

Of Kathie Schooled in Every Grace

It took me twenty seconds to recognize her, but when I did, it was the sort of recognition that came with the « yes of course » tag. I never expected to see her there, in the middle of Broadway and 86th Street, struggling to wrest a shopping cart from a crack in a road, but come to think of it, yes I did, or at least a part of me did and that part of me was asking, “what shall I do about it now?” There was not an iota of stress or animosity, now that I knew...Only the wish to let sleeping dogs lie. A volley of thoughts bombarded my mind which made a salad of all of them, borrowing a little from pity, a little from smugness and a lot from the pure and simple desire, as I have said, to let sleeping dogs lie. Even the self-addressed “yes of course” appeared as a pacifier thrust abruptly into the mouth of an infant to produce a sensation of satiety before lunch, but unlike the youngster, I felt no need to clamor for the full meal. I did not hasten my steps, tap her shoulder (I was coming up from behind) and make myself known. Yet, strangely, at the same time, I did not feel at all inclined to avoid her. She had paid her debt to pride, and what I once held against her was logically what I could now hold against myself. So there I was, caught between the urge to greet her and the desire to let her move away and of those two choices, I selected neither. Instead, I decided to leave it up to Fate, so I walked normally to the edge of the curb, where we both stood, as indifferent as two people whose only common ground was waiting for the same light to change. Ninety seconds drifted between us as a chance to pierce the silence and I gave her a sidelong glance, the sort that intends not to be noticed but always is, and was, when she turned to me full face and looked at me through eyes that once had turquoise tints in them but were still beautiful. I was thankful for the gesture. At least the eyes retained some of their beauty, turquoise apparently, can fade to a pleasant shade of gray. The rest had suffered whatever suffering life threw her way and I knew at least some of it and had no

inclination to know the rest. So I was grateful for her silence which responded to mine. How did I recognize her after all these years? Her thick cloud of hair, once blond now gray, pulled back in a neat ponytail gave her away, but also, there was a certain resolute handling of the shopping cart that suggested a love of triumph. Triumph over lowly things is still triumph.

We met in eighth grade at the Joan of Arc Middle School, located between Amsterdam and Columbus avenues. I mention this because the names of the school and the avenues have always struck me, not as a tribute to our European origins, but as a rush to replace the primeval Manhattan marsh with an urban Disneyland in a sort of give-me-a-name-any-name game. I have a strong flair for desperation, please bear with me.

That year the administration of Joan of Arc invited the parents to attend their children's first day at school, which meant a full assembly of Moms back in 1963. My mother, one of the few women who worked in the "real world," for that was what we called it, had made arrangements with her university that employed her to teach Spanish.

"We have a very welcome addition to our class this year," said the homeroom teacher. "Kathy Bernhard from Dayton Ohio. Is it Kathy or Katherine? Or Kate? Come up and tell us a little bit about yourself Kathy." Immediately a neat little figure moved up the aisle and to the front of the classroom.

Turning towards us, we spotted a ponytail worn high and doubled so that it looked like a sea horse, its wearer was blond and more exotic to my eyes than my Korean desk mate. Standing before us was the girl that the teen mags like *Seventeen*, actually wrote for - the girl who lived in a neat white house with a garden. The girl who had dogs, went bowling, loved pizza and

hanging out with friends. The girl who was cute and funny but also smart and college oriented. The girl who had a car at 16 and drove it. The girl who was boyfriended but chaste. The girl who smiled and made gee whiz stars dance in her fair eyes and had lips ending in dimples. The girl whose photos GIs carried in their wallets and dreamed of marrying. Here, wandering in from the Heartland, was America, the Authentic, with its accent of neighborliness, its bright sunniness oscillating into our great dark immigrant city and urban jungle with its eye turned towards Europe, so readily spurned and spurning, but subdued, that September morning and under the charm of *the other*. Was Kathie Bernhard... Jewish? No, that wasn't possible. Jewish kids were like me, sallow, dark haired, destined for a life of strife and bound for inescapable existential misery. The pursuit of happiness, not written with Jews in mind, spoke to and for the Kathies.

