

Gypsies

by

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When I was very young, my mother told me that I had an older brother but that he had been carried off by gypsies when he was less than one year old. "But he will return one day," she continued, her eyes wide and serious, "to comfort you after I'm gone."

When I asked my father about it, he took on an even sadder and gentler look than he usually wore and said only, "Ignore her, son. Just ignore her. She doesn't mean it." It wasn't much of an explanation, but then schizophrenia is a difficult thing to explain to a child. For schizophrenia was the gypsy that carried away, not my brother, but my mother and with her any chance I might have had for a normal, happy childhood.

I was born and grew up in the suburbs of a Southern industrial city, one that had little of the graciousness of the old South, but a great deal of its meanness. Without TVA it would have been the same malarial backwater my father was born in, with its reek of poverty and stagnation, where the mosquitoes came in the night like gypsies to steal away children and adults alike. TVA controlled the river and the malaria and brought us into the twentieth century, and by the time I was six years old in 1960, the factories were fixtures and the thick, brownish pollution covered the city like a shroud.

Throughout this transformation my father was always the Southern gentleman. He was forty-five when I was born, but his age alone can't account for his courtly manners, as constantly displayed and as out of fashion as his seersucker suits and his straw hat, which he always tipped to ladies. Maybe it was the way he was raised, but by the time I was curious about it, he had no relatives left alive. Maybe it was a conscious decision made as a young man. If so, I would never have found out, for his inner secrets were never revealed. At any rate, by the time of my childhood, it was an integral part of his nature. He was polite, mildly spoken and patient. He spoke ill of no one except politicians. He always had coins for beggars, which he gave them with a few kind words and not a trace of condescension. He was tall, a little above six feet, and he stood straight, self-consciously straight, as if he

were a Civil War general who knew he had lost the war and had to maintain in posture the lost glory of the Confederacy.

Often when I describe my father to people they tell me that he sounds too good to be true, like someone out of a book. And the description, as I've perfected it over the years, could have been lifted from any number of Southern novels. But it's not the whole picture, though it is wholly true. What is also true is that my father had no idea of how to raise a child, or even how to talk to a child. If he had been younger it might have been different. He might have known what to tell me. And what to hide. But when I set off to face the outside world of grammar school, he was fifty years old and he wasn't sure what to make of his bewildered and beseeching son. He had for me what he had for all beggars--a few coins, a few kind words of comfort. But it wasn't enough. It wasn't enough for a boy starting his long passage through life, a boy who needed to know about gypsies.

If my father's right place was in a book, my mother's was surely in a nightmare. In my very early years she would have nothing to do with me, not even acknowledging my existence. But when I was old enough to listen to her stories and to understand them, she took over my care and ousted the hired surrogates that had done the job for the first three years of my life.

The stories were descriptions of her nightmare world, including the story of my long lost brother. "He was only ten months old when they came," she said. The story got more specific over time. "They came in the night like thieves and stole my only son."

I wonder if my father made a conscious decision to leave me with her, absorbing these strange tales, or was it just the easy way out? Or did he hope that I could see around the madness to the person behind it, the one he had married?

"Ignore her," he said. But she wouldn't let me. She was rarely quiet, and usually the madness spilled out of her in a verbal torrent that made no sense. But when she was with me, she sat calmly, and the words formed themselves into narratives. Her repertoire wasn't limited to the account of my brother. Other stories detailed my father's cruelty and the world's neglect. There were picaresque tales of young men that she had known, and frequently her parents were the subject. In some versions they were reigning royalty in some distant and unnamed land. In others they were merely idly rich, the toast of the town in some distant and unnamed city. But wherever and whoever they were, they would turn up any day to claim her from this godforsaken swamp.

How could a child, with his hunger for entertainment, for knowledge, for attention, ignore such a one? She spoke with the intensity of madness and I listened with the intensity of childhood, watching her wide and willful eyes with my own wide-eyed innocent stare. She embellished the stories with exquisite if historically inaccurate details. Her knight in armor was as likely

to arrive in a Cadillac as on horseback. But he arrived. To my delight and to her own.

