missed payments away from foreclosure). This reframing of layaway is nothing short of amazing.

According to the Merriam-Webster online, LAYAWAY is defined as "a purchasing agreement by which a retailer agrees to hold merchandise secured by a

deposit until the price is paid in full by the customer."

While this is an accurate definition, it answers only to the letter, not the spirit of the practice of layaway, with its social and economic ramifications and its costs in aggravation, dignity and never-ending waiting. Layaway is the bastion of the striver, the credit-less and the patient. I love it and I hate it. I both identify with the layaway lifestyle and wish I knew nothing of this peculiar buying method.

Because I've had a layaway life and a 'pay now, get later' history, I've had to explain layaway to the uninitiated many times and no matter how clearly it is described, the concept sounds incomprehensible and perhaps, dirty, to them.

"Well, you go to Kmart for curtains, towels, dishes. You give the clerk five or ten dollars and agree to put a bit of money each week towards your order over the course of two months. When it is fully

paid, you are allowed to take your items home. Pay now, get later. See?"

Here is when you get the confused, head-tilted look from the listener. The words are English, the theory is not difficult in essence, but still they gaze at you in a sweetly befuddled manner. And who can blame them? Because if you don't have to use layaway, it is a notion best left misunderstood.

After college, I had the privilege of committing fancier acts of layaway, ones that would have been unimaginable to my teenage self. I got a job at Freeman's Auction house in Philadelphia. Freeman's justly bills itself as America's oldest auction house. When I worked there, they had an unofficial layaway plan for employees. Items that were too expensive to purchase at one shot were put on our employee house accounts. We made payments every Friday when we got our pitiful paychecks. It differed from my traditional layaway experiences in two important ways. One, I was part of a team, a cohort of like-minded people -- most

of the staff were buying on the house layaway plan, even the ones with family money. This was a guilt-edged arrangement and suddenly, layaway was socially acceptable, even sexy. The second (and genuinely important difference) was that we got to take the items home immediately after they were knocked down to us at auction.

In traditional layaway, this getting to take your purchases home before you were fully paid up would never happen. Not in a million years. Not if you begged and pleaded. Not ever.

This twist on established layaway customs was due to the simple fact that Freeman's had to make room for the following week's sale material. There wasn't the space to hold all the items the employees had bought at the sales and were paying for on their accounts. Since, we were all mad for the sales, they would have needed to buy another building to store it all. Apparently, the house wasn't worried that they would get stiffed. They knew where we worked and the house

account was seen not only as a perk of the job, but also as economically sensible. The employee accounts poured money back into the house, one small weekly payment at a time. It was good business. They encouraged it. I mean right after they hired you, they gave you a permanent bidding number, a privilege reserved only for dealers, regulars and employees. The occasional buyer stood in line to get a number before each sale. But the employees were gifted with their own number. I was bidder 240 for quite a few years. It made me feel special, a part of a world that I was surprised I even had a pass to enter.

There was a third difference from traditional layaway and that was with the items themselves. The stuff I bought at Freeman's was better quality than the scratchy five-and-dime store linens and acrylic sweaters of my layaway past. Here, some of my purchases were collectible, some simply beautiful, but I was buying things that had enduring value. Even the actual ephemera had a sense of permanence. I bought early 20<sup>th</sup> Century postcards that depicted St.

Patrick's Day. Postcards are actually catalogued as "Ephemera" and by definition are not meant to last. But here they were in my eager hands, 85 years later. Each year, I would put one of these vintage postcards in a #10 envelope and mail it to my mother for St. Patrick's Day, re-using them for their intended purpose.

At Freeman's, I had a few errors in judgment but what shopper hasn't experienced those mistakes? Perhaps, the lamp with the fish motif I bought for a dollar was a suspect choice. I purchased it on the fly as I walked through the main auction room on my way back from lunch. The auctioneer asked for a bid, none was forthcoming due to the sheer ugliness of the lamp. He jokingly asked for a dollar and my hand shot up fast. I never stopped walking during the entire transaction, just kept heading through the large saleroom on my way to the elevator. The auctioneer said, "SOLD" and banged his gavel with a solid-thud finality due the purchase of a Rembrandt etching. He



knew my permanent bidding number, so I just waved to him and went on my merry way.

Certainly, my layaway adventures at Freeman's were a different experience than the times I bought my school clothes on layaway or my prom dresses.

It was an improvement. I think.

My life has been defined by layaway - both as a retail practice and as symbol. In my struggles to acquire is reflected a genuine soul-problem: my wish for hopeful prospects, and the realization that I've spent a lot of time paying for future happiness that I've delayed indefinitely. Again and again.

Layaway is waiting.

Layaway is payments made with nothing to show for it until the bitter end.

With me and layaway it seems the "price is never paid in full."

Certainly, by now, I had imagined my life would be well beyond this point. It is not.

## The Red Balloon

### **Philadelphia, 1968**

The flight of *The Red Balloon* through the streets of Paris may have informed my own childhood understanding of the nature of balloons, of flight and impermanence. The film sat in memory so clearly, I incorporated its magic and superimposed it on my own world. On a Philadelphia morning after a parade, I clutched a red balloon by its thin string. I let it go. Caught it as it rose. Clutched it tightly, let it go, and caught it again. Over and over until I released my grip on the fragile string for a moment too long. My balloon drifted into the sky and I stood rooted to the ground, transfixed as it disappeared. It did not return to me but seemed to go above the

buildings and past the cloud line, perhaps out into space. It was gone for good.

My parents were young and I remember them that day as beautiful and with their promise stamped on their unlined faces and Irish good looks. Before the implosion of our lives caused by my father's alcoholism and subsequent loss of jobs, before my mother could no longer cope with the nature of what her marriage had become, I remember them. My mother wearing a navy and white dress and matching coat with her pitch-black hair, blue eyes and arched brows - Jacqueline Kennedy her style example. My father in his dark suits and crisp white shirts, a silver clip on the skinny 1960s ties he wore to work each morning.

The world changed slowly in South Philly and the Hippies, the anti Viet Nam movement, the very furor of the decade had not reached these blue collar streets, or my dad at his white collar job at a brokerage firm in Center City Philadelphia. My mother was naive and other than the big Kennedy button she wore during the

1960 Presidential campaign had been basically apolitical. Not until the day John Kerry testified to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee about Viet Nam was she awakened.

Later, she would be further politicized as a single mother in the 1970s but without any of the cachet of the activist. Her politics were personal and rooted in harsh realities. She would identify as an underdog and with the underdog her entire adult life but with a twist. Our situation was coded. We weren't poor, we were broke. We weren't alone, we were in it together. It could be worse, it could certainly be worse, was the underlying theme.

There always seems to be a reckoning. It's been my life-long conviction and my fear that our families' sufferings are passed down to us in a manner that we can't see or fathom, yet can't deny. If so, my inheritance was an acceptance that hardship and difficulties were easier to believe in than the notions of good fortune, luck and an easy happiness.

I've fought against this pessimism, but it has lurked in my subconscious and stayed a part of me.

My past has been shaped by women and women's struggles: my mother's battles to raise her children as a single mother, my grandmother's overwhelming tragedies, my own aloneness.

Widowed young, my grandmother would bury five children before the end of her life, two of those kids she put in the ground before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthdays. She suffered from dementia in her later years, which clearly was due to the fact that the pain of her losses was so unbearable that only escape to a child-like place could assuage her grief.

Her husband was a Philadelphia police officer. They met at a dance, my grandmother arriving by herself. Her loneliness was undone by my grandfather. He had a brawling, Irish family who weren't particularly nice, but numerous. He was well-known and admired in the neighborhood. Her life was instantly enlarged and energized through their marriage.

It would not last. First, their daughter would die of pneumonia. Then my grandfather would have a fatal heart attack. A year after his death, their eldest son would be diagnosed with leukemia.

After my grandfather's passing, my grandmother worked as a banquet waitress at the Quartermaster's in Philadelphia. For extra money she shucked oysters at a restaurant and also worked as a bathroom attendant at a hotel. Her life was hard work, yet she retained a dignity in her bearing and was always, a lady. South Philly was a place known for its informality, and first-name only policy, yet my grandmother was spoken to and referred to as Mrs. Lavin. It was a mark of respect for a humble woman whose essence was one of dignity. Still, when I go to a hotel or restaurant that has a bathroom attendant, I am mortified. I tip the attendant but know it's wrong she has to work in a public restroom. It's as if she were my own then-young grandmother handing me the towel and I am disrespecting her by being there.

My mother was the youngest and my grandmother wanted her life to be easier than her own had been. She hoped for a post-card existence and marriage for her: *Greetings from Florida*. But my mother married a man who would never allow her happiness. My grandmother was angry at my mother for this error in judgment and showed that disappointment to her.

"The good, old days? There is no such thing as the good, old days," she told my mother.

It's true. The good, old days are best left to those whose memories are bright, happy. The rest of us keep moving forward, searching for a future that is bearable to look at each day. It is an elusive torment, but the women I've known have lived by its terms without question.

## Moving On, Staying in Place

### **Philadelphia - Rittenhouse Square - 1990**

I walked to work heading north on 18<sup>th</sup> Street. My goal was to get to Rindelaub's Bakery for a coffee with cream and an old-fashioned doughnut. The place was maddening. The testiness of the early-morning customers was matched by the crabbiness of the high-handed bakery staff. The tried-and-true method of the queue was not respected by the patrons or the employees at Rindelaub's. I was convinced the daily break-down of the line was due to my nemesis, the German. She ran the front counter with the strictness and imperial manner of an Austro-Hungarian Empress. She purposely skipped over certain customers to wait on her favorites. She would choose the patrons she



wished to serve and the rest of us had to pray for a reprieve. Each morning she would look right through me, picking some lucky bastard to my left and then one to my right, causing the agonizing pre-coffee wait. Still, I persisted on going to Rindelaub's twice a day, at 8:55 am and then again at 10:30 am for my second coffee.

I needed my coffee and doughnut and could barely muster the will to go to work without the proper caffeination. Work without coffee depressed me. My boss, David, ran a tight-ship and didn't care for lateness. One minute late was still late. He didn't accept my on-going feud with the German as a reputable excuse for tardiness. He never used the word "tardy," but as an ex-inmate of the Catholic school system, I knew what he was thinking.

My morning and my life were getting organized and ever so slightly regimented by David. Authority figures hate tardiness the way Republicans hate taxes and David was *the* authority figure in my world. He was

also the person who gave me an opportunity to work at an auction, a setting that was so out-of-reach to me that I hardly knew it existed until I randomly applied for a position at one. He had my loyalty for hiring me. I didn't want to lose my job because of a German bakery. The doughnuts weren't that good.

David Bloom was the Director of The Rare Book Department at Freeman's. His knowledge of literature, politics, and history was seemingly encyclopedic. The fact that the rest of Freeman's was run with the lenient attitude of 1970s parents sharing a joint with their teenage kids did not faze David in the slightest. He only knew one method of working: precisely. He was on time every morning, he took lunch at 1:00 pm, and he had a mission to put together four book sales a year. I was his assistant and he wanted me there at 9:00 am, doughnut and coffee or no doughnut and coffee. There to fulfill my part in creating the best quarterly sales of books, prints, autographs and ephemera that Freeman's could put together, based on available material.

Frustration in getting the best material was an ever-present concern. Freeman's, as a regional auction house in close proximity to New York, would often lose better consignments to the glamour of Christie's, Sotheby's and Swann. Still, fine objects showed up daily and we were all in the business of selling them to the highest bidder.

My work life was ordered by David's habits and by his insistence that I follow suit. He believed in the concept of finding freedom in structure and would explain to me again and again how this worked, who said it, and how I could apply it to my life. At 25, I could not comprehend how more order and more structure would free me. I understand it now completely and with some chagrin that I didn't listen to him more carefully back when he was offering me this guidance. Oh, I listened, but with the intention of changing his mind and rectifying what I saw as his stodginess.

"That is ridiculous. It makes no sense. How is structure going to free me?" I said each time the

subject came up in the book room, which was weekly, at least.

Usually, it was a topic of conversation whenever David was encouraging me to take an even more devoted approach to the work. Then, he would brandish the structure/freedom paradigm and I would parry with my skepticism.

The real wonder is that he didn't fire me just to get a reprieve from my asking him a million asinine questions and offering him my opinions on every matter under the sun with the conviction of absolute rightness that only a person 25 or under can manage.

David's advice infiltrated every part of my life and yet I hardly ever consciously took it. Most notably, he and his wife, Carolyn, instinctively didn't trust my boyfriend and gently encouraged me to find another man. And oh, how right they were. But I was under the semi-delusional impression that beneath his selfishness, my boyfriend, Chuck, was a good person. Despite witnessing actions that clearly

displayed an unfamiliarity with his conscience, I would not be swayed and persisted in seeing an honorable man where none existed.

My absurd sense of loyalty has always my been downfall. I have a streak of stubborn allegiance to the people I love that leads me on occasion to see a stronger and more worthy character than is there. Chuck may have treated me like the hired help, but I felt I was in pursuit of life and in my unnecessary gratitude to him, I ignored his weakness and his callous behavior.

Chuck had a studio apartment in Center City Philadelphia. When I first moved in with him I was glad to be in the city where it seemed something was happening. Initially, I lived surrounded by his things. Then we moved to a bigger place in the same building. It was a duplex and we had the first floor, the basement level and a small patio. With my house account/layaway plan at Freeman's, I was now in a position to imprint my emerging taste on a space I

could call mine, and that had potential. This apartment would be a home and I was anxious to create a tasteful, pretty and complete environment for what I saw as our LIFE.

The trouble with all this optimism was that Chuck was not the right man for me. Our energies didn't match, and our notions on important items like character, honesty and honor were poles apart. He wanted an easy way through life and I did not have the family money or resources to provide that for him. It was a backwards relationship where I identified as the person who would have to provide for him. He rarely displayed any like anxiety for my well-being and future. He was underemployed, yet ambitious. He had a solid middle class upbringing that he thought trumped my working class background, but he lacked a moral compass. He wanted the "finer things," those that offered beauty and permanence, yet he saw people as disposable.

