

## Calico Notebook

Every morning for a week now I've been walking to the coffeeshop on Central Avenue in the block where Betsy McCarthy, a high school classmate of mine, used to live. Most days I stop on the sidewalk out front and look through the fence at the construction going on next door. But today, after a full week of great spring weather, it's suddenly cold and windy, so I just hurried inside, ordered my coffee, and sat down to write.

First, I need to address the compulsion: how I throw on my clothes the minute I wake up, how I grab the backpack and head out walking—same mile, same route—to this coffeeshop. At the start, it may have been the need to get out of Mom's house, to escape the cupboards and closets and dresser drawers, all those decisions about her things, now that she's gone and the house is about to go on the market. I only have the one week of spring break before I have to fly back to Chicago, and my sister Connie and I have been making good progress—her kids have been helping with runs to Goodwill and the dump—but at the end of the day, Connie gets to go back to her own house, because she's the daughter who married her high school sweetheart and has never lived farther than ten minutes from her childhood home. Meanwhile, I've been living in Mom's house, the emotional work zone, sleeping in the bedroom Connie and I shared when

we were girls, because I'm the daughter who left Fleury Hills forever right out of high school and never looked back.

The compulsion is urgent, like I'm afraid I'll forget the details of some important dream. I write quickly, but that isn't to say I don't write carefully. I never write in ink, and I'm obsessed about the pencils. I make sure I have several in my backpack before I head out, sharpening them on Mom's old pencil sharpener on the wall inside the pantry door. And all along I've been writing as though someone other than me will someday read this.

Each day, when I settle down to write, I can't begin without first reading through all the prior entries. Sometimes I make notes in the margins—afterthoughts and occasional edits, but only where I've dropped a word or where the handwriting is illegible, because I don't as a rule allow myself to revise just to make myself sound better. I revise only to make myself clear. But each day it takes that much longer to get to the blank page.

It's become precious to me, this notebook I picked up on a whim the day Connie and I were in Target looking at storage containers—this slim notebook with the dark blue calico cover and the cheap lined pages.

So, today as I was passing the construction site next door—they're putting up a commercial complex, and the bulldozers have demolished the entire block, including Betsy McCarthy's old house—it hit me I ought to come up with a title for whatever this is I'm writing. But maybe that's putting the cart before the horse, as Mom would have said. How can I come up with a title when I can't even determine how the various parts relate to each other?

Which reminds me of Sister Perpetua's English class—Unity of Purpose on the blackboard in her perfect Palmer Method penmanship. An outline would be a good thing, or at

least a list of recurring themes. Interesting, that Sister P. floats up today, after I haven't thought of her in decades, because Fleury Hills Catholic High is definitely one of the themes, not to mention Betsy McCarthy and the coincidence that right now the bulldozers have entirely leveled her house.

### #1: The Kavanaugh Hearings

I have to begin somewhere. The hearings took place the week my mother died, when I was staying at the house while Connie and I made the funeral arrangements. The day Christine Blasey Ford testified, I was riveted to the small TV in Mom's den, which sits on a dresser surrounded by photos, including the old pair of eight-by-tens in matching dime-store frames, Connie on the left, me on the right, our high school yearbook photos. I was breathing so shallowly the whole time Blasey Ford was on the stand, and meanwhile her face on the screen was perfectly flanked by Connie's face and mine in our frames. At one point I looked up and there was the crucifix above the TV, the heavy mahogany one that hung in my grandmother's bedroom until she died. By the time Connie came to pick me up (we had an appointment at the church office to select the readings and hymns for the funeral Mass), I was a wreck.

I didn't mention the hearings to Connie. It's been a while since I've felt comfortable discussing politics with her. I don't know if she's still active in her Catholic pro-life group, and I'm afraid to find out how she and Jack voted in the last election. Sitting beside her in the car, looking out the window as we passed through the business blocks of Fleury Hills, as we went up the hill toward Immaculate Conception, where we both used to go to Confession on Saturdays and Mass on Sundays, I was struck dumb by this sense of being cut off from her, my own sister. I

was still breathing shallowly, this sense of something trapped under my chest, and I don't think it was grief over losing Mom, although later, when the music director handed us the list of hymns and Connie said, "Well of course we have to have On This Day, O Beautiful Mother, right?" I was definitely crying about Mom.

## #2: The Weeping

First I wrote "The Crying," but then erased it. Even though weeping seems melodramatic (almost Victorian), it captures what happened the week of the funeral and the Kavanaugh hearings and that luncheon at Annemarie Mulloy's house (which should be next, #3). Weeping captures the physical, the whole body drenched with it, like a serious symptom, something catastrophic going on, and what happened to me two nights in a row back in September was definitely physical. Both times I woke up with a start, after weeping in my sleep, though I couldn't remember any particular dream or nightmare. I had sit on the side of the bed in the dark until I got control of myself. Then I went to the the kitchen and lit the stove under Mom's old tea kettle. Both times my lungs were aching, like I'd just been swimming laps, or like I'd finally made it to shore after nearly drowning in an undertow.

