

Upheaval

“Dina, what's your name?”

“My name is Dina, Mom.”

“*Sheena?*”

“No, Mom. I'm Dina,”

“Brenda is where? I don't know any Brenda. No, what's *your* name, Dina?”

“Dina, Mom,” I repeat in vain. Silly me.

“*What* are you saying about Linda now? Maybe *he* can take me home. Oh, I should never have come here,” Mom laments.

We walk and roll our way towards Chez Chapeau, a small Ventura Boulevard millinery thriving defiantly amid the ubiquitous Starbucks, pot shops, and nail salons. When it opened in 1968 the exclusive little shop appealed to chic doyennes and monied bohemians, and it still does. Back then even I occasionally would spend my amassed baby-sitting dollars on a turquoise toque here or black bolero there, perfect complements to my funky, self-built wardrobe. The artisans of Chez Chapeau were very generous with the tricks of their trade, and over time I became a fair hat designer myself, simple stuff mostly--Jackie pillboxes wildly embellished, chenille cloches, tams of boiled wool—toppers easily made to order and shipped from my home studio. Since my return to the neighborhood all these decades later, the current wave of hat-makers has graciously allowed me to sell my pieces in the shop, and they always make a fuss over Mom.

Today we are delivering seven velveteen berets ordered by a Benedict Canyon choreographer, each a deep jewel tone and each for a specific day of the week. The shop is just eight blocks from home, but to Mom we are journeying to a hinterland where her parents, deceased for decades, will never be able to find and collect her. Crooked and anxious in her sleek black wheelchair, she dutifully clutches the parcel of hats on her blanketed lap, head and neck angling perpetually at nearly ninety degrees. She scans her narrow view of the ground for clues that might point her homeward.

“Can *you* take me home, Dina?”

Funny how she always gets my name right even in the context of complete bewilderment, even if she doesn't know I'm her daughter and firmly believes she has had no husband or children at all.

“Mother and Daddy are waiting for me, and last time they simply went home without me. I don't know what's wrong with them, just dumping me here like this....”

Three years ago, still naive enough to think it possible, I had tried to convince Mom once and

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for all of her parents' current whereabouts with a visit to the family plot over the hill. It's in a lush and artfully landscaped cemetery overlooking the city and is the final resting place of celebrities and hoi poloi alike. Bela Lugosi lies in perpetual repose kitty-corner from my paternal grandmother, and ZaSu Pitts is peacefully interred across the lane from my brother David who did not entirely survive the Viet Nam war.

“Well, *I* don't know who put those markers there, but those can't be *my* parents,” she had insisted, Saint Bernadette and the Virgin Mary watching us from their grotto of pillow basalt.

“I saw them drive by the house just yesterday, and they had the nerve to leave without me because I wasn't there! So take me back now or I'll miss them again!”

Such vain attempts at graveside logic with its indisputable facts only agitated and confounded Mom more, and in hindsight I would come to see that three years ago she was well on the way to her very own free-floating, amorphous reality. In the person who has spent her life in a froth of bitter contention, such Alzheimer's-related changes can be hard to detect. They say that dementia can turn once easy-going folks into belligerent combatants while life-long cantankerous carpers become docile and cooperative. Lucky for me now, but, oh, if only that docile Mom had been the one in charge of our upbringing.

“Oh, I just love the sun, don't you, Dina?” Mom screws her nearly hundred-year-old face skyward to catch every possible glint. Another dementia-inspired anomaly, this new sun-worshipping in one who had spent her life battling the cycles of blistering burns, peeling flesh, and unsightly freckles. Mom also developed a weird fondness for birds, especially mourning doves and pigeons. A life-long hater of those formerly filthy winged vermin and denizens of the equally filthy Snake-pit, she now insists on keeping seed in feeders and water in old Tupperware scattered throughout the backyard. This development was shocking, since as kids we were forbidden any household pets, and she expressed unbridled disdain for all God's creatures great and small, indoors or out, feathered, furred, or scaled.

When traveling the less-traveled avenues of the neighborhood, we roll in the middle of the street whenever prudent, avoiding the buckled sidewalks up-heaved by the roots of innocent but errant trees--the ill-planned and ill-planted ficus, magnolia, and ash--plopped into a wee patch of curbside loam half a century ago by nescient developers counting on speedy growers. Occasionally the city will make a haphazard repair in this neighborhood or that, but these patch jobs often pose more peril with their crude misalignments. Mom can no longer learn anything new and, even when looking directly at the offending pitched-up concrete, cannot understand why we avoid the sidewalks. This, every thirty

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seconds:

“Get out of the middle of the street! Now, why would anyone put those ugly roots right in our way?”