But I'd made a choice and saw only one direction: forward. In my mind, my job at Freeman's Auction offered an opportunity to live differently than my mother, who had struggled for much of her life. Freeman's was a peek under the curtain, a chance to witness a world that was wholly new. Chuck was the man in my life, and with enough encouragement from me, I naively thought we would be happy. I pushed forward.

How did I even get here? I often wondered. While it wasn't on a par with the New York houses, it was an amazing place, and a considerable way from the tiny, sweatbox apartment I had grown up in. That place was situated over a hairdresser's and from there to Freeman's was a far journey – one taken without the necessary class cues and skills that ease the way. From the beginning of my tenure in the Rare Book Department, I was continually inundated with unknown situations that I had to efficiently process in order to avoid social disaster.

My first day and the auction house was hosting a cocktail party. Great! Day one and there was an event that I had to navigate.

Fantastic.

I needed a dress, shoes. It was to be a dressy affair. Men have it so easy. Put on a blue blazer and knot a tie slightly haphazard and they were set. God, I was so scared. I stood in my taupe heels and red dress, confident only that the dress was not overdone. I knew overdressed was a worse sin than borderline underdressed. I would err on the side of caution when it came to clothes and uncertain social situations. I knew being embarrassingly overdressed would show desperation and I was vested in avoiding that label. I would not be marked as desperate, clueless, with a whispered, "what is *she* doing here?"

My fear was entirely plausible. My life had already had fair portions of both humiliation and harsh judgment. I wasn't anxious to continue the trend in my new life.



Here I was surrounded by people who made a living selling the things that other people had spent a lifetime acquiring. And most of them only parted with their belongings due to death. I was now officially a seller of estates, a person who hunted for treasure amid closed boxes where anything could appear at any moment. Ahh, the era before EBay, and the online giants when there was still a possibility to make a real, live discovery. Freeman's was also a place populated by characters who would defy the logic of sitcom television. If a show with these particular people was aired on a Monday night, it would seem the writers had thrown darts at a board marked "CHARACTERS" and chose randomly. These people didn't fit naturally but as a cohesive whole it somehow worked. At least during that brief time, when for me, as the saying goes, "the world was young."

It wasn't all glamour, particularly in the book department. At that time, rare books were a man's business and while the dealers loved a fine leather binding or a pristine dust jacket on a modern first

edition, they were a tough bunch. This was business. Period. At Freeman's, the fancy-pants shenanigans of the other departments were not tolerated in the book department. To even get the job, I had to pass a "box test." This consisted of me lifting a box of books to prove I wouldn't wilt when it came time to unpack pallet after pallet of them. I didn't even hesitate when asked during the interview to hoist a box and I lifted the heavy load without a problem.

What made me take the job was the fact that a few minutes before he gave me the box test, David showed me a 15<sup>th</sup> Century bible. It wasn't exceptionally rare, but I'd never held an object that was so old, so valuable, so *worthy*.

How could it have lasted so long? My family could barely manage not to lose our crappy silverware. It would get accidentally thrown out in the trash, or the cheap stainless tines would bend. Then we would be down to four forks again and have to go back to the five and dime for more, since there were five of us.

Yet, here was a book that was over 450 years old. Generations had taken care to keep it in one piece. It was all here: the pages pristine, the binding tight. It had been cared for and now lay in my hand, while David instructed me to support the book's spine. Don't greedily grab the book and slam open the pages. Patience and care were required.

I found out later that my naïve but decided rapport with the material and my stellar box skills got me the job. I was also informed that I beat out 23 other people including a Yale graduate. I presume this was my cue to either be proud of myself for (apparently, miraculously) doing better at an interview than someone who went to Yale or impressed with my new job: Yale graduates were interested in the position; therefore, it must be a worthy endeavor. I felt neither impressed nor proud. I felt only glad that I had a job.

Later on, I wondered how I had managed to land the position over so many others and realized my soon-

to-be boss, David, liked me as a dark-horse candidate. Did that make me the James Polk of the auction business? Also, having worked for years, I was comfortable with interviews. Plus, they needed someone who was unafraid to get their hands dirty and I was apparently one hell of a box lifter.

## The Red Balloon

### **South Philadelphia, Summer, 1970**

"You have two choices: You can put him away or you can put him in front of the T.V. with the rest of the kids and he'll learn from them."

In 1970, this is what passed for liberal thinking when your kid was born with Down syndrome. My mother, who was a born-liberal despite a Catholic, working class background, agreed with the pediatrician's assessment of my brother's options. She saw her two choices and decided she would keep her youngest child, this little boy with a sunken chest so deep you could fill it with water, this boy with the extra chromosome, with the label: retarded. In 1970, My 28 year old mother knew, everyone knew, that the casually

flung "You could put him away," was a nicely stylized way of saying, "throw him into an institution and he'll be fine"(let him rot).

My mother understood instinctively that "putting Tommy away" was a potentially nightmarish situation on the order of a torture house. It wasn't so long ago that the developmentally disabled were often relegated to a fun house of horrors at these places where we "put them away." So, my mother took the other option and plopped my brother in front of the T.V. with the rest of us as soon as she could possibly do so: once he survived two bouts of pneumonia. After that, he would sit in his playpen watching *The Brady Bunch* with his brother and sisters. Tommy would later be deemed "trainable" as opposed to "educable," colorful terms that were then in use to characterize how far he would be expected to achieve during his life. We didn't care about his labels. We accepted him. He was ours.

The weekend he was born was hot. I wore one of my favorite matching shorts-and-top sets which my

mother had bought in three confectioner colors. I followed my father around South Philly with my brother Marty who was 11 months my senior and my little sister, Mary, in tow. My father carried Mary in his arms while we roamed around. We were following his anger and frustration that his newborn son was not right. We were trailing behind his shame and confusion.

Even though there was a new life, it was damaged, apparently. And in that mid-summer heat as I followed behind my father in the humid air, it was crystal clear that life was happening in a bad way. I grew tired from walking for what seemed like hours, never certain where we were going and why we couldn't sit down, couldn't stop, couldn't have a cold drink.

When we arrived at my grandparents' house, my paternal grandmother offered a dry, rouged cheek to me. She would never let you kiss her on the lips, just the cheek. She always said she had a cold and didn't want you to get sick. She was not a warm person. We

called her "Nanny." Not Grandmom or Gran, or Gram or Mom-Mom, but Nanny.

Strange and formal.

My father and grandmother began to argue, screaming at each other. This in itself was distressing as they never fought. My father reserved his alcoholic, emotional upheavals for his wife. For Nanny, who he adored, it was always a pleasant manner, a few laughs, a raised glass together, and the dutiful, loving son.

The fighting meant we would have to leave. I was tired. I wanted to stay. Nanny and Pop-Pop's house was comforting. It was old-fashioned and filled with oddities: window seats in the second-floor sitting room; a pink, claw-foot tub in the bathroom; a roll-top desk whose nooks and crannies piqued my curiosity. I would pretend it held all my secrets in its cubbyholes.

During that long day, my father battled his fate, almost unaware that his kids were with him on the



journey. He ended the argument with his mother by leaving, still furious but perhaps resigned to losing this fight.

What had happened? Why couldn't we go home? I was the 5 ½ year old equivalent of beside myself when we left my grandparents' big, three-story-rowhouse on Ritner Street and returned to the South Philly summer.

Later, it would become clear what happened that weekend: my father was on a bender. He was drunk and distraught that his newborn son was mentally disabled. Tommy had just been born and he and my mother were both still in the hospital. My parents had been told that Tommy had Down syndrome. This was a calamity to my father. In that time and place what loomed ahead was shame for him, institutionalization for his son, and maybe the knowledge his own fate was sealed.

After my mother returned home from the hospital, Dad told Marty and me, "Your brother is retarded." He was drunk and angry when he said it. Marty and I

panicked. We yelled and cried. We jumped up and down, frantic. Tears streamed down our faces.

I don't think we even knew what he meant by the word "retarded." But even if he had said that he was buying us bunches of cotton candy, and boxes of popcorn before taking us to visit a land of flowers, pixies and fairies, the yelling and drunken anger, would have frightened a 5 and 6 year old. And maybe he didn't care if we comprehended the facts, just as long as he got the desired reaction: maximum emotional fall-out.

What goal was he trying to achieve? Was it just the terror of a man with a worsening drinking problem which forced him to behave cruelly? Was it a lack of control by a man overburdened with the effort of trying to bury his shame? Was he so troubled he must be excused, whatever the motive? Maybe, he acted on the impulse of a moment, his words unremembered by him to this day.

Perhaps, he never wanted kids. Maybe his dreams for his life were different than this reality of wife, children, and job. Having a disabled child would have amped up the stakes and his fear. He certainly exhibited little patience for the process of raising children. Often, I've thought that deep-down he couldn't bear the thought one of his children would make good and do better than he had done with his life. He would later make choices that appeared calculated to keep his children down, and whether he committed these acts of neglect out of an innate and unconscious laziness or with a cold intent is not clear to me.

Why intentionally? If it wasn't deliberate, why did his choices seem purposeful? Now, it was his drinking. Later, it would be moving us out of South Philly to Upper Darby, which was not far as miles go, but an upheaval and a culture shock. It would be refusing to pay a proper amount of child support and refusing to pay for braces, tuition, clothes, or even to help us get a used car when we moved out of South

Philly. In Upper Darby, without a car, we each had to walk everywhere on our own two feet and carry everything with our own two hands.

Now, that I live in the New York metro area, I see that it is easier to live car-free in a city where you can send your laundry out and have it delivered. Where you can go to the local grocery store, shop and have it all brought to your door. You can live without a car quite nicely. But once we left South Philly, having no car meant struggle, burdens: physically carrying groceries, waiting for rides, being dependent on the largesse of someone to give you a lift when you needed one. Walking in the cold while a friend or neighbor rides past you, too busy to pick you up; feeling like a beggar after they drove by, maybe with a cheery honk of their horn.

Sometimes, I'd wonder if my father ever drove past us on the street while we carried our bags of food, or walked in the cold. It would have been the perfect embodiment of his relationship to his family.

In my mind, there is powerful symbolism in the act of driving past someone, leaving them (literally) on the side of the road. And while no one owed us a lift, the power of that "leaving-alone" resonates with me to this day.

Growing up, when I began to notice that my father didn't seem to want our lives to improve, it filled me with a sense of dread and shame. But during the terrible summer days after my brother Tommy was born, uncertainty was the key. Fueled by alcohol, my father was unable to disconnect from his desperation. This culminated in us wandering like vagabonds across the neighborhood. The little gypsy parade with my Dad was the antithesis of his history in this place. His roots ran deep here as did my mother's. We had no business straggling around like outsiders.

It made me afraid.

In the past, these South Philly streets had always felt friendly and compact. The corner bakeries were fairylands with pink-iced cupcakes and Italian

cookies. The streets were crowded with kids, their parents sitting out on the pavement in front of their little rowhouses. They sat on beach chairs talking long into those summer nights. As young children, we stayed up late, safe in an insular world of people who lived their entire lives in Philadelphia. The neighbors were on a first name basis. Children called adults by their given names. There wasn't a formal use of surnames.

It wasn't "Hi, Mrs. Esposito, Hi, Mr. Holmes."

It was "Hi, Mitzi, Hi, Joe."

As a child you had the sense you knew these people from forever and would know them always. There was Rita, Mitzi, Pat, Alice, Ethel, Clara, and another Clara. We differentiated the Claras this way:

1) Clara.

2) Clean Clara. It wasn't that Clara number one wasn't clean; it's just that Clean Clara was constantly attacking dirt. If she wasn't cleaning her

windows, then she was scrubbing her front steps, armed with buckets of scalding water.

This was a place complete in itself, a fully manageable world that required little from outsiders. We were natives. We belonged here: my father, my mother, all of us.

As kids, the highlight of our day was the appearance of the pretzel man. He had an old-fashioned push cart, right out of a photograph of the Lower East Side at the turn of the century. He didn't sell anything else but soft pretzels. He was a purist. He wore shorts and a t-shirt, his arm muscles ropey and veined from pushing his cart up and down the narrow South Philly streets.

It wasn't until many years later that it occurred to me that most people my age wouldn't have a memory of a street vendor with a push cart. It's a city image from a way-gone time, a fragmented glimpse into another era.

When we heard his bell, my brother and I would run down our street as fast as our pre-school legs would carry us. Our hero would give us our pretzels. We didn't pay him because he would collect the money from our mother when he and his cart reached the end of our block. It was part of our routine: playing on the street, splashing in the little pool in our tiny cement back yard, watching television, retrieving our pretzels from the pretzel man, and ending with the sounds of our neighbors talking and laughing as they sat in their beach chairs on the sidewalk every warm evening.

There was a sense of the village in South Philly at that time. In a communal fashion, the lives of the South Philly Italians, and the Irish who lived among them, were vividly and loudly public. The kids in this neighborhood played outside all day and into the evening because it was safe. No one kept to themselves, or minded their own business. Their neighbors were their business — you were their business. They knew your mother, father, grandparents,



aunts, uncles. If you were there, you were on their collective radar and consequently, under their supervision.

Sitting on the beach chairs in front of their rowhouses, scrubbing their front steps to a gleam, chatting in the skinny alleyways behind the houses, always talking, talking. In the movies, Italian-Americans are depicted as forever eating, but the wildness in these women was in their willingness to express an opinion. It was in the talking. They were never passive or afraid. They all seemed to be married to men named Jimmy, Bill, or Joe, but it's the women I remember the best. They were definitive, vivid.

And they never forgot you, either. To an almost embarrassing degree. My mother took me to visit our old street when I was 13. I had not seen these ladies in a few years and now I was growing up - developing. In South Philly, those Italian neighbor ladies would be thrilled when you finally got breasts. Boobies

would send them into spasms of remembering the past:  
Before you got boobies, when you were five and waiting  
for them to cross you to the other side of the street.  
Before you got boobies, when your doll's baby carriage  
lost a wheel because one of their sons crashed it and  
you didn't cry because there were no other girls on  
that treeless street to play with, so you accepted the  
rough, boy-rules. Now, at 13, you had boobs and you  
were a woman, and they knew you *when*. I think they saw  
it in terms of continuity and proof of life's  
certainties. Who was I to argue? I had just gotten  
these boob things and if the South Philly ladies  
thought that initiated me into the secret society of  
womanhood, it was difficult to argue with them.  
Besides, who is to say they were incorrect?