## #3 40th Reunion, FHCH

Our class has held three or four reunions, but I've never attended one, even though Annemarie Mulloy is always the organizer and I've actually stayed in touch with her over the years. I guess I've never been one to get all nostalgic about the good old days. Which is why, back in September, when I mentioned to Connie that I'd decided to go to the reunion in June, and

not only that, I'd agreed to help Annemarie Mulloy with the planning, she said, "Who are you and what have you done with my sister?"

I laughed, but we both know it was because Annemarie had come to the funeral home, and so had two other classmates, Elena Charles and Nancy Obrecki. They each had signed the guestbook and picked up one of those pretty Blessed Virgin holy cards that Connie and I had chosen especially, and crossed the room to get down on the kneeler in front of Mom's casket. Moreover, Annemarie had gone the extra mile and attended the funeral Mass the next day at Immaculate Conception. And so when she asked if I'd like to join them for lunch before I left town—Elena and Nancy would be there, too—how could I say no?

Lunch was at Annemarie's house, a perfect September day, outside on the patio, and when Elena uncovered her mint brownies for dessert, Annemarie went to get her reunion folder so they could bring me up to date. There were two lists in the folder: members of our class they still hadn't been able to track down, and members already contacted by email.

Apparently they'd been chipping away at the list of the missing for months. "We need to move on now," Annemarie said. "Those people probably don't want to be found."

But she seemed peeved about the people on the list who hadn't had the courtesy to reply, not even to affirm they'd received. I was relieved to see she'd listed me as having replied, because I didn't recall that I had.

Nancy said, "Be careful what you ask for, Hon. Let's not forget Ron O'Keefe."

Apparently Ron had immediately written "thanks but no thanks" and asked that his name be removed from the list because he didn't want to think any more about "the humiliating circle of hell" that Fleury Hills Catholic had been.

Elena rolled her eyes and said, “Dante. Sister Laetitia would have been pleased.”

I remembered Ron from Latin Club—baby-faced, shy—but I didn’t say anything in his defense.

Apparently Betsy McCarthy was among those who hadn’t replied. Annemarie seemed particularly peeved about that, because after all Betsy was our class valedictorian. Annemarie had gotten it in her head that Betsy might be inclined to answer if she got a friendly follow-up email from me. I have no idea why Annemarie would think that—I wasn’t close to Betsy any more than she was. Still, it was the only thing she asked of me the whole time I was sitting there on her lovely patio enjoying the lovely lunch, so I said I’d be happy to. As soon as I put Betsy McCarthy’s address into my phone, I said I’d best get going, because I wanted some time with my sister before I had to fly home in the morning. What I really wanted was to go back to the house, pull down the shades in my old bedroom, and lie down. Because I was exhausted by just an hour with Annemarie and Elena and Nancy.

#### #4 Betsy McCarthy.

I’ve been thinking about my obsession with the construction site, and why I keep picturing how Betsy’s house used to look from Central Avenue—plain and worn, set back from the sidewalk, shaded by an old tree. I think it’s because of what Connie told me back in September when she was driving me to the airport.

“So you know her story, right?” Connie said, and proceeded to tell me what she heard maybe ten years ago from a friend of hers whose sister married Betsy’s brother Tim. The story goes that both Betsy’s parents were terrible alcoholics and the whole time she was getting those

perfect grades that earned her a full scholarship to Boston College, she was also managing the household—meals, laundry, everything really—not to mention taking care of her brother and little sister, because most of the time her parents were passed out cold on the bed by the time she got home from school.

Right there in the car with Connie, about five minutes from the airport exit, this strange sob escaped from me and I fell apart. Connie was trying to keep her eyes on the road and at the same time handing me a tissue from the glove compartment and asking what was the matter, what had she said?

When I got control of myself, I said maybe it was just the shock of it, after all this time, hearing what poor Betsy had gone through, and I never knew a thing about it.

“Nobody knew,” Connie said. “She didn’t want us to know.”

There was this silence between us then in the car, and I wondered if Connie was thinking about Daddy. Not that we ever came home from school to find him passed out cold on the bed or anything close to that, but it was true he drank, and he was suddenly dead in his sleep when I was fifteen and Connie was still in grade school.

Then we were pulling up to Departures, and saying our goodbyes, Connie hugging me hard. We both were crying then, sisters who loved each other, who had just buried their mother.

