Trilliums and Jelly Donuts

1956

"Chechilia," Daddy says, pronouncing my name the Italian way. "You're going to the library again?" I can tell he is thinking about scary people hiding behind all those tall leafy elm trees that march along the eight blocks between our house and the public library.

"I'm in 5th grade, Daddy," I say. "Nobody tries to scare the big kids, and my book's due today." I have it in my hands and I'm ready to go.

"Chechilia," he says again. His voice goes up in the middle and his bushy eyebrows scrunch together. Whenever he does that, the line between his eyes gets deeper and longer, pointing to the grey hair above his forehead. None of my friends' daddies have grey hair, so I guess mine must be older, or special.

It's a warm sunny Saturday morning in September, my favorite month. School started two weeks ago and my birthday is coming. Next year I'll be a teenager. Three more years and I'll graduate from St. Brigid's and go to St. Patrick's High School. I can't wait.

All summer I went to the library every Friday. I borrowed lots of books about birds and faraway places like Antarctica and the Galapagos Islands. The library looks like a small white house at the top of the hill, and all the rooms are filled with shelves and shelves of books with plastic covers. I have to use a step ladder to reach the top shelves. So does the librarian. She reminds me of Sister Frances, my second grade teacher, only without the nun clothes. They're both short and wrinkly and Irish. They wear glasses with black frames and silver crucifixes around their necks. Sister Frances smiles more, though.

Now I'm interested in science fiction and just finished a book about evil reptiles heading for earth in their spaceship shaped like a torpedo. It wasn't as scary as watching Boris Karloff on *Science Fiction Theater*. I kept waiting for it to be scary and then I started wondering how reptiles with tiny brains could be smart enough to fly, but birds have small brains too and fly without a ship. That seems harder to me.

"I can get a mystery book for Mommy," I say. "She likes to read when she's sick."

"Never mind," Daddy says, sounding like he had a tummy ache. "I got her the new *True Romance* magazine she likes yesterday." He points to the white Snowflake Pastry bag on the round kitchen table and says "Got some jelly donuts too."

"Can I eat one on the way to the library, Daddy?"

"They're supposed to be dessert," he says, "but go ahead." He opens the bag and holds it out so I can reach in and take one. "Say goodbye to your mother, and be back in time for lunch."

There is flour and tomato sauce and cheese on the counter next to the refrigerator, so I know Daddy is going to make pizza. Whenever Mommy stays in bed on Daddy's day off from the railroad, that's what we have for lunch. He was a Mess Sergeant in the war, so he knows how to cook.

I run down the hall between the kitchen and the bedrooms and stop in my parents' doorway. Mommy has on her red baby doll nightie. She's holding a little round mirror and taking off her hairnet. She always wears one to bed for a whole week after she goes to the beauty salon so she won't mess up her fancy hairdo. It's combed up high on her forehead and shaped like wings on the sides. The wings look hard, like they might break, so daddy and I never touch them. Her

tray from breakfast is still on the bed next to her. She always has Cream of Wheat and Wonderbread toast with grape jam. I can't make Cream of Wheat without lumps in it. She hates lumps.

When daddy eats Wonderbread, he takes a slice, folds it in half, and mushes it with his fingers until it's all flat. Then he rolls it up and dips it in his coffee until it's soggy and eats it just before it falls apart.

When Mommy sees me, her arm jumps and she drops the mirror on the blanket. Her face changes to sad and I can tell she wants me to stay and pat her, but I really want a new book so I kiss her cheek fast and run down the hall and out the kitchen door with the big fat donut between my teeth. The air smells a little like barbecue smoke or burning leaves.

The grown up twins who aren't very smart are standing on the corner at the end of our block with their two bull dogs and a big ball of red yarn. They remind me of Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee from *Alice in Wonderland.* One of them is holding the ball against his bomber jacket with both hands, and the other is pulling a piece of the yarn toward him and making a new ball. They do the same thing every day except Sunday. I never see them in church though.