Considering all this, is it any wonder that I sided with her? Can I be absolved for wronging my gentle father? I repaid his benign and puzzled neglect with active distrust and suspicion that bordered on dislike. Is it any wonder that I watched distant horizons for knights in armor and long lost brothers and that I avoided dark corners with a shudder and a hazy idea that gypsies might linger there?

Unfortunately, my mother's madness was not all talk. There were incidents, mostly harmless and sometimes even amusing if you ignore the underlying tragedy. She hid things in all corners of the house. After washing her best china, she hung the cups and saucers on the clothesline to dry. Precariously fastened with clothespins, they hung over the backyard like an aerialist's picnic. For a few weeks she kept her shoes in the refrigerator, resisting my father's efforts to deter her. She put a load of wet laundry into the freezer, where it solidified into a colored, glacial mass. She started for the front door with an empty suitcase saying, "I am going back to St. Louis," a city she had never been close to. In these and other incidents I was often a co-conspirator.

But it got worse. Later there were the threatening and obscene phone calls she made to both acquaintances and strangers. She would disappear for hours, even days. She would throw dishes and furniture, leaving the house in the same tangled and abused state as her mind.

Through all this my father maintained his calm and his patience. During the bad times, he hired a nurse to stay in the house. The nurse would administer the drugs and the firm restraint that my mother needed and would go when my mother got better. During the mercifully easy and painfully short periods of remission, my father would keep a silent vigil in hope for a permanent end to the nightmare visions. But they always returned.

My mother's attention and my father's neglect combined to make my association with other children difficult. I had no playmates before I started school. I had hardly seen other children at all, and I had no more idea how to talk to children than my father did. Then I was thrust into the midst of them with no avenue of escape. It would have been traumatic enough without the questions. I never knew what to say about my family, what to say when asked about brothers and sisters. Should I mention my long lost brother? I didn't know, and my answers must have been unsatisfactory, as I was soon the subject of whispered playground conclaves and the object of furtive and curious glances.

I was backward in grammar school, unable to understand the real world that was so different from the one my mother and I inhabited. I was also subject to sudden and seemingly unexplained fits of crying. An intense

but otherwise typical incident occurred in the third grade. The class was singing songs from a songbook. The music teacher, a jolly round woman, accompanied us on the piano. I never actually sang, but I followed the words in the book, and I was doing so then, hearing the children around me happily and tunelessly singing and the music teacher's shrill soprano above it all. "It was late last night, when my lord came home inquiring for his lady," they sang. "But the servants said on every hand, she's gone with the raggle-taggle gypsies." By the time the teacher noticed me and led me from the room, I was crying beyond control and probably no one could hear between my sobs the words "The gypsies. The gypsies."

By junior high school I had figured out what school expected of me, and I applied myself diligently. I had enough trouble in life without the extra burden of bad grades. I soon became an exceptional student, but a lonely one. I was still wary of other children and had no friends.

When I was fourteen, my mother took a decided and permanent turn for the worse. I never knew what I was coming home to, what battles might be raging behind the sedate facade of our sheltered suburban home. One day I walked into the house and immediately felt something wrong, felt the thick atmosphere of conflict and fear. "Mother," I called. But no answer. I waited, but little did I know how long I would wait. From the dining room I heard steps, rapid shuffles on the carpet. I walked in. My father was on one side of the table, my mother on the other. Her back was to me, and I walked well into the room before I saw that she had a kitchen knife in her hand.

"It's all right, John," said my father. "Go on up to your room. Everything's under control." Ignore her, he used to say. And now, with only a table separating him from possible death, he said the same, trying, in his fumbling way, to protect me, not from her but from the painful truth. But I didn't see that then. I only saw his attempt to get me out of the way, his attempt to avoid explanation. As always I was siding with her. But how can you side with a crazy woman with a knife in her hand? My mother wouldn't even look in my direction. I backed toward the door, stumbling against the furniture: the chairs, the sideboard. They stood like silent, reproachful witnesses, all in matching, dark-stained walnut. The furniture, like that in the other rooms of our house, came in sets. Only the inhabitants were at odds. I went upstairs to my room and sat at the window and watched until they came to take my mother to the institution where she would spend the rest of her life.

