Twentieth Century Finches

Thanksgiving arrived thick with onion and celery sautéed in butter. Irene was still in bed when the parade started, but the stench of her labors hung in the air, heavy as a recently martyred saint. She had been awake through the wee hours, Kirbying and cooking. A few of her coworkers were coming to dinner, and in the words of my absentee father: *Everything had to be perfect*. I wouldn't have put it that way, at least not out loud. In my mother's house, perfect was a four-letter word. Indignant as an accused televangelist she would say, "I do not require perfection. No one is perfect. I only ask that you hold up your end."

But my end felt heavier than usual at the end of the night, so I didn't last as long as she did. Still, I folded all the bath towels in thirds and stacked them in threes on the shelves of the linen closet. Then I dusted the encyclopedias and their shelf, carefully. Both were new and unlike other women who might have had to check with their husbands before investing in the complete set of 1981 issue Encyclopedia Britannica, Irene consulted the calculator and signed on the dotted line. Traveling sales people loved my mother. Those evenings after Lloyd left were a gold rush for peddlers of replacement windows and retractable awnings. Vacuums that could suck a five pound bag of sugar from the floor (not that a five pound bag of sugar would ever—ever find itself upside down on my mother's carpeting) and encyclopedias for transporting the Far East into our western Pennsylvania living room. For my mother's part, it seemed she used these

purchases as an opportunity to prove a point. These were the hard won spoils of a single parent. The shiny new symbols of her independence—our independence from reliance upon men—men like my father, at least, who was the President of Not Being Perfect.

After the shelf, I buffed the television screen with a cloth diaper. Scoured both the *his* and *hers* sinks and before Johnny Carson could crack another joke about married men, I crawled to bed as the Kirby and my mother roared over him.

What I really cared about was the Thanksgiving Day parade. The opening cadence was my favorite part. The horn carriers raised their brass to the skies to start the show and the whole band—the drummers and the flutes; the woodwinds and the brass; the flag throwers and the baton twirlers rolled off of their heels onto their feet and marched. Life cereal in one hand, spoon in the other, I watched as a band from Little Rock played a *Funny Girl* medley. "I'm gonna live and live now. Get what I want I know how." Arms outstretched, eyes closed, mouthing the words as I spun around and around. I might as well have been standing on Broadway in six inches of snow wearing a shimmering gold mini skirt: teleported out of my living room into the screen like that cowboy kid from *Willy Wonka*. I would never have talked to my mother the way he did, but it would have been nice to think I could have gotten away with it once in a while.

I don't remember placing the cereal bowl on the encyclopedia shelf; I had forgotten everything in that moment. I was not a statistic—not a product of a broken home brought about by the sudden surge of married women in the workplace—the way my home economics teacher, Miss Orlandi, had said. My face was not covered in 'spots' nor did I secretly think about making an anonymous call to an analyst. Watching the band, I was beautiful, and my mother was more like Mrs. Brady and less like herself, and we were

both truly well-adjusted. So when in a frenzied spin my hand struck the bowl sending it into the air, flipping it upside down, spilling a soupy mess across the gold trimmed pages; seeping into the brand-new reams of the top and bottom shelves, I froze at the sight of it. And for a half-second, I was in awe. I couldn't help but think that if the bowl had been my baton, it would have been a perfect toss.

By mid-December I had begun offering to do extra cleaning in areas away from the shelf when Irene and I were in the same room. I volunteered to take toothpicks to the tight, crumb-filled space between the kitchen counter and the electric range; alphabetized the vinyl albums; heaved the Kirby around my bedroom. Anything to avoid the shelf and the irreparable yet thus far undetected damage I had done to it. But after a long day spent in the girls' bathroom in between classes, plastering my face with orange-tinted Oxy, all I really wanted to do at the end of it was sit in front of the television and watch other people suffer.