Refreshing and green as its immense canopy is, one particularly gnarly ficus has claimed completely and dangerously a five-slab section of pavement right in front of The Orion, the 24-unit apartment house we used to call the Snake-pit when it was one of only two such buildings on a street otherwise lined with modest but custom homes. Over decades it has become just one of many overpriced, gussied-up apartment houses on the densely populated street where single-family dwellings no longer stand.

My home-owning parents had viewed apartment dwellers as lower class and no doubt on the public dole, hence “The Snake-pit.” But that didn't stop them from welcoming these inferiors as regular customers at our small mom-and-pop establishment offering soda in returnable bottles, an assortment of bomb-shelter canned goods, and pre-packaged sandwiches long before the advent of “best by” dates. Also a full complement of spirits, free delivery to boot. Outlandish as it sounds now, I used to walk small orders, which usually included alcohol, to neighborhood regulars, a few of whom lived in the Snake-pit. Yes, I know. What were those people thinking, sending their 12-year-old daughter to deliver bottles of booze, no matter how familiar the client, especially to a place they regarded as a snake-pit? But things were different then—they also had put me alone on a Greyhound bus to the Bay Area when I was eight--and besides, I secretly looked forward to the generally creepy adventure, and I loved the tips. Four bits to walk a few blocks was high living for me, much more so than babysitting.

One of our regulars, Rand Walker, lived with his tee-totaling wife Leota on the ground floor of the Pit. As a polio patient Leota wore Frankenstein leg braces which didn't allow for much mobility, and I had found it fascinating that her last name would be Walker. This peculiarity often brought to mind Danny Crowe, another customer who lived south of the boulevard at the end of Liberace's cul-de-sac and who, with his collar-length raven black hair and beakish nose, did indeed resemble a crow.

Every afternoon I would take a large bag of Fritos, two tins of Vienna sausages, a quart of skim milk, and a half pint of Christian Brothers brandy in a brown paper bag to the Walkers' dank, heavily draped apartment. Housecleaning was a rare occurrence in Apartment 5, and upon entering I would steel myself against the sharp, sour odors borne of an alcoholic, an invalid, and their cramped one-bedroom apartment where refuse was rarely disposed of and laundry seldom done. Breathing through

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my mouth, I kept the transaction friendly but brief, and when finally handing me my fifty-cent tip, Rand would invariably say, "Put that in the basket next Sunday."

"Where in God's Heaven are we going now, Dina?"

We duck into a drive-way to avoid a black Suburban, a bronze Escalade, and a sky-blue Prius all going way too fast. Mom hugs the parcel of berets to her scrawny chest.

"To the hat shop," I reply, keeping it simple.

"A *bath* cop? What's a bath cop?"

I get in front of the chair and with my face a few inches from Mom's say, "No, the hat shop, Mom. You'll see in a minute."

Better to show than tell.

In this new, uncharted dimension, the jumbled details of Mom's overly long life are as many colored shards in a kaleidoscope, falling as they may and settling into new arrangements with each new twist of the lens. No two twists alike and none ever repeated. But lately the confetti that was her life can no longer find a place to rest. Her mind has gone feral and her height has lost five inches, but Mom has all her organs and is in no pain except for the occasional ingrown toenail or the Herculean effort of evacuating the contents of a sluggish, impacted bowel.

What cruel irony to see friends, relatives, and strangers dying off, often prematurely, from ill-health, poor choices, or plain old kismet, while the shell known as Mom carries on with no let-up in sight. I had buried my own youthful husband three years ago, or rather, the sea had buried him, leaving me without a body to identify, keen over, or even reduce to ash. The most astute and vigilant boatman is utterly helpless and never more rudderless than when a ruptured fuel line conspires with the whims of nature twenty miles off-shore. Widowed and with dwindling resources, I moved in with Mom, never expecting to see her hundredth birthday.

The Walkers had managed The Snake-pit--or rather, The Orion--Rand doing what passed for general maintenance while Leota took care of receiving rents, issuing receipts, and other attendant paperwork. As the effects of his drinking grew more dire, Rand could no longer be relied upon to replace broken railings, unclog drains, or haul garbage to the curb. The tiny kidney-shaped swimming pool succumbed to the wind-blown detritus of the adolescent ficus trees already raising hell from the

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sidewalk, and the deposits of pigeons and morning doves accreted under railings like guano on a sea wall.