My family had moved away from Winton Street long  
before my future 36Cs were an uncomfortable reality in  
my young teenage life. And this, the first glimpse our  
former neighbors had of me since I was a sturdy,  
tomboyish little girl, had them heaping praise upon my  
mother in respect to my development. They raved and

cooed, "Oh, Patsy, (my mother) she's got boobies." Oh, Patsy, look at her. I can't believe it."

Neither could I. I was mortified and stood in the cement yard of the rowhouse wishing I had worn an over-sized sweatshirt instead of a tight, French-cut t-shirt. There was no escape from their well-meant, verbal ministrations, however.

When you live in the glare of an old-fashioned South Philly neighborhood even for a short time, you are marked for life. Unfriendly, snobby people aren't just unlikeable, they are incomprehensible. They are frightening. Truly secretive people are unknown creatures you are particularly unprepared to manage.

I can testify to this.

When my father moved us to a weird house just outside Philadelphia in Upper Darby, we left the closeness of South Philly behind. It was the summer before I entered the second grade and the change was drastic for us. Upper Darby sits on the edge of West Philadelphia. It wasn't a suburb in the traditional

sense but a tired place on the city border with the requisite cramped houses and worn out streets. The house we moved to had been converted to two apartments. Our place was on the ground floor and had a small grassy yard. There was a small apartment above ours.

The house was wedged next to a rug shop on a street with a lot of traffic. The neighbor who rented the tiny 2<sup>nd</sup> floor was a little-seen guy with a green Triumph he kept in the drive-way. He would occasionally make an appearance in our world, but essentially, we had the building to ourselves. It was an oddly situated place. There were no other kids on the street. We made do with each other. We would watch the cars drive by on West Chester Pike, counting how many VW bugs we saw go past. We played Red Rover, using the grassy mound at the side of the rug store as our starting point. We sat in the yard, astonished by the tall shrubs that our father swore was really a peach tree.

In the move from South Philly to Upper Darby we traded in the casual, first-names-only environment of the Italian neighborhoods of the city for a more uptight arena. Gone were the neighbors who knew you since birth, gone were the lives lived on the sidewalk, and the beach chair conversations on muggy nights. We were now living on the fringe, among people trying for the slightest upward mobility. The place was as relentlessly working class but somehow it felt much more cramped and isolated.

My parents were still together, tied by four kids and my father's alcoholism. The house was chosen by my father and me and rented without my mother's consent. She didn't know what it looked like until moving day. It had an old, built-in spice cabinet on the kitchen wall that smelled of ingredients wildly unfamiliar to me. A spice cabinet seemed mysterious and I took great pains to tell my mother she would love the new house because of this built-in marvel.

I was now a chooser of apartments.

My mother hated the place and it would be the scene of much upheaval in her life. Years later, I would feel guilty when I began to understand my part in renting the place: I had informed her it was beautiful, I had talked up the spice cabinet, I had chosen the apartment that would be the setting for the end of her marriage, and the worst year of her life. I would come to think it was essentially my error in judgment that had confined us to this apartment for a year of isolation and unhappiness. This place where we would be refugees.

But it was also at this house that Tommy became real to me. He had been in and out of hospitals after his birth and my clearest memories of him as a separate person start in this place. He was healthy by then and it didn't seem like anything was wrong with him. He crawled around on the floor, fast as lightning. We would change his diapers, watch television with him and feed him. He was our little brother and appeared perfectly fine to us.

My father was more of a concern at this point. He wasn't working, and would promise to take us places and then forget what he said to us. He did watch us while my mother worked. Since, he had lost his position at the brokerage firm, my mother found a job as a waitress at a restaurant. She worked at the Melrose Diner back down in South Philly until midnight and then would take the subway, the EL and a bus home to Upper Darby, late at night. She wore her waitress uniform on the commute home, carrying cash tips in her pocketbook. Travelling late at night while wearing a waitress uniform screams "I have cash on me!" and made her a walking target. This went unnoticed by my father and perhaps, herself. And really, the only one who took her money was my father.

That summer would end in the break-up of their marriage, and my father's first serious attempts to get sober. My mother would get \$700.00 dollars from my Dad's father, who we all called Pop-Pop. He was a sweet man who loved his wife, his crazy sons, his daughters, all their spouses, his grandchildren, the

Church, his work and his dog, Ginger. When he gave my mother the money, it was the first time he decided to hand cash not to my father, but directly to her. And finally, a little wised up, she would keep it for herself and not give it over to her husband.

She would use the money to start a new life for us. She moved us to the other side of Upper Darby to a tiny apartment over a store on a busy commercial block. It was less isolated than the previous house but had the dubious distinction of being on a street with two taprooms, a luncheonette, two hairdressers and a gas station. Still, we were within a block of two Italian delis, a butcher, a seafood store and a bakery. Hallelujah! It wasn't South Philly, but it was a real neighborhood again.

This new apartment was in the parish of St. Alice and I was glad to be there. The previous parish of St. Laurence was okay, except for two things. One, our lives had been falling apart in that crazy house located in that parish, and two, the teacher I had at



St. Laurence had taken a decided dislike to me. The only kind thing she did for me all year was on the last day of school. I was reading a book about angels and showed it to her. She told me I could keep it.

The little girl in the book died at the end.

The rest of the year this teacher was peevish and borderline nasty to me, despite my good grades.

Another, slightly strange note at this school was the statue of St. Laurence himself that we passed daily. He had his hand on a gridiron and it was whispered that he had been burned alive. Passing good, old St. Laurence everyday was alarming. Hopefully, St. Alice wouldn't turn out to be a martyr, too. We'd had enough of martyrdom.

Our new apartment was in the Bywood section of Upper Darby, and was a two bedroom situated over a hairdresser. It wasn't fancy, but my mother genuinely thought it was a better place for us to grow up than the Philly neighborhoods she would have been able to afford. She saw her choice as Upper Darby or the

Kensington section of Philadelphia. Going back to South Philly was not even a consideration for her. I think she wanted to embark on this new phase of her life without the added pressure of family, friends and neighbors as witnesses. And while it was true that the Bywood section of Upper Darby was considered a better neighborhood than Kensington, it was a difficult thing for outsiders to comprehend.

*How can you tell? How do you know it is a better place to live?*

*It isn't clear to the untrained eye.*

I think her choice was made with one simple fact in mind. My mother knew her kids weren't hard. Oh, we could endure, and knew not to expect much in the way of tangible things but we weren't street tough. So, Upper Darby's Bywood offered a safer environment than Kensington could give us.

We thought South Philly to Bywood was a lateral move and that South Philly to Kensington would have been not only a descent, but much more difficult to

escape from in the end. This point made perfect sense to my mother but was too hazy for anyone unused to the neighborhood life to even hazard a guess.

*How did we get here?*

The answer to that question was complicated and the aftermath was still being played out with the slightest tremors and aftershocks decades later.

## Moving On, Staying in Place

### **Philadelphia - circa 1990**

Funnily enough, things never held sway over me. A childhood of not having did not create a desire to acquire. I would have recurring and glancing experiences with objects that would further my amazement in how people are hypnotically attached to their things.

My first inkling that money did not equal good taste happened rather haphazardly. High School. Ron. His parents lived in the real suburbs in a single house with a spacious yard. One afternoon, my friends and I went with Ron to his parents' house. He took us in the back way. As we were leaving, he kindly showed us the living room. It was literally cordoned off with

a velvet rope tied to a golden pedestal. The furniture was, Ron informed us, "antique, real antiques."

But of course! One wouldn't segregate plaid den furniture; it would have to be antique to get the velvet rope treatment.

What the furniture really was (in addition to "antique, real antiques"), was hideous. It was the ugliest, most prickly looking Victorian furniture imaginable. The room was not for use by the kids. Ron's parents needn't have worried because no one would want to sit on this stuff to watch TV or to tussle around with a date. Making out on its stiff horsehair would have been decidedly uncomfortable.

I gazed in disbelief at this room that was barred like a period room at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and I instinctively understood one thing: it was a tacky thing to do to exclude your family from the living room because you bought prissy furniture. Things should be used and enjoyed, not left to rot in a darkened room that no one could use.

When I landed at Freeman's I began a formal education on the nature of acquisition. I had possessed almost nothing of value in my life except for the throw-away. Maybe, a pair of jeans I particularly liked, or shoes I thought were cool, but nothing that was worthy of saving for generations. We just didn't have access to possessions of permanence. But at auction, I had a front row seat to witness how people acquired items, or coveted them, or attached significance to them or even attempted to retain them long after they could no longer afford to keep them.

I was continually shocked by the stories that were attached to the acquisition and divestiture of fine possessions. One day, a lady came into the book room who was known to my boss, David. She was in her early-50's, possibly younger, but she looked tired, worn out and much older than 50. She had a fine voice, modulated tones. She wasn't sweet or nice. She was overwhelmed by her life and its unexpected turns and this manifested in sourness.

Her father had worked at the Wister Institute in Philadelphia. He had been a respected and well-known doctor or scientist. She was his devoted daughter and fiercely proud of his legacy. I think she knew her own life would never equal the interest and excitement of his and she clung to his memory accordingly. She wanted to sell a few of his effects and was there to discuss this with my boss.

I remember her teeth. She had small, small pointy teeth that looked as if they'd been filed down to nubs. Why she didn't get false teeth, I don't know. I'm certain she couldn't afford caps, but perhaps a bonding or even dentures would have looked better. Here I was, diagnosing her dental needs and coming up with a treatment plan for this woman who I didn't know at all. It wasn't like I had the best teeth, but I just knew that false teeth would be better for her. I felt she would get treated better if she had decent false teeth instead of her poor, filed down ones.

Later, I would find that she had had an unfortunate experience on the nature of possessions. She had rented a storage locker and had many of her father's things stowed away there. When she couldn't pay the rent on the locker, the storage place sold the stuff to the highest bidder. A Philadelphia book dealer found out about the sale of her storage locker and knew there was a strong likelihood she would have good scientific material because of her father's work. He went to the sale and happily bought her possessions and later consigned them to Freeman's. As he gleefully told me the story, it was obvious that he had scant sympathy for her plight. A good deal was a good deal and fine material was fine material. Auction was a matter-of-fact world, despite the lacquered veneer of society imposed upon it.

For the want of a small amount of money, she lost items that would have kept her afloat a while longer. She was desperate. She tried to hide this behind a stiff, formal manner. With her small, pointy teeth and her reduced circumstances, it seemed to me that to



take advantage of her was the height of cruelty. Could no one lend her a few bucks for the storage locker? I understood the value of a good deal as well as anyone but what was different with her situation was her relationship to the things she lost. Her father's possessions were not only her past but her future. They connected her to her parent, and they had financial value. They offered a chance for a better future for her and were her legacy. But, she was the story of auction as much as a family selling the possessions of some recently-deceased Main Line doyenne. She was the story of auction as much as the buyer who collected as a hobby, easily affording the items he bid on in some pricey catalogued sale.

I was caught emotionally between a fear of what her life had become and anger at the unfairness of the treatment she received.

Witnessing these moral hazards and the life and death equations implicit in the sale of personal objects made my work at Freeman's seem grown up, a

bona fide *job*. My friends from the neighborhood were working and making more money but what I did for a living was an unknown and in my innocence, it felt substantial to me. I could never have foreseen this job and it certainly placed me on an unexpected path. I enjoyed the hustle of the sale days and loved the good deals. I had an appreciation for the lure of auction and the romance of it. But I knew I didn't fit the mold of the other girls who worked there. Firstly, I was in the Book Department, which immediately made me suspect. Our department ran on a different vibe from the rest of the house. Often, I would go all day without any contact with the other girls who worked at Freeman's. David and I were together all day, companionably going about the business of putting together the next book sale. I would unpack books and sort them into categories. I often got lost in the material, particularly the photo and art books, grazing my way through their pages for minutes at a time.

After my initial sorting, David would refine my selections, finding the material that had value, culling and culling through massive amounts of books, magazines, ephemera, prints, photographs, autographs. David wrote the catalogue with its precise bibliographic notations and I would proofread it. He was an explorer, giving the future buyers the all-important information on the condition of the books. Was the dust jacket chipped? Was it a tight binding? Was the book bound in leather or cloth? Did the paper have foxing, that orange-brownish discoloration? Book collectors need to know. They don't just want to know, they need to understand condition. They want all the particulars about this book they may bid on come sale day. Is it a first edition? A book club edition? Is it rare? Is it weird? Is it beautiful? Does it fulfill their desire for whatever it is that drives their passion?

The dealers used the catalogue as a form of shorthand. What is going up on the block? What is available that will suit their needs, their clients'

wants? Did the catalogue overlook a potential gem? Can they get a good deal?

They kept cordial relations with David and were his colleagues, but if he made a mistake with any item, they were sure to discover it. If he overlooked something and miscataloged a book, the ordinary buyer might not catch it. But one of the dealers would absolutely recognize the mistake. To be the only bidder to comprehend an item's true value meant both a potential payoff for the dealer and a loss for the house and the consignor.

Years of the layaway life made me a canny recognizer of a good value. In that respect, I was of a similar mindset as the dealers. They were not just proprietors of goods, but recognizers of value. That was the method for success as much as a client list. I was just learning and it takes years to cultivate the knowledge and the eye for material, though. I never thought when I was using layaway to buy my school clothes and prom dresses that one day I would be able

to apply my bargain shopping techniques to acquire china sets, amber Depression glass and drop leaf tables and 19<sup>th</sup> Century engravings of European views.

But I did. Life is strange that way.

My job gave me a sense of hope. But every day I went to work, I still returned home to my boyfriend, Chuck. I loved him. Why I felt this way about him is now a mystery to me. He treated me like a second-class citizen and I saw myself as a person who didn't accept that treatment. My mother had had no choice but to allow for that behavior from bosses, landlords, and various parish folk. But me? I was the strong one who would get out, who wouldn't ever be stuck. I would take no shit. From anyone. And generally, I didn't. What I failed to realize was that I was conditioned to not even recognize when I was being treated badly. Just as long as the perpetrator hid their behavior with a modicum of kindness, I would accept the smallest portion and be grateful for it. Chuck saw that potential in me and his lazy nature must have

recognized that his life would be easier with a person who wouldn't demand much from him. So, we got together.

