

EXCERPTS FROM AN AMERICAN MEMORY

From "One" (1881-1923)

My grandfather was a man who went through his life without grace of imagination. Stolid, purposeful, sternly comforting as he may have seemed on the outside, the wind blew through my grandfather's bones.

●

He kept an office on the mezzanine level of the theater, a small room with a single high window like a turret window in a castle. The room was large enough to hold a desk and chair, a filing cabinet, a small old-fashioned sofa. Two shelves over the desk held bound ledgers; below them, on a smaller shelf, stood six glasses, a quart of whiskey, and a pitcher of water. Tucked in one corner was a low iron safe squatting on four feathered talons, each clutching beneath it a dull iron ball. In this small room, in the middle of the mornings, my grandfather wrote checks, balanced his ledgers, wrote out book orders for films: cartoons, romances, musical comedies, always accompanied by newsreels that showed the progress of battles on the far sides of the earth.

When he was inside his office, the door would stand open; a shaft of light from his desk lamp would fall across the red carpeting of the mezzanine where the staircase turned up toward the darkness of the balcony seats. In the auditorium, two cleaning ladies would vacuum between the rows of seats, their machines attached to long black cords plugged in under the skirt of the stage. They would sweep up spilled popcorn, pieces of candy, crumpled wrappers of various kinds. Under the seats they would find lost coins, dropped scarves, gloves, handkerchiefs, sometimes wallets or valued personal objects, necklaces, trinkets, jeweled rings, sometimes dollar bills.

●

There is a memory that stays with me in which it seems always to be February or March, the months of chill gray light, and in which the time seems always to be the same vacant, slow hour of midmorning. Outdoors, the snow is turning to slush; it falls in wet clumps from the black branches of trees, and, in the streets, the tires of cars leave deep ruts in the slush, which then fill with icy water. In this memory there is a cold buffeting wind, heavy and strong with a cutting dampness, under a sky that is low and gray.

Inside the theater, I feel aimless and confined, burdened with empty time. I embark upon a circular pattern, which compulsively I trace over and over. I climb up the stairway past my grandfather's open door, then continue along the muffled carpeting up into the chill emptiness of the balcony. I cross through the darkness of the balcony; descend the opposite staircase; move through the wan gray daylight of the main lobby; then re-ascend silently past my grandfather's open door. I make this identical journey six, eight, perhaps ten or a dozen times, running as quickly as I am able without breaking my silence or alerting my grandfather, traveling circles through the darkness of the hollow old theater.

When I am exhausted, I climb to the top row of the balcony and find my way into a center seat, beneath the square holes cut into the wall of the projectionist's booth. The

auditorium is dark, illuminated only by the dim glow of the exit signs over the doors. Waiting for my breath to calm, I gaze down through this great volume of historical emptiness, able to see only vaguely the pale image of the screen standing behind its thin translucent curtain. As my wild heartbeat slowly quiets, silence closes in around me. I am enclosed inside a vast dark space free of sound, of motion, perhaps even of time. I wait. I seem to sense only a great silence. Then at last I begin to hear the sounds of the wind from outdoors. There is a dull buffet against the wooden roof. From somewhere backstage comes a subdued, hesitant moan. Then the wind gets caught under a roofboard, or tries to come in at a barred doorway, and I hear a high rising whistle, a small voice thin with unspeakable weariness, a sound that comes from the far distance of the dead past, palely wavering, tenuous, as frail as a thread.

From “Four (1933-1938)”

Although she presented with some success an outward impression of stylish self-confidence, social independence, and a certain bohemian disdain for the less significant aspects of moral conformity, she was not a rebellious creature. More to the truth, she was a woman whose life was governed by fear as much as it ever could be by the apparent independence of her temperament. The many fears she possessed were both small and great, rooted predominantly in her childhood, and wide ranging in their variety. She feared disorder, violence of any kind (the result, perhaps, of her parents' excessive fighting when she was young), and the callousness of feeling that permitted or caused abuse of weakness by strength. She feared all forms of personal danger and the physical suffering (more in others than in herself, and more in children than in adults) that comes from injury to the flesh. She feared horses and to a lesser extent all large domesticated animals (especially if horned or hooved), unleashed dogs unless well known to her, and, in suspicion of their carrying diseases that might turn them vicious and poisonous, squirrels, skunks, foxes, all rodents, and bats. She feared lakes, ponds, and rivers, or any places, including bathtubs, where death by drowning could occur. She feared automobiles, cliffs, heights, ladders, airplanes, and high speeds. She feared the silent and lethal powers of electricity, and she feared pieces of exposed machinery in which any part of the body or clothing might be caught. She feared ice skates, sled runners, roller skates, and bicycles, broken glass, knives, ice picks, the lids of tin cans, household astringents and acids, communicable diseases, and all the kinds of poisoning conveyable through tainted, infected, or contaminated food. In dread of choking, she was frightened of the effect, especially on children, of popcorn, peanuts, hard candy, the pits of small fruits, olives, and fish bones. She feared pencils and sharp sticks, barbed wire, slingshots, metal shavings, and all materials of potential hazard to the eyes. More abstractly, she feared the coming of war and the disharmony of nations. She feared high winds, lightning, burglars, trespassers, and loud or sharp noises. From early childhood she had been afraid of brandished weapons, but in particular she was frightened of firearms and guns. When she became married (in the year 1933), she married for love, but also for protection.

