

WOMAN IN A GYPSY DANCING DRESS

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This is something I've not seen before:
my mother--perhaps it's the drink my uncle fixed her--
bringing out the photographs in the wooden box, unbidden.
Pink roses and blue inlaid in cedar--who makes things like
this anymore--a fine box just for holding pictures.
She reaches in and pulls one out--great grandmother, I think,
stern, germanic, not a loose hair anywhere, her shirt sleeves
stop an inch above her bony wrists and mean enough to scare
twin babies clutched up against her chest.
I can always tell my mother, she's the wide-eyed one and
sleepy uncle,
he won't take the picture as I pass it to him.
"I'd do things different, if I could go around again."
"What?" My aunt is interested now, fearing, I think,
it might have something to do with her, but no--
"I'd be more assertive," is what he says.
We all think of my grandmother.
I find her, tiny in perfect early 1900's bustled gown,
waist held in tight, a man's hands could circle it,
she used to tell us,
under a hat upon which a bird is poised to fly.
Here she stands beside my grandpa,
the top of the hat just reaching his shoulders.
And here he is with spotted hunting dogs and hanging feather
bodies that must be ducks,
a rifle casual underneath his arm. "You know he used
to stash bottles at the club house," my aunt tells us.
No comment from my mother, only more pictures:
herself and me as a baby.
She was quite beautiful, hair dark and gathered at the neck
and then again almost half-way down her back.
I don't remember this beauty, at least I don't remember
knowing it. And what must she be feeling?
She won't tell me but she is returning or recreating
that other life before my father and inviting me in, oh, not

directly, never directly, but shyly,
"and here's Aunt Margie and Uncle Jerry's wedding."
He looks assertive here, shoving cake into Aunt Margie's
face. She's laughing.
And she laughs now--the same laugh, for our essential
selves don't change that much.
Just yesterday she told me that my uncle's
stopped flushing the toilet and she doesn't know hey.
They've been married over forty years--
forty years and four children since he shoved cake into her
face.

Here now my favorite: mother and father at a lamp-lit
restaurant table on the evening of their wedding--
His eyes are half-closed; a cigarette dangles from the corner
of his mouth.
And she, impossibly slim, is gazing somewhere through
the film that glistens on her eyes into that dream she thinks
will be her future.
I see something I'm sure they don't see
a forties movie, and they are the stars,
an apartment with crystal canisters for drinks,
something about that golden elixir shining through the
glass--it's better as a picture.
In an art deco world nothing bad can happen. Or
if it does, it's funny.

I don't like these later pictures. My mother seems to lose
her sense of style, or is it just the fifties
living on the backs of cereal boxes, long-play record jackets
and that new thing called t.v.
or maybe it's myself I don't like seeing
--as if my being somehow compromises
a life that could have been,
a man that could have loved her, not fat fingers
groping for her,
for any of us, to keep him company when she rejected him.
What happened to the woman in a gypsy dancing dress,
on the front lawn of that tow-story house where
she lived as a girl.
I remember her upstairs room: built in bookshelves lined with
books no one now has heard of

but I read every one of them while everybody else was sleeping
when I stayed there with my grandma.
And I would play with the silver-backed
brushes and mirrors still laid out on her vanity
as if she had placed them there that morning,
and imagine I was her.

I don't like these later pictures--my father khaki-clad.
Everything broadened; there is nothing fine about him.
He's dead now. I find one I've never seen before--
he must be eighteen and cocky, I would have been
drawn to him--farm boy comes to the city to
audit the books at the Kroger Grocery Store. Where did he
learn to do that? I'm one generation from the farm,
and we don't have any pictures from his family, only
some stories passed down that made them seem like hicks--
when they got indoor toilets they would only flush them once
a day because they thought the water would get used up.
We're back to that now, but then it just seemed stupid, and I
wanted nothing to do with my cousins from the country.

But now the pictures must go back into their box,
the late-nite news is on: my mother watches Ginger Rogers
receiving an award and doesn't comment on how fat she's
gotten.

No sign marks her face as she puts the box away.
I once heard that when we reach a certain age
a natural anesthesia is released that stops the pain
that comes from knowing time's become a finite box of
pictures that cannot be removed or changed or even taken out
and only a few more can be slipped in on top,
travel pictures mostly.

I wait until the three of them are sleeping to take
the pictures from their box again.
Black and white has faded into color.
Is this what sets us off from jungle beasts--
we seek to capture moments in our lives, wrench them out and
trap them for display: a smile,
a hat upon which a bird is poised to fly.
A man chases a woman on an urn. In the next picture
they pose with their two lovely children and

years later, we see him with his second wife
pretending to push her over Niagara Falls.

There is one more picture I need and
in the morning I will ask my Aunt to take it,
a picture of my mother and myself
posed together not quite touching, on the couch.
I will place it on the chest at the foot of
my bed beside another picture waiting there:
she at thirty and I at four in matching purple dresses.