The bull dogs have flat black and white faces and growl at me. They're on leashes but I'm always afraid they'll get loose and bite my legs, like my Scotch terrier used to do when I was small and rode my tricycle on the sidewalk in front of our house. I wonder why Daddy isn't worried about them chasing me instead of a stranger jumping out from behind a tree.

Maybe I could write a scary story about them for school. Sister Teresa makes us write something every Monday afternoon after recess. Last week, I wrote about my grandpa who died when I was ten. Daddy came home from work early the day it happened. He was crying, and I

never saw him do that before. After I handed it in, Sister read it right away and then looked at me for a long time, like I was a new kid in the class.

I hold on tight to the reptiles from outer space, drop part of my donut by the bull dogs' front paws, and walk by as fast as I can. I don't look back.

1970

"Ah," Cecilia says, opening her 25th birthday package from her father. "Half-moon cookies from Snowflake Pastry Shoppe! These were my favorites when I was a kid." She splits the cookie down the middle, giving the vanilla half to Leo, her partner almost since she arrived in Vancouver three years ago. She bites into the chocolate half with great expectations. "Mmmm," she says, savoring every cakey crumb. "It's amazing they got here in one piece."

"Every once in awhile the post office fails to disappoint," Leo says, biting into his part of the half moon. "These are very yin yang."

"I wonder if Dad noticed that," Cecilia says. "Let's see what else is in here."

"You don't say much about him," Leo says.

"He's never said more than a few words at a time since I can remember," Cecilia says, lifting a loaf of pumpernickel bread from the box. "I think he came back from World War II with PTSD. Ma said he was never the same after the war."

"How so?"

"Talked to himself when he thought no one else was around, kept the TV on all day and all night, like he was trying to drown something out, got up a million times during the night to check doors

and windows. He was always afraid I'd get attacked every time I left the house, even just to play in the yard. As I got older, that scared me."

Cecilia gets the butter from the fridge and a knife from the drawer next to the sink, proceeding to slice the bread. "He still runs the TV all day. I can hear it whenever I call."

"What about your mother?"

"Sometimes I think she checked out at 40 just to get some peace and quiet."

"The photos of her – she was a beauty."

"She was," Cecilia says, handing Leo a thick piece of bread, "though I'm not sure she knew it, at least not all the time."

"Thanks C," Leo says. "Think I'll add some provolone to this."

"I walked in on her in the bathroom one morning before she got her makeup on and you'd think I'd caught her without any clothes on. She told me to leave and slammed the door shut. I was late for school that day because she wouldn't come out."

"I'm glad you don't wear any," Leo says, "makeup that is."

"Speaking of PTSD," Cecilia says, sinking her teeth into her own bread and feeling her erogenous zones tingle. "Jana and I are working on a story about U.S. draft dodgers in Canada." She and Jana work for *The Vancouver Sun* and the piece will be their first shared byline.

"How's it coming?"

“Some of these guys have brothers and friends who came back from Nam in worse shape than dad.” She and Leo sit down at the kitchen table across from each other. “I wonder why more of them don’t apply for conscientious objector status. At least that way they could stay home.”

“A lot of them don’t qualify because it’s not about religion or philosophical convictions,” Leo says. “They’re just plain scared of having their arms and legs blown off for no good reason.”

“For sure it’s not the same as WW II and saving the world from the evil mustache,” Cecilia says, taking a filterless Pall Mall from the pack on the table.

“Those things’ll kill you,” Leo says.

“I know, I know,” Cecilia says. “It’s hard when everyone at the paper smokes.” She clears her throat. “Why do you have to be so good?”

She perches the unlit cigarette on the edge of the clear glass ash tray and reaches for a chunk of Leo’s provolone. “Strong stuff,” she says, waving it under her nose. “You don’t want to eat it and then go out in public hoping to remain unnoticed.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Leo says, pushing away from the table, and coming up behind Cecilia, his hands kneading her shoulders. “I have other things in mind for us this fine afternoon, Birthday Girl.”