Down the hall, Irene shook her head at the set showing the evening news in black and white while I tried to take in as much of *The Facts of Life* as I could before she sensed I was relaxing. If she knew I was in the prone position, she might have suggested I start with Volume A and write a 500 word report on the modern day miracle that was the artificial sweetener. But before I could find out how Tootie got herself back into the good graces of Mrs. Garrett, who was also red-headed and divorced and given to sudden outbursts of anger, the god-damned doorbell rang.

My mother speed-walked the hall, brushed her thick hair from her forehead and opened the storm door. I heard the man on the other side say, "My name is Reginald

DeBor of the DeBor-Frank Funeral Home. I'd like to talk with you about the peace of mind that comes with knowing you have chosen a facility that will offer your family the best possible care during the uncertain and fragile moments following your departure."

Still unnoticed, I eased off the couch and crept to the kitchen where I could get a better view. Mr. Reginald DeBor of the DeBor Frank Funeral Home was dressed as one might expect—much like his clientele. He was gangly and unnaturally puffy in the cheeks, donning a jaundice green suit. Irene stood waiting for the pitch, a barrier of screen between her and the Grim Reaper, while he double-checked his clipboard. "Mrs. Pugh,"

"It's Ms., as a matter of fact."

"My apologies," he said and paused to make eye-contact. "I appreciate a woman who stands on her own two feet. Now let me ask you, Ms. Pugh, have you made permanent plans for your future?"

Giving the screen a gentle push she said, "Call me Irene."

Mr. DeBor stood in the doorway, grinning. At closer inspection, he was a cross between Billy Dee Williams and Grace Jones, if Grace Jones had sported a Geri curl. But his teeth were like hers: huge and ivory. Irene had always admired people with good teeth. She spent countless hours brushing and flossing, rinsing with salt water, burning her tongue with mint green wash, distributing her time equally between the his and hers sinks. But to no avail. Her mouth was a mine field, polluted with silver in the back and a partial where her two front teeth used to be. She spent so much time in the chair, in fact, receiving root canals and gum treatments that she had insisted I become a dentist. Not a dental hygienist (which everyone knows is just the job you get when you're Mr. DDS's

latest girl on the side.) I would be a board certified bitch of a dentist—extracting teeth in the name of objectified women the world over. Volumes B for bicuspid and I for incisor would give me a leg-up on the competition.

Under normal circumstances I would have been concentrating on transforming into an orange flower to match the sofa so I could sneak in a few more seconds of television before being told to make the tea. But he wouldn't stop smiling, so I stood next to my mother, both of us transfixed by those teeth.

Finally my mother said, "Come in, Mr. DeBor - Frank, is it?"

"Just DeBor. Reggie DeBor. Frank was my wife's name."

"Oh?"

"The family name."

"I see."

"She's been gone for three years," Mr. DeBor said, searching his pointy shoes for inspiration. "And it's still-"

"Come in, please. Jenny'll put the water on for tea."

Mr. DeBor slipped out of his shoes (without having to be asked) and followed my mother into the living room. Clearly this was not his first day on the job. I filled the kettle and waited for its whistle like a train pulling out of the station to blow. Tea! Tea and the whole routine were beginning to really get on my nerves.

All I wanted to do was twirl a baton. To wear a shimmering gold mini skirt that would show off my rear-end when I spun around, and I believed if I practiced hard enough, I'd land a spot with a marching band in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade.

Every day after school I rolled the silver rod of the baton back and forth between my fingers. Practiced tossing it up and catching it while it was still moving, tossing it up and turning in a full circle before catching it while it was still moving. Making sure it didn't just fly but also sing and dance on its own in the air. I was a baton ventriloquist; a baton puppeteer. But not in the house. *Not in the house! Are you nuts? Outside. Outside.*

I leaned over the faux brick half-wall between the kitchen and the living room to ask Mr. DeBor how he took his tea and saw his hand resting on my mother's knee. Irene rarely sat, except for during the evening news or a sales pitch. Otherwise she was upright, her arms like the attachment hoses on the Kirby. And though I had become accustomed to the sight of her perched on the edge of the green chair, almost oozing onto the floor—such was her intoxication with the sales person's presentation, I had never before seen one of them touch her. I didn't think she liked to be touched, yet she did not appear to be offended. Maybe it was the nature of the business. The dead people business: the living want to be touched to remember *they* can still feel. Perhaps this was part of the shtick, part of playing the role of funeral parlor guy.