Managing duties soon were assumed by Lewis and Alma Tiegs, Apartment 2. On my daily rounds to the Walkers I had become friendly with Mindy Tiegs, a whole year my senior and a *public*, meaning she went to public, not parochial, school. Being an only child, a resident of The Snakepit, *and* a genuine hoyden, Mindy Tiegs fascinated me. But what held me most in her unwitting thrall was that she was among the very exotic and mysterious bunch of *publics* who took catechism lessons every Saturday in our very classrooms at St. Vibiana. Each Friday afternoon the sisters would admonish us in pious earnest to take home for the weekend anything we didn't want stolen, thus removing all near occasion of sin from our desks. Maybe they aren't exactly Pagan Babies, who of course were black as soot and from the African subcontinent, but they *were* publics, after all.

One mid-July night heated by the Santa Ana winds, Mindy invited me to sleep over. I swooned, and, after much persuasion and a bit of fibbing, I convinced Mom to let me go. Once I'd brought Rand Walker his evening half-pint—his daily intake recently had increased twofold—I joined Mindy at the pool, now chlorine blue and free of ficus leaves. Her parents let us stay in the recently vacated Apartment 12 directly above the Walkers where we gorged on Cherry Crush, Cheetos, and butterscotch topping straight from the jar. Mindy had an enviable collection of 45s, and once we tired of Lesley Gore, The Four Seasons, and Little Stevie Wonder, we fell asleep under thin sheets on the floor in the empty living room, listening to KRLA on her coveted Zenith transistor radio in the red leather case.

Until last month, Mom's habit when we walked the neighborhood was to struggle out of the wheelchair right around the Orion Apartments and walk a few blocks using the chair as a walker, always remarking on the monstrous ficus roots. But recently her capacities have diminished even further, and sometimes her brain can no longer signal how to work her legs. Her decline is the exact reversal of a toddler's forward development—nonsensical speech, diminishing motor skills, a stranger to the toilet. She can no longer take naps in her beloved sun; last week after a twenty-minute snooze in the mild rays of winter she became catatonic and aphasic, with more than just a foot on the other side. I hefted her tiny self into the house and onto the safety of her green over-stuffed chair, still paralyzed. Eventually she heard Debussy's Arabesque Number One drifting from the living room, the most beautiful music on the planet, and it was eerie how abruptly she snapped out of it.

“This music makes me want to do this step,” Mom announced clear as a bell, standing herself

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up without hesitation. We grasped hands and swayed in place quite limberly.

On the warm July night that I spent in the empty apartment with Mindy, we'd been startled from deep sleep in the wee hours by the very near and disorienting wails of an ambulance. In bare feet and wrapped in our thin sheets we joined the Tiegs and several other tenants gathered near the pool in time to see Rand Walker being taken by stretcher from Apartment 5, Leota leaning on her antediluvian crutches and sobbing silently in the doorway. Rand died on the way to the hospital from intracerebral hemorrhaging, sudden cardiac death brought on by years of heavy alcohol consumption. Three weeks later Leota moved in with her niece in the Tehachapi Mountains, and five months after that the Tiegs bought a house in a new tract two counties over. The Jehovah's Witness couple who moved into the vacant apartment in which Mindy and I had spent that surreal Santa Ana-buffeted night now managed the building, and the orders I delivered to them in Apartment 12 contained no alcohol.

After an uneventful but pleasant visit to Chez Chapeau in which goods and paperwork are exchanged, and Mom is sufficiently fussed over, she is nevertheless anxious to get back home to the house she doesn't believe is hers, the house where everything--furniture, walls, drapes, carpets, sinks, tile, clothing, blankets, dishes-- has been made miraculously by her mother and father. ("How did they get all this here from back home?") Upon our return, she is certain, her parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and cousins will finally be able to locate her and usher her to her proper place.

In the din of the Boulevard traffic just outside the shop, blocks before any devilish, errant roots can derail us, Mom asks, "Dina, what's your mother's name?"

"Eloise, Mom."

"*Help* Louise?" she strains. Without the parcel of berets to occupy her chilling hands, she laces and wrings her bent fingers, knobby and shot through with arthritis.

"No, *Eloise*," I shout, like a fool speaking to a foreigner.

"Oh, really? That's my name, too," she chirps. "Does she know who you are?"

"Yes, she does, Mom."

"Oh, no? That's good. Now, can you please take me home?"