Later, after take-off, when I looked down like I always do to see if I could spot the reservoir near Fleury Hills, I was thinking about the loneliness of high school and about certain secrets that had to be kept. It’s wasn’t only Betsy McCarthy. I was thinking about Mary Kay Burnley. During the lunch at Annemarie’s, Elena had said Mary Kay was coming to the reunion, even though she hadn’t actually graduated with us. Elena and Mary Kay had been cheerleaders

together, both dating guys on the basketball team, and they were best friends, until out of the blue, summer after junior year, Mary Kay's parents decided to send her to a Catholic school for girls in Ohio where her grandparents lived.

Was I the only one who thought it was strange, almost cruel, that Mary Kay's parents would do that to her, right before senior year? But more importantly, was I the only one who later put two and two together and came up with the answer that Mary Kay was probably pregnant? But of course I didn't ask those questions during lunch at Annemarie's. I did ask Elena if she and Mary Kay had been in touch all this time. She said it was only recently that they had reconnected through Facebook. She said Mary Kay is single, no mention of kids. She lives in Florida now, close to her elderly parents, who retired down there.

#### #5 Rape

Back when Harvey Weinstein and #MeToo was all over the news, which was around the time I had to fly home twice because Mom had fallen and broken her hip, I never once thought of Jimmy Sullivan, never once thought me too, because I'd never considered what had happened between Jimmy and me as rape (telling: that I write between us rather than what he did). Then later, when Christine Blasey Ford was on the TV, which was the same week I got sucked into saying yes to the reunion, it never even crossed my mind that Jimmy might be there and I'd see him face to face.

But here I am writing rape, not allowing myself to erase it. Here I am re-living the event in question: that day in the woods, first year at Catholic University, spring, a dogwood in bloom, a low branch right above my face. But first I should tell how it came about I was there under the



dogwood, on the ground, which was unexpectedly cold. I should tell how happy I actually was when Jimmy called to say he was driving through D.C. and maybe he could stop by, how I said yes at once, even though it was exam week and I was in danger of failing Chemistry, which later I actually did.

I should tell how I showered and washed my hair and told my roommate Christel it was a nice surprise, my old boyfriend from high school stopping by. Because it wasn't true Jimmy was ever my boyfriend, though there was a time when I wished he were. Actually he was this smart and funny guy who was on the newspaper staff with me, who every now and then would drive me home from school after we worked late. Once, right before graduation, he took me for a ride around the reservoir, and suddenly we were parked and making out. Things were moving fast, but I put a stop to it. This isn't to say I wasn't thrilled at the time that he wanted to make out with me. I guess I was just hoping that next time he'd say how much he cared about me first. But there was no next time.

And so, when I told my roommate Christel that I was surprised Jimmy was stopping by to see me, that part was true. Since graduation, I had seen him exactly once, end of the summer at a party, just before we both headed off to college. Jimmy got into Hopkins, pre-med.

And I guess I was surprised, after he picked me up at the dorm, when he didn't take me somewhere for coffee or a bite to eat. In truth, I really can't remember what I was thinking when he found that trail through the woods and suggested we walk. I can't remember where the woods were, or how long we rode to get there. I only remember how surprised I was when he kissed me hard, when suddenly I was on my back behind the bushes looking up at the dogwood, pressed

against dry leaves and twigs, which were surprisingly cold and uncomfortable, and not what I ever thought the first time would be like.

Christine Blasey Ford said she thought Brett Kavanaugh was going to accidentally kill her. I don't remember being worried Jimmy was going to kill me. I remember looking up at the white blossoms of that dogwood. I remember the twigs scraping the back of my legs when Jimmy pressed on.

I have to think it through: surprised is the key word here, because if I was surprised, that implies I wasn't expecting it. I don't remember saying no, but I didn't say yes. Was I given a chance to say yes?

It was fast, and he took no care. It hurt—searing—but all I remember about afterwards is how he got up and brushed the leaves from his pants.

#### #6 Betsy McCarthy, Second Thoughts

Annemarie was right about one thing: Betsy was inclined to answer an email from me. She apologized for not replying back in the fall. She said she regretted she couldn't make the reunion, but didn't say why (not that I thought she should have). She said she hoped everybody would have a nice time.

She could have ended it at one paragraph, cordial and done with it. But there was a second paragraph. She said she remembered me from the newspaper staff and from Sister Therese's Home-Ec class. She said she remembered my mom volunteering in the cafeteria, and how sad it was when my dad died sophomore year. She said she'd be in Chicago in the fall, a conference at Loyola, and maybe we could get together for coffee and a catch-up?

I was surprised—delighted really—and wrote back yes.

It will be good to see Betsy, and not only because we both ended up in academia and have common interests. Something tells me Betsy is the kind of person I can talk to about Mary Kay Burnley having to leave Fleury Hills Catholic before senior year, and about the Kavanaugh hearings (religion and politics rolled into one). I picture myself confessing to her how confused I am, just writing the word rape on this page. Actually, it occurs to me now that all along I've been picturing someone like Betsy McCarthy as reader of this notebook. It comforts me especially to think of her reading #2, about that spell of weeping.