He was completely willing to let me work hard. If he had a piece of furniture to move, hell, he'd ask me to help. And I mean, really, why he should bother one of his buddies? He knew I wouldn't say no.

He was also completely willing to have me miss the better things in our limited social life. When I was home on any given weekend night, we'd have draft beer at McGlinchey's. It was cheap and we could stay all night on a few bucks. But oh, if I went home to see my family? Then he went to the bar at the Barclay Hotel for single-malt Scotch and a high-end hang.

Rent due? We'll get it together, baby. But oh, his high school friend (the rich one he needed to impress). Dude was getting married, so \$150.00 for a blue blazer to go with his pressed khakis and natty tie. For the wedding, for the wedding. So life with Chuck was not as rosy and I had hoped. Like my

mother, I kept making payments for a future happiness that wasn't going to arrive. It was here I learned that relationships could not be handled using the simple method I employed to further my life. I used a basic calculation:

**Hard Work + Belief in a Future Good = Happiness**

With Chuck, I irrationally thought I could negotiate my future with this theorem. I didn't understand the situation, or the character of the man I had chosen.

This life with a job where I could be fairly respected seemed a far cry from my mother's life, steeped as it was in an ever-present threat to her dignity. I was left in peace to unpack box after box of books, sifting through the dust, to find one compelling item after another. My mother would wait tables, clean houses and finally break free of hard, manual labor to become a secretary.

Later, I would make up for my brief respite from hard labor when I would end up waiting tables, working as a banquet waitress, doing customer service, being

an internet cruise travel agent, and finally  
culminating in working as an assistant - a thankless  
job, but it pays the bills. Did I attempt to re-  
create her life of unappealing and unfulfilling jobs?  
Or was I caught between my artistic ambitions and a  
need for freedom? My failures and my reasons for them  
belong to me alone and I own them free and clear.



## The Red Balloon

### **Upper Darby, PA - 1970s**

In the end, a few years after he broke the news to me and my brother Marty that our baby brother was disabled, it was ironically that extra chromosome - the genetic fluke of Tommy's birth - that was my father's way out, the key to his exit strategy. My mother left him, unable to raise Tommy and the rest of us in the midst of the existence he had forced us to live. He was now free to pursue an easier life.

Tommy was Tommy. Yes, he had Down syndrome and that was inconvenient and cause for concern. What would his future be? Would we make it through till we all grew up? I distinctly feared the death of my mother, knowing that it would mean the separation of the family and that Tommy would be put away. I understood that my father would not keep us together if my mother died. He would unload us, all of us, but

Tommy would be the first to go. It was imperative that she live. As I grew up and this reality began to sink in more clearly with each passing year, my worry increased. I would lay awake running the averages, hoping for the best and planning alternatives for our futures if she did die. I never managed to come up with a creditable plan to care for my siblings if this event should happen. No wonder I spend half my life catastrophizing, teasing out the worst case scenarios when I have a problem. The fact that I hide my catastrophe thinking from almost every person I know does make it easier to manage. Of course, there are a select few who get to see that catastrophizing side and most of them likely wish they hadn't been a witness to my emotional worst-case scenarios.

I have a need to prepare for any and all eventualities and that includes delving into the abyss, extracting the most terrible possibilities, then making a plan, and a back-up plan. I hold these plans and back-up plans close to me. And I use them to

cope with whatever is heading straight for me - real or imagined, actual or hypothetical.

*Most people do not live this way.*

*Most people do not live this way.*

*Do they?*

*No, they do not live this way.*

*I live this way.*

It is nonsense. More nonsensical than my family's naïve and endless hopes for the future.

I think I placed my happiness on a layaway plan, one where I will receive this elusive thing after I make all my payments. Except, I never get the item I am diligently paying for week after week, year after year. I just pay for it.

In regards to Tommy's likely fate if my mother had died when we were children, I am convinced that with my catastrophizing I did not fall far from the mark. My father would have been unable to cope with

his kids, let alone the developmentally disabled one with the slanty, blue eyes, the tiny nose and the thick tongue. He would not have been judged for dumping Tommy or any of us. We were not surrounded by people who cared about our welfare if it meant actually taking action. We were one person away from our family unit being annihilated: Tommy to a home for disabled children and the rest of us to foster care or some Catholic residential facility for unwanted kids. The stakes were extremely high and I knew it and certainly my mother knew it.

Tommy was always one of those lucky individuals that everyone likes. This has nothing to do with his disability. He just got people and they got him. His innocence and lack of guile never left him and are still intact, even as an adult. There was always an ease with him and his genuineness was refreshing. People responded to it.

He had an adorable face and was adept at a Chaplin-like physical humor. Since, his speech was

never good, he learned to convey things with his face. His expressions were varied, rich. He may have had the IQ of a small child but socially, he was quite smart. He understood humor and could be funny. Sometimes without realizing it, but many times with a full intention - a roll of his big blue eyes or a little dance of joy. His language skills suffered because his tongue was thick and unwieldy in his mouth, but when he was motivated he could get across an entire story in a handful of words. He was an unconscious specialist in brevity, able to use a minimum of words to create an entire narrative - a brief yet complete sketch.

Once, we were at a party at my mom's friend's house. Tommy was there. He was happy, as usual. Not saying much, as usual. Apparently, he had a recent family drama on his mind. Suddenly, his voice rang out for the entire party to hear. It was loud and clear. Bell-like. He said four words but they were enough to illustrate an entire scenario.

"Marty. Cops. Mommy. Cry."

In four short words, all my mother's friends knew that my older brother, Marty, had been arrested and this had made my mother cry. And it was true. Marty and a buddy had been hauled in to the police department for underage drinking. My mother and the other mother had to bail them out in the middle of the night. My mother was pissed. She cried. She yelled. Tommy soaked in the entire story and spit it out over potato salad and hot roast beef sandwiches at a party.

"Marty. Cops. Mommy. Cry."

Hemingway would have been proud. Not an adjective in sight. I've yet been able to equal this feat. Someday, I will come up with four words that tell such a complete story. I will throw away conjunctions, compound verbs and complex sentences. Toss away clauses, phrases and adverbs and get right down to it.

"Marty. Cops. Mommy. Cry."

The sheer brilliance of it astounds me.

Our lives did feel awkward. And we feared embarrassment and exposure to ridicule. Because of our poverty, our little apartment over a store and that we were Catholic kids whose parents were separated, embarrassment and shame were not unknown visitors. I think now that perhaps our very isolation and a family structure that differed from the neighborhood norm may have helped us better navigate Tommy's disability. What did it matter if he was "retarded?" So what? We weren't ashamed of him, just where we lived, sometimes. He may have had limitations but he loved us.

We played endless versions of duck-duck goose. Tommy was obsessed with it. We watched him as he grew fascinated with a paint brush, rubbing the soft bristles with his fingers. It soothed him, calmed him and was his version of a blankie. Except for school, he kept it with him and would even sleep with it. It lulled him. Before the paint brush, he would sometimes sit in the living room tossing together paperback books or silverware over and over in an almost

autistic repetition. These activities were unusual but not terrible or invasive, just an edge of compulsivity that likely relieved the stress of too little room, too much noise and not enough fun. We all suffered those irritations but Tommy was unable to fully articulate his distress. Without the verbal outlet, he relied on repetitive patterns to give him structure, solace.

Several of Tommy's peers would be placed or "put away" at young ages. Some were just little kids when they were placed in institutions. "Put away" was how it was referred to at that time. In an era of enlightened parents and inclusion in education, it is hard to imagine now that a small child would be sent to an institution because of an extra chromosome. We passionately did not want that for Tom. It just was unthinkable. He was easy. He was ZEN. He could hang with us, and like us, he learned not to expect too much or ask for a lot.



Our salvation was tied to Tom: he was our shared mission and was the catalyst for keeping us intact, whole. No institution for him. He was sunny-faced, funny, endearing and one of us from the beginning. We were devoted to him. My mother shored up the courage to leave my father in large part because of Tommy. She was released from the inertia of fear to make a run for another way. She didn't care about the Church, the gossip, the worsening financial situation, the difficulties which lay ahead. She knew she had to get out. And she did. Tommy stirred her to action.

Tommy's disability wasn't the real problem. That fell to poverty. To isolation. To the slog.

As children living in poverty we came to learn early the world could be judgmental and unfriendly. There was no relief from the grind. My brothers and sister and I were hot and sticky and never quite comfortable during our entire childhoods. It was hard to find humor in discomfort and even when we laughed at the situations we found ourselves in due to this

aggravation of poverty, we were still hampered by the sweatiness of the effort.

Laughing. Fighting. And our favorite: magical thinking. I would tell my little sister that it was okay we were stuck in our apartment all summer because maybe if we were down at the shore, something bad would happen. Maybe, we were being protected, I would routinely advise her. I assured her it was all for the best and that someday we would be happy. It made sense to us as children but there is a life-long damage from this magical, excuse-making thinking:

- 1) No one understands this thinking in the normal world.
- 2) The habit of accepting less becomes quickly ingrained. And a life-long practice.

Now, I shudder at these rationalizations even though I realize I was just a little girl and logic wouldn't have been a strong suit. I was justifying our reduced circumstances in the hopes there was a reason for the situation. Maybe, we were poor in exchange for

a future good? Maybe, it was part of a bigger, unseen plan.

Attached to our magical thinking was our tremendous will to escape the fate most adults we met thought would be our future and our just due. When you are poor, the outside world is truly that - outside. There was a justification attached: since we were poor, begrudgingly, we were allowed to exist, but not to thrive.

Tommy's disability in many ways would be a saving grace. He would bind us together tightly enough so we identified as a unit - comrades stuck in the same foxhole instead of the random urchins the outside world would see.

## Moving On, Staying in Place

### **Philadelphia - 1992**

I took the Crescent City back to Philadelphia from New Orleans. I carried my clothes in a knapsack. I had three packs of Benson & Hedges, forty bucks, a lighter and a copy of *A Confederacy of Dunces* in my handbag. I was also heaving a slightly stomped-on heart and a bad attitude on-board with me for the journey north.

It was the fall of 1992 and I was broke, too thin, jobless, and in debt to my good friend, Bob, for the train fare from New Orleans to Philadelphia. Bob was smart enough to only purchase me a one-way ticket. He knew if I had a round trip ticket, I would return to Philly only to turn right back around for New

Orleans the minute I got a few hundred dollars together. Bob was also astute enough to know that a \$300 bank roll and moving to New Orleans meant eventual disaster: for me, for anyone really, but the luckiest few, which I was not.

I had met Bob a few years before in acting class and we became fast friends in the process of learning about intentions and objectives, sense memory and the never-ending emotional combinations of mad/sad/glad/fear. He was a playwright but he made his living working part-time as a salesman for a company that sold promotional products. Basically, if a business was looking to market itself, Bob could provide it with every conceivable banner, pen, keychain, and branding option that could be dreamt up in that pre-digital age. Bob worked at his sales job three days a week and devoted the other two days to his writing. He managed to craft a life that seemed effortless, including this mysterious making-a-good-living. Since, I could barely earn a decent dollar working full-time and it was hardly effortless, I

wondered about his path to success. He was so laid back that it didn't occur to me that he was actually professionally ambitious and able to shelve his poetic sensibilities while at work. It would take years before I solved this particular conundrum.

Bob always wore shorts when he wasn't at work and was one of those guys who look like they just got off a flight from Bali. Maybe that was his intention since he had lived in Bali for a while trying to make a go at exporting native crafts. He may have looked half a hippie but there was an element to his personality that was also concerned with upward mobility and he was determined to keep that trajectory. His fine education, the woman he dated and the majority of his friends certainly belied his hippie persona. But still, he was a wonderful and strange mixture of successful professional, artist, and shorts-wearing good-time guy.

Bob was funny. He was the kind of guy who knew a lot of people and liked to collect friends. His

parties were a social soup in which most of the friends were complementary ingredients to which he added the occasional discordant spice. I was one of the off-flavors as was his other roommate, Linda.

Bob, Linda and I were living together at Bob's place. It was a three story rowhouse in Fishtown, one of Philly's quintessential, gritty neighborhoods. This place was blue-collar Philly to the core. Years later, Fishtown would become "gentrified," attaining credibility with professionals, artists and white collar urbanites. But Bob was in the extreme forefront of that movement. When he lived in Fishtown it was still what it had always been: a tough, working class, rowhouse Philly neighborhood.

Since Bob bought into the neighborhood when it was decidedly not gentrified, he was an outlander. This was blatantly obvious to me the first time I saw his house. In the front window, Bob had placed a life-sized, photographic cardboard cut-out of a baby. He named it Oscar and claimed that was the name he would

give his future son. While, I cautioned him strenuously to refrain from naming any child Oscar, I was more concerned the neighbors would think the photo of the baby in the window was weird. I didn't want him getting beat up because his wacky sense of humor and style didn't mesh in this neighborhood of literalness. There was little room for whimsy, including absurd window décor, especially since hipster irony wouldn't arrive in Fishtown for several years. I knew the current neighborhood residents likely wouldn't appreciate Bob's cardboard cut-out baby. And because I grew up in a similarly styled neighborhood, I was certain that a low profile and a minimum of fancifulness would be the best way to introduce yourself in Fishtown. Still, Bob was a homeowner, not a renter, and that afforded him some leeway with the neighbors. Renters were inexplicably often looked down upon in these working class neighborhoods.

Bob's love of the absurd bounced off the dour reality of the place and he obviously enjoyed adding his incongruous bits and pieces to the neighborhood



culture. It was in the small gesture that his humor flourished. One time, he showed me a notice in the local weekly paper, *The Fishtown Star*. There on the **front** page was a news item about the doings of "The Bard of Marlborough Street." Now, Bob's house was on Marlborough Street and this "Bard" referred to in the paper was indeed, my good friend himself.