“Do you prefer Kathy or Katherine?” asked the teacher.

“Oh, not Katherine, Kathie, I like to spell it with an ie at the end. Well, thank you for letting me attend your beautiful school. Well, my name is Kathie Bernhard and I was born in Manhattan but grew up in Dayton, Ohio where my Dad still works. My parents are divorced and I guess you can say I followed Mom back to New York when she got a job working in public relations. I really liked Dayton, and I liked San Francisco where I attended elementary school and I really go for Tucson-that's in Arizona- where we spent summers and I look forward to going back to Tucson with my Dad next summer. Well, all I can say is that I am really pleased to be here and I hope to make Joan of Arc a better place and study real good because I wanna be a veterinarian and I know that's a difficult profession to be in.”

“Well, Kathie with an ie,” the teacher said with a smile in her voice “I have a sneaking suspicion that your dreams will come true. Welcome to Joan of Arc.”

“What a lovely, intelligent young lady!” My mother said when the otherwise boring day was over, and we were walking home. “Everything Barbara said about her is true. I hope that you will make friends with Kathie.” She ended on this light injunction which I had no intention of respecting, because I knew I couldn't. How could I have the temerity to make friends with a goddess, for that was Kathie's destiny while I was a lowly serf, no better than a clod of mud. But a word about Mother, Father and Barbara.

Mother, a child of Russian Jewish immigrants, had no family in America, unlike Father who had the widespread noisy Jewish family that many Jewish intellectuals try to forget, but cannot. Father in his youth espoused atheism and social democracy, buoyed by illusion that the Religion of Man erased the stigmata of chaotic Semitic origins. Of course it didn't. However, New York in the mid twentieth century provided the luxury for the persistence of this illusion, with its sidekick, financial ease. Father's family, however, remained religious and, therefore, in my Father's eyes, despicable, except for his first cousin Joe, a fellow atheist, a wealthy lawyer and a backer of gilt-edged Liberal causes. Joe's wife, Barbara was also something of a trailblazer in those days of traditional femininity, as she worked in the public relations department of a large publishing firm and knew Kathie's mother. Joe and Barbara's daughter, Celtically named Alison, was a junior at Temple University and was dating the man she was to marry, a future cardiologist. Predictably, they have produced perfect children and are living in a lovely suburban cocoon with good train connections to Manhattan. I have lost touch and could care less as the expression goes. Unhappily, I cannot lose touch with the memory of Mother's idolizing Joe Coleman's (changed from Cohn) family, and her own frustrations which bent her to a militant “admirationism.” An act was only so good as its worthiness was measured in the eyes of Barbara, and, also, increasingly, Alison, whose elegance, thinness, perfect posture, and

pleasantly arranged features mirrored the young Jackie Kennedy, therefore mirrored a land of wondrous possibilities where even Father's perpetual ill-humor did not enter. I had escaped being compared to Alison thanks to a significant age difference. Thus, it was Kathie who became the most logical measuring stick on which my various inadequacies marked the fine wood of her glittering presence. A word about my presence which was far from glittering, and seemed to my 14 year old mind the curse of genetics and ill-luck, and here I have to resurrect my father's sister, Gladys, known for her mean streak in a family where hurtful remarks circulated like recipes for Matzoh ball soup.

“I can't get over how tall she's got!” Gladys smirked out to Mother one day during a visit. I had just entered the living room. The remark went through me like a poisoned blade. At 14, I was already five foot eight and praying that one morning, I would wake up and find myself miraculously shortened to the very comely five foot four of – you guessed it– Kathie Bernhard.