I decided to leave Mr. DeBor's cup black and unsweetened. My mother's mug I filled with half a teaspoon of sugar and only enough milk to tint the tea. His hand was on his own leg, which was crossed, by the time I turned the corner, but his arm was stretched over the top of the cushion where Irene sat. If I had not been going to such extreme lengths, such pain staking measures to avoid the encyclopedia shelf at all costs, I would have marched over and pulled out Volume W for *What the?*

Irene had only been on one date since the divorce. Stuart Pearlman from the office had asked her to meet him for a drink after work. "How cliché," she'd said, plucking her eye

brows before bed the night before. But she agreed to meet him and when she came home after the drink to find me in front of the tube, she did not tell me to turn it off. Instead she dropped her purse haphazardly on the floor, sunk next to me on the couch and said, "Jenny, I am so glad to be home." Stuart Pearlman must not have had such captivating teeth.

Mr. DeBor launched into the sales pitch as I placed the tray in front of them on the coffee table. He took a sip and said nothing about it being too bitter or dark. He just kept jawing on about price ranges and package deals. I could almost see him, an over-sized beaver, chomping away at the pine or the cedar or the cherry that would become the box he would have my mother buy. The box she would spend all of eternity in. Besides the coffin there was the service, the number of days the box would be left open, and the hours each day we could visit. We, in this case, meaning me. Me who would be left behind. Me who would gush over her, blow my nose, and comment about how lifelike Mr. DeBor had made her look. It all made a difference in the price.

Irene and I didn't attend many funerals. She didn't like to cry in public. She had always said when she died she wouldn't want people blubbering over the casket. It was all too formal and melodramatic. What if they broke her arm and bent it at the elbow? Spread her fingers into a casual wave so I could stand there and work her arm back and forth, gesturing *Goodbye* or *Hello* as the mourners came and went? Wouldn't that be a stitch? The only time she spoke seriously about the matter was after my grandmother's funeral. "Don't put me in a box, Jenny. I don't want to be down there in a box." But she said nothing about that to Mr. DeBor.

"I thought you wanted to be cremated," I said.

Irene and the Enemy looked up from a three ring binder full of casket liner samples, and my mother blushed.

"Nothing is set in stone."

"We also offer memorial service packages for those who opt for the closed casket or cremation," Mr. DeBor said. He bent over and leafed through his hardback briefcase.

"Why would someone pay for a casket if they wanted it to be *closed* during the *viewing*?" I had to ask because it didn't make sense to me. And shouldn't I have been included in this conversation seeing as how I would be the one working her arm and all.

"Sometimes a body can't be restored for viewing. In cases of bad accidents."

"Did your wife have a bad accident?"

"Jennifer!"

"I mean wasn't it hard for you to look at her—restored or not—knowing she was going to be in that box forever?"

"I'm so sorry. For everything," Irene said. She glanced from him to me, and her eyes peeled a layer of skin from my face.

Mr. DeBor cupped his tea and stretched his legs toward the encyclopedia shelf.

"This is a beautiful piece of furniture. Walnut I bet?" He knelt on one knee and a dark wave of tea rose and flapped against the lip of the porcelain mug as he balanced it on top of Volumes N and O, for *No and Oh no.*

Clearly concerned about the proximity of his tea to the encyclopedias, my mother emerged from her enamel-induced hypnosis and stood. She moved her hands through her hair. From her hair to her hips, from her hips to her chin before she must have realized how nervous she looked and shackled her arms behind her back.

"Y- yes. It's new."