One of his buddies submitted a notice about an upcoming party or reading at Bob's. Apparently the folks at the paper didn't get the joke. Or more likely they thought, "What the fuck, if the guy thinks he's the Bard resurrected and he wants a notice in here, so be it."

I prefer to think the editor at the paper saw it all as a semi-funny prank and charged them to place the item in the paper. One problem with that theory, though: it wasn't an advertisement. It was an actual news item, which means that the *Fishtown Star* might have believed there was a great Bard living on Marlborough Street. Think of the possibilities: The

Philly versions of Shakespeare. *Hamlet: The Mafia*  
*Years, or The Taming of the Shrew: Again!* Perhaps, a  
collection of sonnets. Just what the place ordered:  
iambic pentameter - Philly style. Yo.

## Red Balloon

### **Upper Darby - 1970s**

We didn't look like urchins because my mother knew the power of layaway. If there was ever to be an official Queen of Layaway, she would most certainly be a reputable contender for the title. This is a woman who raised four kids, one disabled, without a credit card or even a car. She could not only find a sale, but a fantastic sale at a store she could walk to that had decent stuff **and** offered their customers the layaway option. She managed to get every Christmas gift for her children and every Easter outfit this way.

This is a woman who years later found a dress shop that let you layaway prom dresses. The place was

run by a mother and daughter and offered the layaway option (or at least my mother convinced them to make an exception and allow layaway so my sister and I could obtain the loveliest prom gowns). Finding not only a place to layaway a prom dress, but a nice, private dress shop where the owners took an interest because they saw their customers as clients, was a miracle. It probably wasn't a fancy place, but at the time it seemed ultra refined. Chic.

The Queen of Layaway insisted on seeking out and paying over time for the beautiful gowns in this shop. She did this because she understood the value of the future moment and how these gowns would one day remain as memory more valuable than the all the clothes in our closets - even when the dresses had been boxed in storage for decades. Early on, the shopping locale of choice for this titan of bargains was 69<sup>th</sup> Street. It was there that she refined her layaway skills.

Upper Darby was anchored by the 69<sup>th</sup> Street Terminal and the 69<sup>th</sup> Street Shopping District. The

terminal was always busy since the Market Frankford EL Train began there on its long run through the city, ending its haul in the equally bleak Frankford section of Philadelphia. Buses and trolley lines also ran out of the terminal and there was a taxi stand. The entire place was a hub of activity and a connection point to Center City Philadelphia.

But the 69<sup>th</sup> Street shopping area was my mother's Shangri-la. Dozens of stores were lined on both sides of the hilly street, which was admittedly a faded rose by that time. There was still some stunning architecture with the ornate beauty of the McClatchy Building, and the Tower Theater. What the street lacked in glamour, it made up for in sheer usefulness. People patronized the stores from both the Upper Darby and West Philly sides, which in that era, meant this shopping hill was arguably the most fully integrated location in either West Philly or Upper Darby.

It was a thriving street teeming with shoppers, but unmistakably down-rent. And thank God for that.

If it had been gentrified with upscale shopping and cafes, my family would have been in for a major inconvenience as we would have had to travel further afield to find stores that offered layaway and discount-oriented shopping.

At that time, 69<sup>th</sup> Street was dirty in that 1970s way: graffiti, grime and bus fumes - almost as if the place had been created out of the economic decay of the decade. I like to think of the street as representative of the culmination of the freewheeling decade - all the resplendent mechanized grime and synthetic feel of the early 70s in one bustling place.

Since my family didn't own a car, our proximity to 69<sup>th</sup> Street's affordable stores - Kresge's Five and Ten, the dirty but serviceable 69<sup>th</sup> Street Market, and Deena's Discount shoes - was important to us. There was also a JC Penney's, a Lit Brothers and my mother's favorite, Tiny Town, which offered nice children's clothes and layaway. We spent a lot time trudging up the hill from the Terminal to the tippy-top where the

nicest store was located: Gimbals Department Store. When I was a teenager, my mother and I would go through their sale racks religiously. She would hold up "preppy clothes" for me to try and I would lecture her on the sheer ugliness of the style.

"What do think, Trish?"

"It's ugly as sin, Mom."

"Well, how about this one? You should dress preppy."

"That shirt is so horrible, Mom, that it scares me."

"Can't you just say, "I don't like it."

"Huh?"

"Why do you have to be so dramatic about it? Just say no thanks, Mom."

"Because, you keep picking things I would never wear. I'm not preppy. I don't like the clothes or the rah-rah's who wear them."

"Oh, the Rah-rahs. I forgot."

"What about this?" (I hold up a fantastic blazer.)

"What is it?"

"Mom, it's a blazer. Unconstructed. Look at the color? It's a great fabric, too."

"How much?"

"Four bucks."

Gimbals on a good day!

#

### **The Apartment**

We had a painting party at the new apartment. My mother's friends came to the place, threw some color on the walls and had a few drinks. These women were not self-conscious or anxious mothers. As a matter of course, they all had three or four children. They



didn't discuss child-rearing techniques. They had kids, and they expected them to do well and to stay out of as much trouble as possible. That was it.

They had known each other since childhood in South Philadelphia. They attended grade school at St. Monica's, and High School at St. Maria Goretti. They went down the shore together the summers after graduation and then married young. My mother was the only one of them whose marriage had broken up. And though their husbands were ostensibly in charge, and each of their destinies was very much tied to their choice of man, they were strong women. My mother's choice to leave her husband was unusual in their world and not entirely understood, but they were her friends.

This place they were painting for us was small and located in the Bywood section of Upper Darby. My mom had taken the \$700.00 Pop-Pop had given her and rented this two bedroom apartment on Garrett Road. It was situated over Lucille's Hairdressing. We wouldn't

be there long before Lucille came to the conclusion she detested us as her upstairs neighbors: there were too many of us, we were too young and she thought would we negatively affect her business.

She became my enemy. I hated her and it was not a childlike feeling of "I hate her!" I truly despised this woman. Lucille's main point of complaint was that we overflowed the bathtub a few times. Because of these mishaps, Lucille saw us as truly destructive little monsters, which we were not. We knew some families where the kids were destructive and practically delinquent, and compared to them, we were a bookish lot.

But it was true, we would overflow the tub. One of us would start the water for a bath and leave it running to fill up a bit. We would forget about it and then Lucille's shop would get water running down her ceiling and onto her immaculate floors. The water was from our tub.

Lucille would knock on our door, punch-drunk from breathing in the fumes of hair dye and perm solutions, and demand that my mother clean it up. She would have the mop at the ready. *Goddammit, she had water all over the place. Again.*

My mother would take the mop and clean Lucille's floor. I don't know why we would always overflow the tub. I guess we weren't paying attention as closely as we could. Kids are bad judges of such household issues.

Since my mother worked as a waitress in the luncheonette next door to our apartment, Lucille knew she could raise a fit. She knew my mother didn't want trouble with a business owner on the block as that could cause her problems at her job at the luncheonette. And she knew my mother didn't want trouble with their mutual landlord who was terrifying.

Lucille was a small woman, always dressed in an old-fashioned white uniform. Her face was tense, thin and as colorless as her blank uniform. She had no

vital edges. Her clientele was the old women in the neighborhood. She did their permanent waves and their rinses, cutting their thin hair and making them beautiful, circa 1973.

My mother was tall. She towered over Lucille who enjoyed watching her wipe up the floor. She followed my mom around the shop to make certain every drop was mopped up and the job was finished to her satisfaction. The water from our errant tub had marred her pristine hairdresser floors and she was literally mad as hell about it. My mom in her waitress apron and wearing a pair of brown, shapeless slacks was bending down from her 5' 8' height to wield the mop. As I watched Lucille harass my mother through the glass front door, a very adult feeling was born: resentment.

Yes, we had overflowed the tub while my mother was at work. We were bad judges of these things and were probably watching TV or reading books from the library. I was the second oldest at 8 and more

responsible than my 9 year old brother. My sister was only 5 and Tommy was 3 and mentally disabled.

Obviously, I should have been on duty, manning the tub, but was waylaid by the lure of afternoon reruns.

Once it began, my hatred of Lucille was impossible to stop. I despised her on behalf of the entire family but I feared her for my mother, not for myself. It was how she treated my mother. I wanted to rush in the shop and tell this hairdresser she was mean. I didn't have the words venomous and feral in my vocabulary at that date or I most certainly would have used them on her.

My mother could read my thoughts. She saw me standing outside the door, obviously struggling with whether I should enter the store. She shook her head "No." I didn't get the chance to tell Lucille that she could have handled the whole thing differently. She could have been a bit kinder.

I didn't have the perspective to realize that water all over her floor was aggravating and

troublesome and that poor Lucille didn't know how to express her upset except with screaming and derision. She used this moment to humble my mother because her own life was unhappy and this was her chance for a bit of payback. She got to lord it over a beautiful woman because that woman had four young children who did stupid, kid things.

The Lucilles of the world were now part of my everyday life. I would have dealings with adults, either directly, or as a witness at my mother's side, that were remarkably unpleasant. It was easy to learn the lesson: women are treated lousy without the protection of money or a man.

The apartment would remain the scene of our struggles and become the dingy backdrop to lives that were devoid of reprieve from a situation that loomed never-ending. And while Lucille would eventually vacate the store below our apartment, she would be replaced by a succession of establishments: another

hairdresser, a candy store, a dance studio and for one season, The Amp Shop.

The Amp Shop was the brainchild of some nameless dude who managed to scrape together first and last month's rent. He opened the store with the intention of selling amplifiers. That was it: amps. No guitars, no drums, not even a tambourine. He didn't give music lessons (it would become obvious that he *couldn't* give lessons because he had zero talent and ability).

He and his buddies holed up in the shop all day and evening playing electric guitars. They had as much talent combined as was in the fingernail of a proper musician. We sat in our apartment above this retail aberration and suffered torture-by-sound, which I can personally attest is an effective form of torture.

I wonder how they managed to play for as many hours a day as they had. Did their fingers never get tired? Were they never sick of the sound of their lack of talent? The reverberations, the thumping, the lack

of melody was all-consuming. There was no stopping their pursuit of their collective muse.

*How about a break after dinner so we could study and do our homework?*

*No!*

*Turn down the volume just a little bit, please?*

*No!*

*Give us a break on Sunday?*

*No!*

Our pleas ironically fell on deaf ears. The Amp Shop guy paid his money and he and his friends would play. Endlessly. Loudly. We didn't call the police because that just wasn't done. We didn't want any trouble: better to keep our complaints to ourselves and endure.

The Amp Shop proprietor was eventually evicted for not paying his rent. Hanging out and playing music on a few shitty amps did not bring in the revenue needed to pay the bills. We were now free until the



next incarnation of the shop downstairs. It was always a blessed relief to have the store empty for a few months. I don't know why except that every establishment that moved in to the space was nuttier than the next and strangely representative of what we were experiencing. We were under siege - a tiny army of five, waged in a battle for dignity.

The Amp Shop, Lucille's, the lack of privacy and the cost of staying together were my family's realities. It was a war of futile gestures. This neighborhood offered little privacy for us because we lived over a store. This was very unusual in comparison to the street after street of rowhouses around us. It wasn't until I was a teenager that I realized the neighborhood hid many things and that other families were harboring secrets behind their front window curtains. I thought we were the only people with financial troubles, or who had a father with alcohol issues, but we weren't. As I matured I was able to see my friends' lives more astutely and began to understand the extent of the problems in the

neighborhood. When I saw whose father was drunk on the street, completely whacked out of his mind. When I realized a family got their shiny new car because they had a penchant for frivolous lawsuits. And worst of all, when I understood there were families truly grief-struck with the loss of a beloved mother or child. I would learn there was plenty of pain to go around. We weren't the only people suffering in Bywood.

But it was the seventies, and even this tired, working class neighborhood was aglow with sexy promise and the go-go vibe of the times.

Disco music and flashing lights. *Saturday Night Fever* played constantly, the songs blaring from kitchen windows and passing cars. A rare thing when music defines a moment in its entirety. It defined the young women in their wrap-around dresses and high heels and the young guys in their tight flared pants and platform shoes. It was trying to learn the dances and singing the lyrics to all the Bee Gees songs. It

was the scent of the excess of it all. It wasn't Brooklyn but it was happening. There wasn't a Tony Manero, but there was Pat.

Pat was my ideal. He worked at T&D's deli. He must have been 18 or 19 when I knew him. He had dark blond, floppy hair and a smile for every female who walked into the store - even a pre-teen girl with a crush was treated with sweetness. I know because I gaped at him several times a week for months and months. Every single time I went to the deli, there was Pat. He was completely unreachable, considering the age difference and the fact that I was a gawky kid. He was my ideal of a future boyfriend with his great smile and his breezy self-assurance. His kindness, I recognized in retrospect. Then, he was just my hero - beautiful. He transcended class, appearing to be from another place entirely. Somewhere sunny.

T&D's was a block from our apartment. They had lunchmeat, good rolls, cold soda, candy, newspapers,

cigarettes, canned goods, toilet paper. Excepting Pat, the best thing in the store was the pickle barrel topped with a plastic cover, its waxy pickle bags tucked in a little bag holder on the side of the barrel.

I would order the ham, cheese and bologna from him, enraptured by his lighthearted banter. He sliced the lunchmeat with incredible speed, looking directly across the high counter at me. Talking to me! He seemed unaware of the ever imminent danger of the slicer - easily capable of cutting off a finger.

One night when I was around twelve, I saw him crossing Garrett Road, the heavily trafficked main street I lived on. He was carrying a huge jug of red wine and was the only guy surrounded by a dozen girls. In my memory, the girls were all beautiful - wearing their platform shoes, tight jeans or short-shorts and halter tops. They crossed the street in a cluster around Pat. He was laughing, literally throwing his head back. He was having a moment so cool, it was like

watching a scene from a movie. Slow motion. The jug swinging in his left hand, the girls rushing across the street with him, obviously adoring him.

I think of him on occasion and always picture him living in the Florida Keys, maybe running a charter boat business. No desk job for Pat. He is tan, and still has a full head of blond, floppy hair. But his eyes have sexy creases in the corner - he's *lived*, now. I hope he has strided through life as blithely as he crossed Garrett Road that night with a jug of red wine in his hand, and surrounded by girls. I hope he has daughters because he was one of those rare men who not only like women but understand them. He was one of those men to whom women are never a mystery or a puzzle, but a genuine delight.