“Ya know, she's gonna be like my Uncle Oscar,” Aunt Gladys said viciously, “tall, but Oscar was blond with blue eyes.” Uncle Oscar of the Nordic looks of which I was bequeathed the height but none of the rest, assailed me with his genetic coherence. Woe to me, the hybrid! The lanky Semitic Valkyrie! Mother absorbing Gladys' nastiness, (after all, she had skin in the game) asked, “You know who is Diana's classmate? Kathie Bernhard. Barbara said you worked with her husband at the synagogue. What a small world we live in!” The remark was not totally innocent as Gladys' one and only job before marrying a doctor was secretary to the celebrated Rabbi Stephan Wise, in 1940. Gladys was not going to let that one go.

“Yeah, I knew a Lyle Bernhard. Worked for the Rabbi. Half Jewish. I've kept up with the family. Lyle married a Swedish girl, and divorced. I heard from Barbara their daughter is a beauty.”

Aha! The mystery was partially solved, the rest relied on suppositions of the most idiotic kind – Kathie gets her all-American good looks from the three quarters that are not Jewish, and her brilliant mind from the Jewish side. Whereas I... To make matters worse, my aunt turned to me and cooed loathsomely over a teacup,

“You'd be such a nice tall girl if you didn't slouch. Why do you stoop over?”

How to answer that? How to absorb the missile that my aunt's forked tongue had just launched?

Father entered with Kathie Bernhard carrying a box of cookies.

How shall I describe my classmate Kathie when so many years – fifty at least- stand between me and an enchantment except to say that such an enchantment existed? It mattered little what she wore or how she fixed her hair, or what she said or why. I am not the old woman narrator of *Wuthering Heights* with letters of passion between Heathcliff and Kathy (that name again!) to provide a paper trail, however, the incident of Kathie and the cookies is seared into my mind with cattle iron indelibility. I shall say that a parents-teachers association cause which Kathie's Mom, was championing, brought Kathie to our living-room announcing, with a curtsy and in a sweet voice made sweeter by open Midwestern vowels, “Mom would like you to enjoy these cookies she baked herself. Home made from scratch. Mom never uses mixes. There's a little note as well. ” As Kathie smiled and kissed each one of us, Mother's eyes filled with tears while the sense of my insufficiencies heaved from the depths of my heart and streamed into a silent lament:

“Mother! How deeply I feel for you! And understand your disappointment... My awkwardness, my complexes, my futile striving to please you and Dad... I am an insult to your slimness, to your gracefulness, to your chiseled features, to your efforts to make me a cool Alison, or a vivacious Kathie, but most of all, I feel the bitterness you feel for yourself for not liking my being what I am.”

Then after Kathie and the cookies, I encountered *Richard Cory* in English class.

Whenever Richard Cory went down town,

We people on the pavement looked at him:

He was a gentleman from sole to crown,

Clean favored, and imperially slim.

And he was always quietly arrayed,

And he was always human when he talked;

But still he fluttered pulses when he said,

"Good-morning," and he glittered when he walked.

And he was rich—yes, richer than a king—

And admirably schooled in every grace:

In fine, we thought that he was everything

To make us wish that we were in his place.

So on we worked, and waited for the light,

And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;

*And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet through his head.*

“Who will be our reader?” the teacher asked. Without really knowing why, I raised my hand and was called on, and I read.

“And what does *Richard Cory* mean to you?” The teacher asked after my reading.

I trembled a little and stammered out something about perception and loneliness which is what the teacher wanted, but that did not express what really struck me about the poem which went beyond loneliness into a sort of mystical possession. Cory ended by possessing the only thing we fear to possess which is our own death, and by possessing the bullet, therefore his death, he hushed the cawing voices of admiration, for those are the voices of an unreal and painted universe, a paradise that is worse than death as it sees no faults, no slights, no blemishes, nor does it care to see them. Isn't the *absence* of that false paradise, the one thing Cory lusted after? The one thing Cory could not have? The thing called life?

Eighth grade finished, and so did ninth. My best friend, Charleen, whom I met when we were in grade school, moved across town and I was all alone. Kathie by the end of ninth grade had left the city for some sunny, drive-thru corner of America, and I had no news that I wanted about her, and I stress “I wanted,” because I had to put up with a lot from Mother who “got the goods” about Kathie through Barbara, and the “goods” were always very good-“serious student of the violin,” or “voted most likely to succeed,” but I am not going to list the glowing reports even if I could remember them. Mother's sharing with me was just that – a sharing and a rampart against the aggressive disgruntlement of Father and other disappointments of her life that talking about

Kathie blew away like dandelion fluff. I offered Mother what my brother, too young, and my father, too bitter at the world, could not – an ear. Was I jealous? Was I hurt? Yes, of course, I was, at the beginning, but only at the beginning. After a while, I knew what to expect, and if time does not heal all wounds, it can, at least, leave a few robust scabs. The rest, to misquote Hamlet, is mockery, or becomes mockery. When I felt a “Kathie crisis” coming over Mother, I breathed out loud “here we go again” making sure she heard me. However, it was not my opinion she wanted nor even my character or appearance she sought to improve; I was there to hear praises of Kathie. Wasn't that the price of her love?

Kathie returned to the city a few years later, when we were both seniors in high school. She was dating a star player in a radical “New Left” discussion group which met in the lovely Ethical Culture school building on Central Park West. Discussions were followed by folk dances, cookies and soft drinks. Charleen took me there one evening, and I was surprised to find Kathie in the company of a former Joan of Arc classmate, Noam Salder. Alas, I cannot say in the arms of...

Noam was one of those intense, dark, brooding presences that don't grow up, but only acquire height. I had known him since grade school where he was called a genius. However, what struck me was not his brilliance – he was intelligent enough – but the way he parlayed his perpetual discontent into rage, rumble, reform. Certainly, he “re-formed” Kathie, after “rumbling” her all-American beauty to please his gloomy view of womanhood. Out of curiosity one day recently, I typed his name into a Google search and found, much to my surprise, not the multimillionaire Silicon valley CEO with high level political connections, but the head of an ecological fly-fishing association and organic fish farm financed by public subsidies. After university, he ventured into the wilderness of northern California, undoubtedly to rage, rumble and reform the

fishing industry, but let us return to Kathie...

who looked fabulous but sad that night in a long peasant blouse, bell bottom jeans and heavy silver gypsy earrings. Her long blond hair streamed freely over her shoulders. She greeted Charleen warmly, and me with a wincing smile. She had met Noam through mutual friends, and yes, she had made early admission into UCLA. They were going to run into problems, however, because Noam was headed for Columbia. They would manage somehow to get together, and oh yes, she dearly hoped they would stay together. Signs of fatigue hinted that her heart was not really in it, but her exalted status as Noam's girl demanded an effort, and for the first time, she was not calling the shots. Strangely, there was no physical contact between them. Noam was standing at the center of a circle, pontificating to his radical friends, who had their arms looped about their girlfriends, while Kathie was off in a corner, talking to us. After a time, the Maestro cast a look in our direction and Kathie, the beautiful and the sad, rushed to his side.

The years passed and I made a life for myself, went to France, married, taught English to university students in Aix and Marseille and wrote. I don't think of myself as an ugly duckling transformed into a swan, ugly ducklings never make it into swans, they keep some of the disfiguring pain which mars the total picture, but gives it depth and nuance. In the course of the years, I made frequent visits to New York and stayed with Mother who kept pouring forth her different "admiration" of which Kathie out in Hollywood ("doing marvelous things in music and screenwriting") was always mentioned, first, but never exclusively, and over time, was not mentioned at all. Other goddesses usurped the throne. Once when Mother's "admiration" had become too outrageous, I stopped her and she sighed.

"You know, Diana, I have always thought that we were the luckiest parents to have you for a

daughter,” she ventured, forcing herself to look at me.

I responded by saying that it wasn't true, and that it didn't matter now, or rather that it did, but we were both too old for that sort of stuff. There is a time and place for everything, and we all miss our cues at one point, some people, however, miss them more often or more egregiously than others. This caused her to cry. Mother always cried when she couldn't think of anything better to do. And me? Years of “waiting for the light and cursing the bread” to paraphrase Edwin Robinson, had given me a preference for hard reality over soft illusion, and, yes, there always was-and is- a price to pay. Even in love. Even towards one's mother. I bade her stop her crying.