"Who sold you these?" he asked, flipping through the warped pages of Volume R for *Run. Run as fast as you can.*

"Why?"

"No reason," he said and closed the book, the sound of it heavy as a gavel announcing a guilty sentence.

I bowed my head and waited. The moments before my mother uncovered the truth for herself were excruciating. I felt flush with shame for all the times I pretended to be asleep when she sat on the edge of my bed, feathering my bangs from my forehead, wanting to talk—excited about the purchase she'd made or needing to hear another human voice to drown out the emptiness of the house when there was no one left but me. And no one but her left to turn out the lights; check the stove; lock the front door. I had tried to clean up the milk and cereal, sopping it with dish towels. But the more I wiped, the more the gilded pages turned to green leaf. I prayed for a miracle, yet each morning when I checked the shelf, the encyclopedias had not been healed. Every day that passed without her knowing—without having to meet with what I was certain would be a wrath thus far unparalleled—had been a gift.

"I'm going to have to think about all of this, Mr. DeBor. It's a lot to process."

"I see." He steadied himself on the shelf as he stood, walked to the kitchen and put his mug in the sink. My mother gathered his binder and bag and handed them to him.

"Here's my card," he said and squeezed her elbow. "Call me anytime."

My mother never said what had happened that night with Stuart Pearlman. I assumed she splashed her champagne cocktail in his face and stormed out of the bar after he tried

to slip his tongue between her lips. I figured the date had been a disaster because she never went out with him again. But the way she looked at Mr. DeBor and the way he looked at her in return made me doubt everything I thought I knew about Irene. I'd never considered that Stuart Pearlman might have rejected *her*. That maybe she was so glad to get home that night because her ego had been bruised. Or worse. Maybe he was a great guy, and she wanted to ask him to follow her home but was afraid of what the neighbors would whisper—the way the women in church stacked their hymnals between my mother and their husbands. Maybe she didn't know how to explain to me how one man could be better than another. Maybe things were hard for her, too.

Irene waved goodbye to Mr. DeBor and closed the door. She stayed in that position, her hand gripping the knob, and stared at the floor for too many minutes to have been scanning for dirt. At last she turned and looked past me on her way to the shelf. She pulled out a book and stroked its pages as if it were the broken fawn she'd hit with the old car. She twisted her mouth, and I braced myself. The heat kicked on, and I wished we could fast forward or go in reverse to another night when we'd huddle over top of the heat register and let the hot air fan out the bottoms of our long nightgowns. I moved toward the shelf and swallowed hard. She raised her hand, and I flinched. But when I opened my eyes, I saw the book laid open, perpendicular to the rest of them, its pages more antique than new.

"I'm sorry!" I called as she walked away. But the only sound I heard was the moan of the hinge as she closed her bedroom door. I stood stupefied. The gravity of her unspoken disappointment seemed to drain the blood from my arms. Frantically, I searched for a pen. I leafed through every book, certain the answers would be there. I

took notes. Sketched pie charts of Pennsylvania's population growth. Researched the depths of Saudi Arabia's oil reserves. Exhausted, I read about the migratory patterns of the Gouldian Finch and wrote a summary of my findings:

> Mom,
>
> The Gouldian Finch is native to the savanna woodlands of Northern Australia. These birds don't like to be around people so they keep their calls quiet and migrate south during the rainy season. Did you know that Australia has a rainy season? I didn't. They mate for life and both parents take care of their young. Of course the babies leave the nest when they are only three weeks old. The book says that in the 20th Century these finches are a dying breed.
> I hope you like my report.
>
> Love,
> Jenny

I boiled the kettle and poured a cup of tea. Too hot to taste, I gulped to feel the burn, holding the last dark sip in my mouth. I wandered through the house, extinguishing the lights. Locked and unlocked and locked the front door. Checked the stove and taped the note to the refrigerator for my mother to find. I lay in bed and watched the clock. Red numbers on a black screen, red coils on a black stove—ticking, clicking like the turn of a lock.