#

Judy was 19, slightly plump but looked a lot like Donna Pescow, who played the local girl who loved Tony Manero in *Saturday Night Fever*. Judy had the same

earthy, vulnerable essence, the same petite, fleshy body and sexual vibe. She was a girl of the times, far and away a different breed from the Catholic women who came of age ten or fifteen years earlier.

She was a part-time student, part-time waitress, full-time party girl. She worked with my mother and they were friendly, despite the age difference and the fact that my mother's idea of a fun night out was to go for beers with her high school sorority sisters after a wake down South Philly.

Not many disco nights for my mother, but still there was always the movie, and the music. That belonged to us at our apartment, as much as anybody. We danced the bump, the hustle, the bus stop and always, we did the jitterbug. She taught us to do the quintessential 50s dance of her high school days. I never could get that catch in the time. There was a pause a one/two, and I always jumped the gun. She would spin us around the living room and it didn't much matter when the music played how threadbare it

all was for us. The music dressed up the plainest moments - the only sure-cure for heartache. We had the radio in the kitchen constantly tuned to the AM stations that played all the 70s music. It was a white radio and sat on the metal radiator cover. I can still remember hearing *Night Fever* playing out of that radio while we did our homework.

## Moving on, Staying in Place

### **Philadelphia - 1992**

Before my mixed-up foray down to New Orleans, before I found myself sleeping the night away in a cold train car on Amtrak's *Crescent City*, before I sat shivering and wondering what the hell had happened to get me to this moment, I had my Philadelphia life. The trip to New Orleans was an ever so brief respite from that. The overblown nature of New Orleans, the people and the vividness of the place appealed to me. There was nothing Eastern or formulaic about the city but its wildness was united with a tradition of deep-rooted family togetherness. People from there, stayed there, adding their homely stories to a collective



narrative of decadence, pirate lore, grandness and pained histories. I loved the mix.

Now, I was going back to Philly, returning to my home with, Bob. I had been living with him during the months prior to my trip to New Orleans, having moved in with him just a few days after my breakup with my live-in boyfriend, Chuck.

Once I confirmed that Chuck had cheated on me, I left our apartment without thinking. I just took the bare minimum and left everything else behind. This mad dash for independence first brought me to the door of my friend, Marianne. I moved in with her at her express invitation. That arrangement lasted a day and a half, up until Marianne found she couldn't handle full-time company and hoped I didn't mind.

I called Bob immediately after Marianne asked me to leave. He invited me to stay at his house where there was a BeerMeister in the dining room, a long, low couch in the living room with tall lamps on either side that threw tremendous light over the room. I

thought the lighting was fantastic, having spent half my existence reading by overhead lights, instead of proper lamps. Best of all, there was a constant stream of visitors to the house. Bob was a connector. He knew a lot of people and they were always dropping by to see him. Having a lot of company around isn't an antidote to loneliness, but it sure does help wile away the time.

The day I officially moved into Bob's was a sticky-hot summer day. I was wearing my "I'm moving" uniform: cut-off jean shorts, a ratty t-shirt and a pair of construction boots. I didn't have a lot of stuff to haul in because I had left most of my belongings at my ex-apartment with my ex-boyfriend, he of the cheating and lying worthy of a country song. Bob and I loaded up his car with the few remnants of my former life that I had bothered to take with me to Marianne's house. While we put those things in his car, I thought about Chuck and how he and his new girlfriend were probably sitting on my couch with the flowered cushions. He and his new girlfriend were

probably eating at my maple dining room table, feeding my pets and using my long wished for and beloved dishwasher in my apartment off Rittenhouse Square. I, on the other hand, was moving into Fishtown. You don't need to know Philadelphia to figure out which neighborhood was considered the upscale one: Fishtown. Rittenhouse Square.

I did get my pets back, eventually. After I was gone, Chuck shipped them to his mother's house. I rescued them when she called and told me she had them and hinted she wouldn't keep them long. I drove up to her house with my sister, retrieved them and gave them to my mother, who wouldn't threaten to euthanize them in a bid to upset me.

***Random regrets:***

*Why didn't I keep the apartment?*

*Why didn't I make Chuck leave?*

*Why didn't I at least keep the furniture or put it in storage until I found a new place?*

The furniture would remain a sticking point once my head was clear and I came to the realization that all the things I worked so hard for were now left with a jackass who wouldn't appreciate them.

I had decorated our entire apartment through the classiest layaway plan in Philadelphia: Freeman's Auction. Ever since I started work in the Rare Book Department at Freeman's and found out they let their employees buy at the auctions and pay for their items over time, I'd had access to cool stuff. With a capital COOL and a capital STUFF. But the best part was that since I worked at Freeman's, I got to bring everything home while I made my payments. It was layaway heaven.

After all, I had bought every single thing in that apartment that had any beauty. I picked each item, and paid for it with my salary on my Freeman's layaway plan. I was the chooser, the selector and the owner of each item. Why didn't I take them with me? Why leave them for a man who didn't care about these

things anymore than he had cared for me or for our life. When I bought this furniture, it had a symbolic value that far exceeded its monetary one. When I left it all behind in that apartment maybe it was as a payment to the gods for an ill-fated life choice: picking Chuck. Was it because I thought loving him was so foolish in the end, that I left my possessions behind? Did I think I was taking my pride and identity, instead? Did I think it was a one or the other proposition?

I needed someone to guide me because all I knew how to do was run away. Not from my problems but from the scene of the problems and the characters involved. I ran from the apartment, the street I lived on, the people who knew me as Chuck's girlfriend. I turned away from what I saw as my humiliation and disappointment. I needed someone to teach me how to build again, without leaving the good parts behind.

They never showed.

*What was I worth? What was my due?*

I never knew.

Sitting on the train, I thought about my first day at Bob's house. It seemed a lifetime ago, that moving day, but it was only months before. Now, I was heading north on the train, back to my starring role as Bob's roommate. I was happy he was my friend, but I felt like a failure for having to return. I had made my attempt at living out of Philly, away from my family and friends and in that attempt was a freedom from my past as the resident poor girl. But that was over now and it seemed all that remained were the odds and ends of who I used to be.

As the train returned me to my roots at 90 miles per hour, I was aware that I was going back to where I started in more ways than one. Yes, back to Philly, but also a return to the nagging certainty that bad luck and a piss-poor fate were dictating my life's trajectory.

Still, Fishtown with Bob was better than living with Chuck, a man who lied 7 times out of ten,

whenever he spoke to me. I had been unaware of his full lying abilities, until I found out that he not only cheated on me but had an entire other relationship. I had known he had a habit of putting himself first to an almost pathological degree but I had underestimated his talent for untruths and half-truths.

Once, I found out about the other girlfriend, I questioned him about the particulars of when and why. It was an insanely dangerous thing to do to ask a man to crush you just for the sake of knowing *what had happened*. It was curiosity, of course. I truly thought there was power in the knowing. If I knew the chain of events that led to my aloneness, I reasoned, I could then be on my guard for next time and would have all the necessary puzzle pieces of my life in my possession.

I thought I wanted the particulars so I could make better decisions, and was convinced that if I understood Chuck's motives, it would help me overcome

my fear and unhappiness. I was wrong (of course) as certain situations almost demand that the less you know the better off you will ultimately be. Details have a way of sticking in your mind long after the feelings of betrayal and dismay have disappeared. Honestly, there was a relief the relationship with this man was drawing to a close. But it was difficult to foresee the fall-out from the betrayal. I didn't know I had a sensitivity to duplicity that would infect how I interacted and trusted people for years.

That said, it was the simplest of situations: boy meets girl, boy and girl think they love each other, boy and girl part badly. But, the things we say and do to each other have costs that a simple story line just can't express. So, boy and girl, or girl and girl, or boy and boy meet. And yes, there is love or lust or convenience or shades of any and all of these things. But the history of any relationship is grounded in the shared experience. When it's over, what it once was is left to memory. I wish I could recall in a more vague



way, only thinking of happy times, and not the obstacles. Selective oblivion would be helpful.

So, we were at the end, me and Chuck. And standing there in my beloved apartment, I got down to the cross-examination. Because in my innocence, that is what I thought was needed to end this segment of my life.

"Are you in love with her?" I asked.

"Yes. I love her, but I didn't fall in love on purpose?" Charles assured me, forcing the edge of sincerity in his voice.

"You are full of shit. You did do it on purpose," I said.

I knew I was making my face ugly in my anger, from biting off my words to glaring at him with a ferocity I didn't feel.

"On purpose? No one falls in love on purpose. It's a pastiche of emotions that just happens to a

couple," he explained to me in his patented, overblown, pretentious manner.

"It's a pastiche, alright. It's a pastiche of lying about your whereabouts, creating a new life while your old life is still in play, and sexual infidelity."

Charles smirked at me, his top lip disappearing. He felt superior, I could tell.

He did have a top lip issue. His was quite thin and almost nonexistent. He had always had a mustache to cover its thinness, but he had recently shaved it off. His face appeared naked in a vulnerable way. Still, some men really need that facial hair and he was one of them. That area above his mouth looked like a lawn that was mowed down to grassy patches. It wasn't appealing and his skin had this scraped over look. Worse, when I looked at him, I felt his upper lip hadn't seen the sun in years and years. But, obviously I was focusing on the mess of his top lip instead of the mess that was our relationship.

So, I left shortly after this conversation about love-as-pastiche that I had with a man, who I realized in that moment, I never did know.

The night before I left him, I slept in the lower level of the apartment, the basement being very apropos. The point of parting is to move forward to a better future. Right? I knew I wanted a future without Chuck, but didn't know how to create an improved version. Certainly, it would have been better to make my exit without two dark-green, Hefty trash bags holding my worldly belongings. Sturdy Hefty Trash Bags are for hauling leaves and garden detritus, and are not the recommended method for carrying clothes, shoes, notebooks, a small rug, books, and past due bills. It was difficult to maintain my dignity with the Hefty bags dragging behind me, scraping the cement. Refusing Chuck's offer to carry them, I tossed the bags into a taxi and rode straight to Marianne's house. I stayed there until she advised me 36 hours later that she couldn't bear a roommate.

Bob came and picked me up at Marianne's and drove me to my new home at his house in Fishtown with the cardboard cut-out baby in the window and the constantly shifting cast of characters and visitors.

Bob's girlfriend was at the house when I moved my stuff in. She introduced me to her best friend from college as I carried in my scant belongings.

"Great," I said under my breath, when I first saw them at the door.

"Hi," Bob's girlfriend said to me.

She could make "hi" feel like she was actually saying, "You're a distressing little person. Please be gone immediately, if not sooner."

"Hi," I said.

My "hi" didn't have the overly-confident subtext of these women, but what it lacked in self-assurance, it made up for in anxiety.

Most of my stuff was still with Chuck at my apartment and these bags constituted my entire life in

its current context. I wished more than ever that I had gotten boxes like an ordinary person. The trash bags were...well, they were trashy.

The friend gave me the once-over. I nodded and smiled as sweetly as I could, my teeth on edge the entire time I was in their presence.

They were the girl equivalent of a starched shirt. Perfectly manicured, beautifully dressed, full of self-interest and self-appreciation and they had a front row seat to the Trash Bag Brigade. They could raise their All-Girls-Catholic-College Alumnae eyebrows at you in unison in a silent gesture of dismissal, amusement and judgment.

I had to stay polite, I needed the place to stay. With the smile still plastered wide on my face, I went about carrying my stuff into the house as quickly as possible. But the two women did a thing that was surprising to me then and is to this day. They didn't make the smallest move to help me but just watched me struggle. Where I was from, it was inconceivable to

just sit around and not even attempt to offer a hand in this situation. Perhaps, their inertia was born of a conviction that physical labor was to forever be so wholly unfamiliar to them that their refusal to help wasn't really an act of meanness. Or maybe, they just didn't know better. If I had expected them to quote the box scores from that day's *Philadelphia Daily News*, I would have received the same blank, questioning and wryly amused looks. Helping, lifting, toting were just actions that women like them would never be required to do.

That, and of course they saw me as a person whom it was unnecessary to assist. I couldn't further their lives and I didn't interest them, ergo, I was not quite present. Of course, Bob didn't realize his girlfriend and her friend were judging me. Men never do understand fully what goes on between women. They fail to see the subtle interactions, the silent judgments, and the one-upmanship that often substitute for conversation among women who are not friendly with each other.

That first night at Bob's, I went to bed early. I was tired from the disaster that was my life. The room Bob gave me was small and had a twin bed. The window looked out to the street. Bob lent me sheets, a pillow and a blanket because I hadn't brought linens with me.

My new home was available thanks to Bob's good sense. He bought the place in Fishtown because he was solvent and smart enough to realize that paying rent was foolish. Buying in a cheap neighborhood and living among the locals was a temporary situation for him, and he relished the role of outsider to the neighbors' dug-in mentality. I thought about Bob and wondered why he chose to help me. Unlike so many of my interactions with men, I didn't have to make a tithe for his assistance. It wasn't a layaway relationship where I paid and paid for some future good will.

I placed the small, Chinese rug that I bought at Freeman's on the bare wooden floor. The rug was from the 1920's. It was beige with deep blues and reds in

its pattern. It was one of the few things I brought from my apartment that had any value. I loved the dragon that was woven into it. I sat on my rug and smoked a cigarette. I looked around the room and realized that this was the first night of my life when I was sleeping in a room alone. The two-bedroom apartment I grew up in was in a neighborhood similar to the one I now found myself exiled back to. We had many more people than bedrooms in that apartment. I stayed there until I left home to share a bed and a life with Chuck.

Shame. I was ashamed. Ashamed of being cheated on by a silly man. Ashamed that Bob's girlfriend and her pal were given the opportunity to look down at me and my only defense was a shaky, underlying belief that they were shallow bitches and their opinions didn't matter to me. Except I knew it was a lie. I knew I cared that they were amused by me. It's a strange thing to feel rootless, yet stuck. I was fixed in the role of neighborhood girl who was out of her depth and out of her element. I knew that most of my



friends could smell it on me. They knew I was different from them. Our pasts didn't match. I never would attempt to ape them. I insisted on relying on my truth. A small dignity but powerful enough, I guess, to keep me sane.