Years later, after my parents' death, I found myself in the neighborhood of Columbia University, doing historical research and writing a book. Charleen and I were finishing an enjoyable lunch at a Broadway diner before I headed back to Butler Library. I was preparing to leave when Charleen, putting her hand on mine, told me to wait. Kathie Bernhard had returned to the city after years in California, and wanted to see me. Alone. I looked at Charleen quizzically. “How will I recognize her?”

“Oh, you'll recognize her alright. And she will recognize you.” On those words Charleen left. A waitress poured me a second cup of coffee. After a few minutes, the door of the diner opened and she came in.

She was not the Kathie of perpetual sunshine, nor the Bohemian de luxe, nor the California golden girl flaunting her designer clothes and fashionable addictions. I even expected the suave, expensively dressed trophy wife of an older man, but was confronted by a gaunt stick figure

leaning on a cane. A complicated turban covered every inch of hair. She sat down as if an invisible hand had pushed her, and I noticed squiggles clouding her eyes.

“Good to see you, Diana. Welcome back.” Her voice trembled, I could hardly hear her.

A waiter came over. She ordered coffee.

“You want a roll with that?” The waiter asked as he poured her a cup.

Kathie shook her head. Was she too weak to talk?

Brutally honest and slightly vengeful, I said, “Welcome back? You are probably the last person I’d expect to welcome me back.”

Undaunted, she answered, “But you see, Diana, you are wrong. I am happy to see you back in the city. Are you planning to stay?”

I told myself she wanted something. Everybody wants something most of the time. Every person has ulterior motives, and it is good that way. It is easier to figure them out, or else they are like my long gone Aunt Gladys, a flaccid cobra that strikes, out of the love of striking. Alright, but what was it that Kathie wanted?

“I’m leaving at the end of the month,” was my succinct reply. “You know, you were not exactly my best friend those two years we were together at Joan of Arc. I would even say that you and that group of odious girls made my life miserable. Oh, I grant you I was no first prize, but, to use

a term, you really rubbed it in. If it weren't for Charleen, I would never have survived.”

“Can't you find it in you to let bygones be bygones? Besides, you had your folks, I only had Mom.”

I laughed and said, “Let me tell you about my Mom,” knowing that I would never follow up on that. True, I had scores to settle with the living, and with the dead, but I preferred to settle them incognito. I finished my coffee, she had only begun to stir hers, uselessly, as it was black.

“Well, I am very glad that Charleen has made such a wonderful recovery.” Kathie said breaking the silence.

“She certainly has,” I responded. “They caught it just in time. Leukemia. She went through hell with the chemo, but look at her now. Absolutely radiant.”

Silence and a long minute, a long two minutes.

“You are also suffering from it.” I said.

“Suffering from what?”

“Cancer.”

“Yes.”

“Do you want to tell me about it?” I asked.

“Not really. Well, if you must know. It was in my lung. I guess I was sort of lucky. Stage two. Lung cancers are hard to detect. You must have noticed my faint voice.”

“Yes, I did. How far into chemo are you?”

“ I really don't want to talk about it. Have you, Diana... have you been in good health?”

So that was it, my health. Richard Cory's bullet. Kathie the possessor of the knowledge of how she was to die, oh not now, given the advances of science, the spiked treasure in her lung would not open its trove for some time, but, it had a mind of its own and it was unpredictable and capricious. The possession finds a way of becoming the Possessor. But there she sat, the Possessor, facing the Empty with, nonetheless, the gift of the illusion of immortality, which is an echo of its emptiness, a chimera, an idea, a saintly question mark and perhaps its only salvation. I started to laugh, softly at first, then loudly, then even a bit insanely, attracting glances. I picked up the check and slipped out of the booth. There is a price to pay for everything.