We visited her at first. She responded slightly to the drugs and recognized us, spoke with us, if not lucidly then at least calmly; and she was sometimes friendly. But that wasn't to last. She eventually stayed in her bed and refused to acknowledge us, and her conversation consisted mostly of obscenities and invective. I stopped going with my father on the visits, and when I left for Harvard in 1971, I never even thought of going back to

Tennessee.

As a result of that decision, my last conversation with my father took place in Cambridge. It was a week before the start of my senior year. I didn't offer to meet him at the airport or at his hotel. I was still siding with my mother. I told him how to get to my room, and then when he arrived at my door, hat in hand, I was overcome with remorse and offered, by way of apology, to take him out to the best restaurant I knew.

"That's kind of you, son. I'd like that, if you'd just give me a chance to rest first." He sat on the bed, and he did look tired. And old. It was wearing him down. I made reservations, and we spent a polite but pleasant hour over our food.

"Summer session went well, did it?" he asked.

"Pretty well."

"You must be looking forward to this year."

"It should be interesting. I'll spend most of my time on independent study. A lot of hours in the library. A lot of writing."

"I'm sure you'll do well."

"I guess. I won't be at the top of the class, but I'll be able to find at least one graduate school that will take me." I was studying European medieval history. My knights in armor were now real ones, even though long dead.

"I'm glad to hear it. I know you'll do well in graduate school. I always..." He smiled at me and sipped his iced tea, a beverage that was not on the menu but one that the waiter, charmed at meeting his first real Southern gentleman, had assured us could be come by. "I always thought you'd do well, that the academic life might suit you. I should have done more to help you, but you don't seem to have needed it."

"I guess not." I thought of my father at his job as a financial expert in a large department store. Was this approval of the academic life covering up a lost longing of his own?

My father refused dessert, and when I had coffee he ordered more iced tea, much to the waiter's nearly hidden amusement.

"I'm only staying tonight," he said suddenly.

"That's a short trip."

"Well, I'm not much for big cities. But I wanted to tell you some things."

"Like what?"

"Just a few words about the future. Your future, I mean. I don't have a lot of future left to me. But I want you to be able to do what you want to do. I just wanted to reassure you that even after I retire, your mother is taken care of. What with insurance and the state money that goes to the hospital and the money I've saved, she'll never be a burden on you."

He waited, but I couldn't say anything. I had hoped my mother

wouldn't be brought into the conversation.

"I hope I'll have a bit extra for your graduate school, but I may not."

"They have fellowships and jobs. I can manage."

"I'm sure you can. But if there is any extra, I don't want you to have any hesitation about taking it. It'll be yours."

"All right." His earnestness made me smile. This minor financial discussion had brought out his most professional manner. "All right, I won't hesitate."

"Good." He relaxed. "I don't want you to have any more worries than necessary when you get to graduate school. I want you to show these Yankees what a good Southern boy can do when he gets the opportunity."

We laughed. I wondered even then what had possessed my father to joke in that way. And I wonder even more so now, now that I know what came after. Now that I long to know what lay under that Southern veneer. I felt that we were through talking and took a last sip of coffee. But we weren't through.

"I realize that I should have told you this before. I don't have any excuse for myself any more than I do for any of the other mistakes of my life. All I can do is rectify matters now and hope for the best." He moved my dessert plate that I had pushed to the center of the table, moved it aside to clear a path between us, as if the words would be so heavy they would have to make their way across the table rather than through the air. The sudden tension took me back to that day, years ago. But now I was on the other side of the table. In my mother's place. Would I, when I heard his unexpected revelation, pick up a knife as she had done, trying to cross the barrier in the one way left to her?

"You really did have a brother."

Not again, not the gypsies again. Had I traveled all this way, stayed all this time, only to have them follow me? Would they be with me all my life?

"He died when he was ten months old. Meningitis. It was fifteen years before you were born. It seemed so long ago, as if it wasn't the same people. I didn't see any need to tell you. And it was so painful for us. For your mother especially."

"Then she was right. It was true."

"It was true, as she saw it. It was what started her illness. Maybe it was in her anyway. We can't ever know. But she never recovered after his death. Not really. His name was Robert Henry. Henry after my brother, your Uncle Henry. You only met him a few times when you were very young." My father's name was Robert. "I know it must be a shock to you. Not just him, but that I concealed it from you for so long. I kept waiting for the right moment, but it never came. Not until now. This may not be the right moment, either. It might have been better just to let him rest. We'll

never know these things. God help us."

"God help us," I repeated, looking at my father, his eyes downcast and sad. "Maybe we'd better go."

We walked to the Harvard Square station through the muggy New England night. He had taken a cab from the hotel, but only because he was in too much of a hurry to figure out the more economical subway system. The red line, I told him, would take him to within two blocks of his hotel. I was full of questions, but fuller still of caution. Like him, I was waiting for the right moment, but it never came. I bought his token, and we parted with a handshake. He went through the turnstile and waved and was gone.

There was something else that my father wasn't telling me, though I suppose I should have figured it out. He died the following spring, only weeks before my graduation.

Without my father's visit, I would have felt no need to go back to Tennessee. I was young and alive and I had no use for funerals. The house and furniture were of scant utility to a student, and I assumed everything would have to be sold. It could all have been done by lawyers or accountants. But now matters were different. I don't know what I expected to find or to find out. More revelations? More about my brother? Or about my father? At any rate, after graduation I returned to my childhood home instead of going on to the University of Wisconsin, where I was going to get my masters.

My father had left everything in order. The will, the insurance, the household effects, the legal papers regarding my mother. It was all laid out and taken care of. He had been very thorough. He had been just as thorough about not leaving any personal information. No photographs, no letters. Nothing that would let me learn who my father was. He was lost to history, and lost to the budding historian who was his son.

I didn't want to stay. The house was too full of ghosts, and I could find nothing attractive in that wretched city. Waiting for some legal matters to be completed, I spent most of each day driving through the countryside and hoping that the next day would bring my release. And I would have had only a few days to wait, but I failed to take my mother into account.

I want, at this point, no euphemisms. My mother was insane, she was crazy. She had spent seven years in an asylum. She was stupefied with drugs and overwhelmed with visions. She was incapable of putting on her own clothes, and she didn't express a rational thought more than once a month. We think that these people are oblivious because they ignore us, because they live in their own worlds where we are not allowed admission. But every week, when he visited, she must have known he was there. And when he didn't come, not just once but for several weeks running, she must also have known that. And even in her insanity, she must have known the reason. Can despair kill someone? An old woman locked in a room, an old woman whose only solace is a husband's visit. If that goes, is it possible that

she would die of a broken heart? I think that it is.

The phone call took me completely by surprise. My mother, in her affliction, took to her bed and shouted profanities, cursing the world, its people, and the madness that put her there. It seems brave when compared to my own reaction at her death. I could only fall to the floor, succumbing to the blow like a schoolchild, crying softly and murmuring between my sobs, "The gypsies. The gypsies."

I was never quite clear on how I got to the hospital or how long I was, if not unconscious, then at least unaware. When I recovered some lucidity I could still muster no strength to get up, no reason to go back to my life. I assumed I was insane, that I carried the same defective gene that had brought my mother so low. I worried about it to the point of obsession and had to be given tranquilizers which would give me a few short periods of relief when I had only my grief to cope with. I had never admitted it, but I had assumed that my mother would get well. I had envisioned it often, my own vision of sanity, my one simple fantasy that now turned out to be as unreasonable as her many involved ones. The miraculous cure, the new drug. The phone call from the doctor. And myself, driving up to the asylum door, her knight in armor, appearing at last to take her away.

My doctor told me that I had nothing to worry about, that I was completely sane. But my failure to respond to his suggestions and his treatment forced him to transfer me to the mental ward of the hospital. The hospital was a huge, brick building near my old high school. The tan-colored bricks had proven to be rather optimistic. They were now nearly black from the soot of the factories. The ivy and kudzu that grew up the sides of the building mercifully covered a great deal of the blackness, but they could never conceal the bars on the windows of the mental wing--west wing six it was called. I remembered the name from my high school days, when students would idly joke about the unknown horrors behind its barred windows. After a week there, I was transferred to the same hospital where my mother had been. It was a gratifying irony for someone who was convinced of his madness.