Shame was bedrock. Shame and poverty were my inheritance and the sheer will it took to engage in the world while carrying these burdens was exhausting. Living with Bob and hanging out with his shiny girlfriend and private school educated friends was daunting, but I was drawn to stay by need and by fascination.

## The Red Balloon

### **Upper Darby - 1970s**

Growing up poor does skew the perspective. What other people see as basics are either luxuries or wholly unknown. A lesson that was learned as I went along in the world was my utter lack of knowledge about certain matters. I didn't know that I didn't know. This turned life into an ever-present adventure in new concepts. My mother did everything she could to keep us fed, clothed and housed. Delicate, fanciful objects were not within her grasp. Her brilliant strategizing to get us Christmas presents and school clothes would come to fruition through layaway which she had down to an art form. She provided us with the basics but I longed for a place that looked nicer,

less faded and threadbare. However, obtaining layaway for furniture was out of my mom's area of expertise, and credit wasn't a concept we would become familiar with for years, yet.

My life would come to be a series of sometimes hilarious misadventures in learning that my experiences in lack were unusual in the lives of most of the people I would come to know. For instance, from a young age I became wistful to find my family better furniture. I believed couches and chairs and pretty pictures could work to change not only our living room but maybe our lives. They had magical qualities, I just knew it.

But I had even less of an idea than my mother did about how to go about getting these miraculous things other than to gaze longingly through the JC Penney catalogue. Most kids back then were anxious for the Department Store Christmas catalogues to see the toys and pictures of artificial Christmas trees, brightly decorated. I studied the large Holiday catalogue on a

stealth mission to find furniture that wouldn't be embarrassing. Of course, I had suspect taste and actually thought the plaid 1970s den furniture made of a synthetic fabric called Herculon would be the answer to my prayers and wishes. In the catalogue (my Bible) were sofa and loveseats that blessedly matched, and wood particle tables with attractive lamps. The photos had friendly looking people wearing nice clothes and kids sitting around the plaid sofa playing board games with all the pieces. It appeared to be actual heaven.

**Imagined Hopes: My Dream Living Room (1974-1975):**

- A brown and orange plaid couch and *matching* loveseat.
- Lamps. Not overhead lighting but actual lamps
- Wood side tables (for the lamps).
- Curtains instead of the white plastic, roll-up shades.

It wasn't to be, this plaid furniture of my wishes. We would make do with what we had. And while I thought a new living room set would make us happy, I didn't realize how absurd it was to identify things as magical, capable of creating stability. I didn't

understand that an improved setting could not change our fate.

#

**Imagined Hopes: The Science Fair:**

I longed to win the science fair and I truly believed if I worked hard enough, I would win, and voila, praise and honor would be heaped upon me. I had a plan to make a genuine Native American village. And that is exactly what I did. I made a lake fashioned from construction paper and tin foil and built some teepees. There was paint, paper, glue, toilet paper rolls, fear, tears, hope and wistfulness. I didn't know it then, but this cosmic stew would be with me for the rest of my life. God, I was convinced that I successfully could crack the Science Fair. It was not to be. I would lose in my division; I wouldn't even get an Honorable Mention for my anthropological study.

But the most galling part of the situation was to lose to Kim Inverso's father. A Native American village did win a prize and it was his village. Even I had to admit that he did a fine job. Okay, at the time, I said I didn't think his village was so great. I mean, even in grade-school, it was clear it was his work and not his daughter's. It had craft. It had panache, it had style. He built his village with realistic teepees, and had a drying rack for buffalo skins. He even stretched a buffalo skin over the rack he made of twigs. This was not Kim's doing but was certainly the work of a motivated, grown-man with good carpentry and art skills. That buffalo pelt was so perfect I think Mr. Inverso located an unknown species of miniature buffalo, brought one down with a tiny bow and arrow that he hand-crafted himself, and then skinned its miniature hide and gently laid it upon his authentic drying rack. It was a tour de force.

My fantasy was to win the Science Fair and cover the entire family in glory, but my skills were those of a child who didn't have the best science knack and

certainly didn't have the materiel to win this particular war. I was going into battle with construction paper and glue from Kresge's Five and Dime store. I was overmatched by actual buffalo hides and realistic Native American accoutrements.

My brother, Marty was our great hope two years later when he and his buddies created a modern space station. They used models and painstakingly glued the rockets together, painting them and placing them in a sophisticated and imaginative setting. They were disqualified for using models and not creating the rockets themselves. I think, in retrospect, that they should have asked Mr. Inverso to be a team member. I am positive he could have created realistic rockets from scratch that would have made NASA proud.

## Moving On, Staying in Place

### **Philadelphia and New Orleans - 1992**

I hadn't wanted to leave the New Orleans but I lost my place to stay when Marianne kicked me out of her apartment at four in the morning. It was too bad for me that I lost my crash place before I was able to locate a job.

My New Orleans boyfriend of six weeks, Rudy, didn't want the complications of a girlfriend with no job or place to live. He had his bartending gig at Roma's, his sideline dealing coke in the Quarter and his garden apartment in Metairie.

"You sound like a Kennedy," he said to me the first night I met him. I was amused because I knew my



Philadelphia accent was a long way from Boston, Kennedy or otherwise, but I let him buy me a drink. We stayed, standing at the tiny bar at the Honfleur, never sitting down, smoking cigarettes and drinking whatever anyone put in front of us.

Marianne and I ran with him and his friends until late into that night. When we were ready to leave the Honfleur, I made the tourist mistake, which they loved.

"Let's go, sugar," Rudy said, putting the Cajun in it even though he was Italian/Irish from Metairie in Jefferson Parish.

"I have to finish my drink," I said.

They all laughed.

"Get a to-go cup."

"A to-go cup?"

This was puzzling. In Philadelphia, a to-go cup would be a take-out Sprite at the Burger King.

Pennsylvania is a Blue-Law state. The Blue Laws have

been on the books forever and limit where and when you can buy liquor. Want a bottle of vodka? Go to the state store, a state run store that sells liquor and wine. Want a case of beer on a Sunday? Go to Jersey, because you aren't getting it in Pennsylvania on a Sunday. Not then, in 1992, and not now, either.

"They'll put your drink in a cup and you can take it with you," Rudy gave me the good news.

"No. Way," I said.

"Let's go," he said.

Rudy wasn't good-looking in a traditional sense, but he was tall, dark-haired, sexy, openly flirtatious and knew the city the way only a native and a bartender can know a city: inside and out.

New Orleans that first night was an introduction to a way of living that does not exist in Philadelphia. Philadelphia with its subtle vestiges of Quaker plainness was beautiful but the decadent, the

humid, the vividly sexual, the to-go cup, if you will, are not aligned with the rhythms of my city of birth.

I slept with him a few nights later. I was embarrassed at first because I had only slept with Chuck for five years and Rudy was my first new man since the breakup. I wanted to be perfect but I wasn't and I babbled in his bedroom while he got a glimpse at my neurotic twitchings and listened to my ramblings, his face confused.

His bedroom was dark but had décor if coordinating throw pillows and side lamps with matching shades qualify as décor. Of course the room had the obligatory great bed.

Every man I've ever known has owned a better bed than I have. One guy wouldn't sleep at my apartment because my bed sucked for sleeping. Beds were their religion, and each of them spent more money on their mattresses and box springs than I did on clothes for a couple of months.

I may have been a Philly girl who sounded vaguely New England to Rudy's and his friends' Southern ears but that wasn't a powerful enough incentive to keep the relationship intact once Marianne hit the wall of crazy and kicked me out in the middle of the night. I had been warned. I knew she was obsessive and prone to violence but at 4 feet 10 inches, how dangerous could she be to me?

Rudy dropped me off at the station in New Orleans the morning after Bob bought me my train ticket back to Philly.

"I don't like goodbyes," he said.

"I don't particularly like clichés," I said.

I didn't really say that. Instead, I kissed him goodbye and cried a little. I should have said it though. His goodbye was the equivalent of a bunt: disappointing in its essence. He got to the plate, where I thought he might take a swing and ask me to stay. But no, just that silly verbal bunt - that blip.

I shouldn't have been in New Orleans in the first place, sweating out Marianne's moods swings, searching for a job, hanging out with Rudy, getting used to the heat, and falling in love with the city. I should have been in Philly at Bob's, rebuilding my life.

While in New Orleans I had stayed at Marianne's apartment in the Garden District. She rented a small cottage in a wealthy area of the city. Uptown. I walked the streets of the Garden District in the morning on the way to St. Charles Street and the streetcar, careful as I stepped over the huge tree roots which erupted from the sidewalks. I loved how the roots would literally break up the cement, lifting the sidewalks in places.

The old oak trees' had their roots tangled in the cement but still the trees grew and flourished. The trees reminded me of my roots in Philadelphia and the generations of my family living there, and my happiness in being far enough away for once that I was unavailable for the quick fix, the family meeting, the

blood is thicker than water mentality that was the excuse for our group identity.

New Orleans, despite its exotic feel, was a family city like Philadelphia.

"How do you like New Orleans," was a question I was asked over and over again from the people I met.

"I love it here. I never want to leave," I would say.

This effusion was understood. The music in the French Quarter, the old bars, the great food in the smallest, least expensive places, all of this amounted to a lifestyle that appealed to my sensibilities.

This absurd little break-up at the train station with Rudy was the culmination of the months of pain in my Philadelphia life, my real life.

The night I met Rudy at the Honfleur, a scant six weeks before, I had just arrived in New Orleans with Marianne. Marianne and I had worked together at Freeman's. I was in the book department with David and

she was the company bookkeeper. Marianne was eccentric. She moved down to New Orleans after a vacation that lasted less than a week. She had met a guy at a hotel on St. Charles Avenue, fucked him, shared a few dinners with him and decided that life would be better in New Orleans.

We had driven a UHAUL truck down South with her antique sleigh bed, couch, desk, chairs, her three cats and me. The entire truck was stuffed with Marianne's possessions, loaded up by guys from the auction house who knew how to pack a truck, and still there wasn't any room when they were finished with her things. I brought along a knapsack with a few clothes and a handbag, which I tucked in the front seat between my legs.

"You should drive down with me. You can stay with me as long as you want to stay. Nothing is keeping you here," she said to me a few weeks before we UHAULED her life to New Orleans on the thread-like promise of

a possible relationship with Andrew, the guy she met while visiting the city.

The fact that Andrew made her no promises didn't detract Marianne from finding an apartment, packing her belongings and quitting her job at Freeman's.

"I know Andrew liked me. He spent every night with me after we met," she said.

"It'll be great if you hook up again," I said.

I didn't think she was assured of a return of his interest because he hadn't called her and he didn't know she was moving to be near him. If he had known, he would most likely be frightened of her intensity. She was my friend, but I recognized her actions bordered on the obsessive and I knew her history. I knew she had a past of romantic gestures that combined an unhealthy mix of the possessive, the clueless and the sincere.

"I met his mother," she said.

"How did that happen?"



"We were out and he said he wanted to check on his daughter. His mother was babysitting," Marianne said for the eighth time.

"Did you meet his daughter?"

"No, she was asleep, but his mother was nice to me."

I thought it was possible that Andrew liked her quite a lot if he introduced her to his family, because that isn't one-night stand behavior. But he hadn't called since she returned from New Orleans and that wasn't a good sign.

Still, I enjoyed hanging out in her eat-in kitchen, while she talked about her plans for a change. Her apartment was the entire floor of a townhouse. The old-fashioned kitchen was familiar to me and weirdly comforting. It reminded me of my home, growing up.

Home. Why call it home? My sister, brothers, mother and I referred to it simply as, "the apartment."

As in, "I hate the apartment. It is hot as the devil's hell during July in the apartment."

Or: "How come we don't have keys to the apartment?" my sister or I would ask my mother.

"I lost them. Just pretend to lock the door," she would reply. It made sense at the time.

Our apartment did have an eat-in kitchen but the resemblance to Marianne's place ended there. No antiques for us. We had hand-me-down furniture that was given to my mother by a well-meaning friend of the family. The furniture was sturdy and well-made, but it had to have been purchased by its original owner at a store named, UGLY FURNITURE, SAD LINES, and SHAMEFUL PATTERNS. The colors were indescribable, mottled.

"Drive down with me. Stay for a while in the city. I think you'll love it," Marianne said again, shaking me back to the present.

"Maybe, I will," I said.

Finances stopped me. My family would not be thrilled and Bob especially, would see heading down South for an indefinite foray, as irresponsible.

But Marianne was a good conjurer. She described her vacation, the city, the places she ate and the bar she frequented with an eye for detail that made me feel I had actually been with her during her holiday. She described it so well that I wanted to go see for myself. I wanted to have a po'boy, I wanted to see the French Quarter and have a drink at the Honfleur.

"They'll hire you back at Freeman's. Remember the story about Jonathan? He left at lunch with that girl from the billing department and didn't return to work for a week. They didn't fire him," Marianne was wearing down my resistance, one problem solved at a time.

"His dad owns a piece of the company," I said.

"That's not true. He would have told me when we were dating," she said.

"Think they'll hire me back, huh?"

"Yeah. If you want to stay, you stay. If you want to come back to Philly, come back. It will work out."

"I'll think about it," I said.

I decided to tell Bob about the plan. He kept looking after me in his way. He tried to jog me out of my unhappiness.

"Try something. Get a new job. Do something. You'll feel better," he said.

"Marianne thinks I should go to New Orleans with her. She's moving there and I'll have a place to stay for as long as I want."

"You're running away," he said.

"No, I'm not."

"How are you going to pay for it? You don't have any money," he said.

No one knew better than I did that I didn't have any money, but I felt embarrassed and vulnerable when Bob stated it so simply. His perception was acute and I didn't want him to know how desperately I wanted money. Not to buy things, but because I equated my lack of money with my worth. It was an ugly truth that I didn't want to broadcast to my friends.

"I can sell a few things I bought at Freeman's. That will give me a few hundred dollars and Marianne will pay for the trip down, because I'm helping her move," I said.