1971

Nine months or so later, Cass is born. To mark the occasion, C’s daddy sends a box of Mexican wedding cookies and a pink baby book. The cookies are actually not a hint that Cecilia and Leo should tie the knot. They have white powdery surfaces and buttery, nutty interiors that Cecilia can’t resist.

Before his gifts arrive, her daddy has a heart attack in front of the TV. He sits there in his favorite chair for two days before Larry, his brother and C's godfather, finds him. The Sunday football game they were supposed to watch together is just getting started. Larry calls Cecilia with the news and reads her the note her daddy managed to scratch into the back of the TV guide with the knife he'd been using to cut up his meatballs. No C. it says, a blob of dried tomato sauce forming a period.

"I'll take care of everything," Larry says. "It's what he wanted."

Cecilia is nursing Cass when Leo gives her the phone. Tears fall on the baby's head. They make Cecilia think of baptism and she doesn't wipe them away.

"Do you think he ever felt safe," she asks Larry.

"I don't know," Larry says, "but I know he loved you and your mom."

"Give Cass a kiss for me", he says, "and don't worry. I'll take care of him."

1974

When Cass is three and already curious about colored stones and sparkling rocks, Cecilia and Leo take her back East so she can see where her mother grew up and places she'd been as a girl. They canoe along the north shore of Lake Superior and explore an amethyst mine near Thunder Bay. Cass finds two amethysts. Leo eventually makes a pendant with the larger one and Cass wears it all the time.

They wade along the edges of Georgian Bay, the clear emerald water still too cold for swimming in May. They see white trilliums along the Bruce Trail. Finally, they visit the veterans section of Prospect Cemetery in Toronto where Cecilia's dad is buried. Cass puts her small amethyst in

the petals of a wild daffodil that is starting to bloom near her grandpa's gravestone. Joseph de Cicco, it says. Free at last.

"Why is grandpa under the dirt?" Cass asks.

"He's not really there," her mother says. "Remember the caterpillar that changed into a butterfly and flew away? She was finished being a caterpillar and left that part of her behind. It fell off the tree and landed on the ground, so we made a little bed for it, covered it up with soil, and put a little pine cone on top to mark the spot. What happened to grandpa is something like that."

Leo kneels down behind Cass and Cecilia. He reaches an arm between them and flattens his hand on the earth. Cass and Cecilia add their hands to his and they sit there until it feels right to leave.

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1920 - 1945

Joseph de Cicco was born in South Toronto. His parents were immigrants from Napoli, Italy. They were hard workers but never learned much English so their options were limited. His mother cleaned houses and his father worked in a small shoe factory. When he was old enough, Joseph delivered newspapers before school. Breakfast was a bowl of half coffee, half hot milk with small chunks of white bread floating in it, like marshmallows. He was a good looking boy, thick curly brown hair and green eyes. He had an older sister and a younger brother. He outlived Faye and Larry outlived him.

Before he left for the war, Joseph bought his brother a guitar and made him promise to take lessons. Their mother was proud of them both. A photo of Joseph in his army uniform was on

the coffee table in the living room, to the left of a heavy crystal bowl that was always full of Hershey's kisses. To the right was a wedding picture of Joseph and his bride. As soon as he joined up, he proposed to and married Rose. She was striking in her satin gown, long black hair swept back from her forehead and framing her high cheekbones. After he came back from Germany and Cecilia was born, pictures of her accumulated on the table as well, until there was no room for anything else.

1971

All of the pictures eventually pass to Cecilia. Her parents' wedding photo is on her desk in the house she shares with Leo and Cass on the other side of the country. She loves the sepia tones, and the healthy pink tint painted onto their cheeks and lips. She thinks about talking Leo into getting an old-fashioned photo taken of them at this year's Pacific National Exhibition, perhaps dressed as Buffalo Bill and Annie Oakley or Calamity Jane. She could add it to the one of Joseph and Rose, a bridge into a new era with strong, if fanciful, ties to the past.