It was only that, of course. The doctors were right. If I carry that defective gene, it has yet to make an appearance. But I could have lapsed into despair. I could have turned it into a semblance of madness or, like my mother, even died of it. The doctors could have done nothing about that. It was a nurse, not even really a nurse, a volunteer worker, a college student, who saved me. My own Florence Nightingale, my own personal lady whose lamp was only a box, but it shone with a small ray of hope.

She came twice a week. She read to us, talked to us, tried to break through to us. Fortunately her constant failure didn't discourage her. She took a special interest in me, and like a historian, she researched my past. She found out about my father. And about my mother. She appeared one

day with a box.

"These were your mother's things. No one has ever called to collect them, and of course they're yours now. She had a few trinkets and photographs and a lot of letters. I thought you might like to see them." She sat on the bed and put the box on the floor and began to examine its contents. "Is this your mother?" She handed me a photograph of a young woman in a sun bonnet and a neat puffy-sleeved blouse. Her eyes looked over the cameraman's left shoulder, and she was not quite suppressing a mischievous smile. Was this my mother? Was this demure and delicate creature the strange storyteller of my childhood? "And this must be your father." A prim young man in a white shirt and bow tie, hat removed for the photograph, he stood very straight but not stiff. Was it he who had drawn my mother's attention away from the camera and caused her to smile? I could easily believe it. He himself was smiling gently, unaware of the tragic turns his life would take and the effort it would require to wear that gentle smile to the end. This was, indeed, my father.

Of course she would have had them, the clues I had fruitlessly searched the house for. Of course he would have given her anything she wanted, anything that might have helped her retain her tenuous grasp on reality. But letters. She had said letters. Who would they be from, what could they say?

I slid out of bed to the floor, grabbing the box. When I looked up two hours later, she was gone, my friend, my saviour, my lady with the box, who had given me my father.

The letters, there were hundreds of them, were from him. In addition to visiting every Sunday, he had written a letter every week. They were usually dated Monday or Tuesday, timed to arrive roughly half way between visits. I pictured a nurse or another of these volunteers sullenly and tonelessly reading them to my mother, thinking she was completely unaware of what they said. But I don't believe it.

It took me weeks to read them all, but I read them. I read the first ones in the hospital, but the next day I was reading them in his study, in exactly the spot where they were written. Like me they had come full circle, from sanity to madness and back to sanity. Printed in a very square, legible hand on small sheets of notepaper, these fragments of a life chronicle the passing of each year and the passing of the years. I still have them today and still read them now and then. "Dear Margaret," reads one.

I hope you are well. John and I are quite well. He hasn't had a day of sickness since that cold over a year ago. He does well in school and seems to enjoy his studies. History seems to be his favorite subject this semester, as it was last.

All this week I have seen jonquils everywhere. I know you had so many

on the grounds there last year, and I hope you will again. I wouldn't want you to miss them. The dogwood in the back yard is radiant, and I wish you could see it. In the walnut tree next door I saw a bird that was orange and black, and it reminded me of how you used to rattle off their names on our walks in the wood. I wish you were here now to tell me the name of the bird I saw.

*Your loving
Robert*

I never knew that my mother could identify birds or that my father paid attention to trees and flowers. I never knew that he wrote the letters or that he watched my progress so closely. And I never knew how much he cared for my mother. And for me.

I first really met my father through these letters. The sad and distant man I knew was supplemented by these glimpses of a man who found some happiness in the beauties of nature and who enjoyed watching his growing son's life, even if he never learned how to participate in it. As I read, I looked occasionally at his photograph. I thought of my father as I knew him, but I also thought of the young man in the picture, a man close to my own age with a marked family resemblance, a man who might have been my brother. And I felt that as my father revealed himself through the letters, he came to me not only as a father, but as a brother. A long lost brother. And as my mother said he would, he comforts me now that she's gone.