"How well do you know her? You stayed with her for one night after you and Chuck split up and she asked you to leave. Remember?" Bob gave me the play by play on my recent wanderings.

That's a good point, I thought. Bob hit it right on the head. I didn't know her that well. She had promised I could stay with her and then asked me to

leave a day later. She was my friend, but could I trust her?

"She's one of my best friends," I said to him, instead of admitting that he did, indeed, have a point.

"You'll have a place with me no matter what happens," he said, "but be careful with her."

Bob didn't like her, and my sister, Mary, didn't like Marianne either. Both Bob and Mary were astute, able to catch the truth behind whatever façade was presented. They were each good-hearted to a fault but never ones to be fooled. Two separate people from my life and both had the same reaction to Marianne. Two people who didn't know each other but who both thought Marianne was trouble.

I didn't listen to either of them. I went anyway. Later on, I wondered at my naiveté concerning Marianne. I had been warned, the picture drawn, and I knew her well enough to have witnessed behavior that should have given me pause, and yet, I went with her.

But, seeing the sun set over Lake Pontchartrain, blazing with orange and red streaks, and the water stretching out to infinity, I didn't care what they thought. Sipping a cocktail and eating a Chicken Big Mamou, made me think Mary and Bob were wrong about Marianne's emotional problems and her volatile nature. Or at least, that it had been worth it to take my chances in order to experience this place.

They were both right, of course. Marianne became increasingly distressed and angry the closer Rudy and I became, and the faster and faster I adjusted to life in the city.

She wasn't seeing Andrew, the man she had rearranged her life for. She called him and he was decidedly cool.

"He said he would call me later in the week," she said.

"Maybe, he's busy. I'm sure he'll call."

"Are you going out tonight?"

"Yeah, Rudy's taking me to dinner," I said.

"Have fun," she said. There was venom in her tone.

I think, in her mind, I wasn't supposed to have more fun than she was having. It scared her that I was making the city my home, because she had taken all the risks and I had only come along for the ride.

But, I was home there. I knew it. I felt free from constraints, family worries. I moved slower in the tremendous humidity, breathed and breathed and breathed in the heavy air. I drank café au lait on Decatur Street in the morning, ate my po'boys for lunch and wandered the old streets of the French Quarter, watching my life as I lived it. For the first time, I wasn't in the past or looking forward to the future. I was in the here and now, present and accounted for this time. Marianne's dour looks and veiled references of her displeasure at my happiness were not going to stop my progress any more than my past would drag me home. I knew it.



#

I took the Crescent City back to Philadelphia from New Orleans. I carried my clothes in a knapsack. I had three packs of Benson & Hedges, forty bucks, a lighter and a copy of *A Confederacy of Dunces* in my handbag. I was also heaving a slightly stomped-on heart and a bad attitude on-board with me for the journey north.

## The Red Balloon

### **The Layaway Life: Pay Now, Get Later**

The Catholic parish was the frame upon which our lives were constructed. My mother wasn't a devout, or hostile Catholic. She was a Catholic the same way she was a woman: born that way. She never questioned the paradigm of her religion just as it wouldn't occur to her to question her gender. It just was. She even managed to send us to parochial grade school by the layaway plan. She paid the tuition a bit at a time and managed to wangle a discount since she had three kids in the school. Each year she had to beg the bishop for the break on the tuition. And she did so, convinced that Catholic school was the only acceptable way to educate her kids. Tommy would attend school for free, first at public pre-schools and later at a Catholic

day school for disabled children that didn't charge tuition.

Tommy went to a Catholic Day school starting when he was about six years old. Here he had friends, went to dances, went to the proms and had a best girl, Patty.

He had one teacher who was harsh, and seemed to dislike my mother and consequently, Tommy. We thought his aversion to her was based on her status as a single mother. It wasn't until later, after this teacher exhibited enough anger, yelling and door slamming at people other than single mothers that he was asked to leave the school. By then, Tommy had been in his class for two years.

I've wondered what Tommy's time was like in that teacher's classroom but he never said. His speech again the culprit. It wasn't that good, and was noticeably less clear than most kids with Down syndrome. If this teacher was harsh with the students, we would have only found out if one of his

classmates told their family. Tom would have just gone to school and not said a word. Other than this guy, the teachers were excellent whether they were Sisters of Mercy or lay teachers. Tommy spent every school day there until he was 21 years old. And he was happy.

Tommy's best friend, Jimmy, was just like him in that he also loved to sing and dance and they both shared that indefinable personality appeal that draws others. The pair of them will now force me to use French to describe their particular magic. I apologize but certain things cannot be helped. Jimmy and Tommy each possessed a joie de vivre. As I recall their comradeship and their collective ebullience I find I want to define it away from their disabilities and even separate from their times. Think young American GIs after the liberation of Paris. Think romantic visions of raised glasses and good times. Think that.

Jimmy and Tommy both thought they were the coolest guys in the room. Jimmy looked splendid in his tuxedos at the proms. Tommy looked handsome, too

and my mother made sure he had the tuxedo, the corsage for Patty, and a group of us to see him off to take a few pictures. In her adoration of all dances, and proms (these occasions were also challenging, layaway opportunities), she once went old-school, high-fashion and dressed Tommy in a white dinner jacket and black tie.

Tommy's time at St. Katherine's went by in a blur. His health was good and his life was regulated. He had school, his friends, and us. His neighborhood life was pleasant. The kids knew him and there were no names called to him in that dirty, gritty, messy neighborhood. The working people there didn't raise their kids to make fun of a Tommy. He was never called a 'retard' or teased. That word, that terrible word, 'retard.'

It's funny, but I've heard people who held Master's degrees use that term. I've heard people who make tons of money throw it around. I've met those who have fine incomes and all the accoutrements of success

who regularly use this expression. I rarely heard the people in the neighborhood use it. It's funny. Class doesn't have an education or income requirement. Either you have it or you fake it. Being nice to the rich, the successful, the people who can further your career and knowing what to say and who to say it to, doesn't create a decent human being, just one who knows how to get what they want.

*I judge, I do.*

*It's wrong, I know.*

*But, it was born from cruel realities.*

#

Jimmy's funeral was one of the saddest I've ever been to in my life. His family's love and hope for him was so obvious in the stories they told about him. There was beauty in the Mass and most especially in the stories about Jimmy, in the love he offered to those who loved him.

We took Tommy to the funeral and Jimmy's family hugged him and expressed how grateful they were that we brought him. I've always admired them for their kindness that day. It must have been excruciating for them to be reminded how recently it had been that Jimmy was dancing at a prom or dressing up as Elvis for Halloween. Tommy's presence surely highlighted what was and never would be again.

But Jimmy and Tommy were true friends and he needed to be there. To say goodbye.

I remember crying during the Mass. Quietly. It was so sudden, this death and in it I read the uncertainty of Tommy's future, too. If Jimmy could suddenly die, it seemed the magical protection had ceased. Tommy had gone from disabled child with a place in the world to developmentally disabled adult with uncertain prospects, and a future I feared offered him more sadness than happiness.

Future. What would the world be like for Tommy?

#

The parish life at the time was all-encompassing. We lived around Catholics, our friends were Catholic and our lives included the attendant Catholic rituals: Communion, Sunday guitar Mass, block collection, the Stations of the Cross. Growing up, almost everyone I knew was a Catholic. There was a Lutheran Church that I passed each day on the way to school, and we Catholic kids simply called it the Protestant Church. Not in a prejudiced way, but it was basically unclear to us that there were different sects of Protestantism, and we needed to call it something as in, "I'll meet you in the parking lot at the Protestant Church." It defined a locale for us, not a religion. We had no clue what they could be doing in there. Did they have statues of the Saints? Did they have Confession?

And I'd bet some of the Protestants were wondering about us. Asking: how come they all had so



many kids? Did they really think the wafer and wine are the actual Body and Blood of Christ?

Frankly, trying to explain Transubstantiation to non-Catholics is difficult - they always look at you in a perplexed manner that appears like they are experiencing (in quick succession) confusion, revulsion, confusion again, and finally, a smug sense of self-satisfaction that they themselves hold more civilized beliefs.

**“Transubstantiation,** in Christian theology, dogma that in the Eucharist the bread and wine to be administered become, upon consecration, the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ, even though the external manifestations of the bread and wine—shape, color, flavor, and odor—remain.<sup>1</sup>

The above is part of the definition from MSN Encarta and please be thankful I didn't include the description from the Catholic Encyclopedia because they clearly had 5 Jesuits working overtime,

---

<sup>1</sup> MSN Encarta. [http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia\\_761555762/transubstantiation.html](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761555762/transubstantiation.html)

translating from the Latin and Greek and consulting medieval texts to explain Transubstantiation philosophically, dogmatically, spiritually, historically.

As a matter of fact after reading the highly erudite defense of Transubstantiation in the Catholic Encyclopedia online, I found an entry refuting Transubstantiation on GotQuestions.org, a website that is self-described as a "volunteer ministry of *dedicated and trained servants* who have a desire to assist others in their understanding of God, scripture, salvation and other spiritual topics."<sup>2</sup>

The trained servants at GotQuestions inform their readers thusly: "How can we know which interpretation is correct? Thankfully, Jesus made it exceedingly obvious what He meant. John 6:63 declares, "The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life." Jesus specifically stated that His words are

---

<sup>2</sup>Website: GotQuestions.org: <http://www.gotquestions.org/transubstantiation.html>

"spirit." Jesus was using physical concepts, eating and drinking, to teach spiritual truth."<sup>3</sup>

Say what you want about the Catholics, but their definition and arguments are thorough and require close reading. In addition to a substantive argument they name check Thomas Aquinas - himself a no slouch in the *dedicated and trained* servant of God realm, instead of simply using the "Jesus Told Us!" mantra.

We persisted in believing in Transubstantiation, and in 'pay now, get later' as a metaphor for religion and life. As Catholics the entire lot of us (my family, classmates, their families, and the neighbors) innately understood this concept. I'm not putting down the religion because there are enough non-Catholics gleefully willing to do that for us. As a lapsed Catholic, perhaps I don't have the right to either complain or defend the faith, but I can attest to the prevalence of the idea of sacrifice in a Catholic milieu.

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

'Pay now, get later' is a mind-set that was as integral to our lives and spiritual training as The Stations of the Cross, and the guitar Mass. Confess your sins now, go to heaven later. Pray now, go to heaven later. Avoid mortal sins now; get to avoid eternal damnation in hell later. Pay upfront for tuition now; get a Catholic school diploma later. Say a rosary now, ask the Blessed Mother to intercede on your behalf with God later. (Disclosure: I feel quite awkward about sassing the Blessed Mother in my list of examples, as I've prayed to her quite often and frankly I'd like to keep her on my side).

Christmas is the Main Event family and friends wise, but Easter is the Thrilla in Manila in the religious calendar. It's Frazier and Ali, and crowds and pageantry and amazing spectacle. It's simple, really: Easter has The Resurrection and Christmas has the Birth of Jesus and let's face it: Resurrection trumps birth on the scale of grandiose. I mean we've all been born, but Resurrected!

The weeks of Lent preceding Easter were an essay in the ritual of 'pay now, get later.' Firstly, it was strongly advised that each of us give up something during Lent, an enjoyable habit or activity. For instance giving up chewing gum or cursing. After Easter, we were free to go back to our former ways, all the while feeling pretty darn good about our weeks long commitment to sacrifice. I'm unsure how giving up gum until Christ is Risen again on Easter Sunday is an apt form of religious dedication but that could be sour grapes. I could never keep it going past week one and was a failure at Lenten sacrifices.

But as required, I never missed the Stations of the Cross on Friday. It was about 45 minutes long and there was in addition to the praying, incense, and a play-by-play of Jesus' final hours on Calvary. The Stations of the Cross were primarily exciting for two reasons. First, it was an opportunity to get out of school a bit early. If the priest was a fast talker and/or anxious to get back to the rectory, the Stations of the Cross could be completed as much as

fifteen minutes before our normal dismissal time.

Freedom!

The second reason was the fainting. Every Lent, you could count on one student to faint from the smell of the incense that was used during the Stations. It was pungent and smoky and not a pleasant, jasminey kind of deal. We were Catholics, not hippies and the incense used was suitably serious. Usually, a student sitting close to the altar would be overcome (not by Jesus' suffering, of course) but by the incense foully choking the air in the church. The student would faint; there would be the slightest commotion to revive them and hustle them out of the church. Once, someone vomited, but while that was interesting, it lacked the sheer glamour of passing out cold. The act of fainting in church, as mildly entertaining as it was for the rest of us, did show a deficiency on the part of the fainter of the mild stoicism that was knocked into us. But at least the student who fainted did so because he was overcome by the stench of incense and not because he was having a dramatic

religious experience. That type of behavior would make the run-of-the-mill Catholics very uncomfortable, indeed. There was a small offshoot of Catholics in the Church who were called Charismatics and were known to talk in tongues and have intense spiritual escapades, but for the most part, the formal requirements were:

- Don't miss Mass on Sunday
- Don't commit big sins
- Go to Confession after you've sinned
- Put money in the Collection plate
- Receive Communion (if you are sin-free, of course)

The tasks on the list weren't that difficult and yet, I've done the following:

- Missed Mass for the most part for years
- Committed big and small sins
- Not gone to Confession in a long, long time
- Not put money in the Collection Plate
- Not received Communion

But still, the Church, with its layaway plan for eternal peace, irrevocably defined how I saw myself and the world around me for most of my life. My family has been Catholic for generations and while I don't agree with most of the dogma, I can't deny that my

mind, heart and soul have been shaped by that  
identification.

*What do I remember?*

Beach chairs on the sidewalk in summer evenings.  
Pretzels sold from a pushcart by a vendor. Baseball on  
the radio. George Washington Cake. Radiator heat. Old  
apartment fixtures. The blue eyes of all my siblings,  
shades from powder to midnight blue. Black hair -  
pitch black in the Irish way. Parish priests.  
Immaculate Heart medals. Pizza shops. Tappies. Sunday  
Mass. Confession. Converse All-Stars. Kegs. Double  
Dutch. Funeral Requiems. Steve Carlton. Rowhouses.  
Family.

Family.