From “Six (1947-1951)”

September 20th, 1947. My father draws the car slowly to a stop on the shoulder of the gravel road. He leans forward to set the handbrake, then turns off the engine. Through the rolled-down windows of the car, we gaze at the farmhouse where it stands silently behind the deep, flat apron of its front lawn.

It is made of white clapboard, and it is in need of paint. Two upstairs gables face the road, and the tall sash windows set into them gaze back at us without recognition. The windows are curtainless. Behind them is the flat, empty darkness of an uninhabited house.

Atop the house is a brick chimney. On the front is a low porch with square wooden posts supporting its slanted roof. From the limb of a tree on the front lawn hangs a swing made of a single rope and a rubber tire. Under the swing, the grass of the lawn is worn into a shallow oval basin of bare dirt.

In the front seat of the car, my father lights a cigarette. I catch the scent of the freshly lighted tobacco. My father exhales. The smoke hits the windshield, then spreads out against the glass.

From the lowering sun in the west, long shadows of tree trunks fall in silent bands across the tracks of the driveway as they disappear around to the back of the empty farmhouse.



(In winter, the old house labored frequently under the ponderous blows of a north wind. At night, when I could feel the wall beside my bed shuddering under its force, I would listen in fear to the screaming and cavernous sounds of the rising storm. In the morning, looking out from the window of my upstairs room, I would see thickly veiled air churning and swept with bright whiteness. Deep drifts of snow, whirled and dropped by the wind, would be slowly filling up the sheltered center of the farmyard. Smooth inclines of snow mounted the sides of the unpainted wooden sheds, obscured all but the tops of their doorways, covered their windows, sometimes reached to their sagging rooftops.

Sometimes we were snowbound for days at a time. After the passing of the storm, the air calmed slowly and the temperature dropped below zero. Under a black sky flung across with bright stars, the nights were frozen into an immaculate emptiness of poised, hushed silence. The farmhouse shrank in the still, arctic cold, settling into itself after the fierceness of the wind like an old tooth settling back into its socket. Lying awake in the vast silence, I would sometimes hear the sharp rifle-crack of a freezing tree limb, a single echoless report from somewhere outside in the blue and shadowed darkness.)

From “Twelve (1971-1975)”

A woman goes mad early one morning. She screams in rage, shouts with a coarse abusiveness, begins throwing her possessions from a window of the building that neighbors ours. The window is on the tenth floor; perhaps it is her dining room, or

kitchen. The woman's words are not always distinct, her shouts distorted by the deceiving acoustics of the high surrounding walls of other buildings.

From the window of our own kitchen I can see the things as she throws them out. A broom appears, sailing in a graceful arc like a spear, and falls ten flights to the courtyard between wings of the building. It bounces once, then lies still as death on the courtyard cement. It is followed by a dust mop, a three-legged stool, and then a box of soap flakes that, twirling, leaves a corkscrew trail in the air as it falls.

My wife comes up behind me, having been awakened also by the echoing rises and falls of the screaming voice. It is autumn. The sky is blue, and steady morning sunlight floods the side of the building from which the objects are coming. A piece of bright red clothing flutters down with a forlorn, exhausted gaiety. It is followed by coffee cups, one after , then dinner plates. A tray of silverware appears in the air, turns lazily, empties out bright knives and forks that seem to hang weightlessly for a moment, then glint briefly in the sunlight as they fall. These objects land loudly on the cement below. As they do so, windows begin to open. Heads stick out.

Standing behind me, my wife grips my arm tightly. Then she turns away, goes directly to the telephone, dials the police. There is a pause. Then my wife says into the receiver, "A woman has gone mad. Someone has to help her."

Reprinted by permission of Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill