

Dorothy Speak / HARMONY

Aunt Miriam and my grandmother lived on Sweetland Avenue under the dark spreading branches of a red maple that shut out the sky and, in my memory, cast the yard and the house in a perpetual twilight, like the atmosphere in an old silent movie. I spent two weeks with them every summer, while my parents travelled abroad. A town the size of Harmony didn't offer much by way of entertainment. I passed many hours cross-legged on a granite boulder, dropped, I thought, by some significant accident of geology in the middle of the front lawn. When I went indoors, blinded by the gloom of the house, I would find my grandmother stretched out in the livingroom on the hard Victorian sofa, looking as stoic as a martyr on a rack.

"Oh, there you are, Carmel," she said on one such afternoon, lowering a copy of *The Complete Bible Quiz* into her lap. She pushed herself up slowly on her elbow. "Turn that darned thing off."

I went over and switched off the television. "Do you want anything?" I asked.

"No," she said grimly, "there's no help for me." Then she looked at me ironically. "Unless you could kill me. Pop me off somehow." She wanted to die before she turned eighty-seven. I hoped she would live forever.

"I don't know—" I said dubiously, then added, "Maybe we could hire someone to do it."

She drew back, momentarily fearful. "Are there such people? Do you think they'd actually do it? Oh, I shouldn't talk this way!"

Her voice had not always been so deep. She had a man's voice now, and her face had grown flat and masculine. Her skin was violet behind her thick glasses, and her ears were enormous, droopy and oily-looking. Not at all like the delicate ears of the girl in the photograph hanging above her head. I was said to resemble this

picture of my grandmother posed in a high-necked dress before a heavy, theatrical curtain. Her face was smooth as an egg. She had one long blonde braid, tied with a satin ribbon, and on her knee she held a live Dachshund.

"Where's my purse?" my grandmother glared around near-sightedly, and finally found it under a pillow. "Here," she said finally, rummaging in it with crooked fingers. "Here's a dollar for a treat at Glass's. You *could* make me a cup of tea." She gripped my hand hard, her grey eyes blazing. "Don't ever get old!" She reached for her cane, pushing herself up by her swollen knuckles. For seconds she hung, half-way to her feet. I knew better than to try to help her. She began to make her rickety way to the diningroom, a journey of five minutes.

"Look at these old legs," she growled. "They're good for nothing."

I headed for the kitchen, calling over my shoulder, "What kind of tea do you want?" This was a conversation we rehearsed every day.

"Darjeeling. It's the best, I think. Don't you? Except for green tea, and you can't find that anymore. Don't give me any of Miriam's herbal tea. I'd rather drink hot water."

In the kitchen Aunt Miriam was wedged between the ironing board and the stove, the hot iron shooting steam up in her face. "The kettle's on," she told me. It was a small kitchen for such a large house. Miriam had spoken once of extending it into the back yard.

"And knock down walls?" my grandmother said. "What for?"

Once, looking at the kitchen cupboards with their ugly steel handles, I asked Miriam, "Is this the original kitchen?" and she sighed. "*Everything* in this house is original."

At the time, the frustration in her voice was lost on me. I saw Aunt Miriam as a living part of the satisfying decline of the house. I did not think she could be anything but charmed, as I was, by the mustiness wafting up from the basement, the lengthening cracks in the ceilings, the dark wax on the floors. She could have painted the front porch, torn up the ugly ferns and planted begonias, modernized the windows, but my grandmother didn't want anything changed.

Watching Miriam bend over the hot iron, perspiration beading on the fine hairs above her lip, I believed there was no better place for my aunt. She was in her late forties, and there was a bizarreness to her looks. Her head was long and peanut-shaped, as though she'd had a violent birth. She had a full, unattractive lower lip and the large penetrating eyes of a psychic, the slightly drooping right lid giving her a look of clairvoyance.

When she was younger, she had taken a secretarial course. She had travelled on a ship all the way around the world and come back manless. Now she did the dusting and the ironing in my grandmother's house, went in the evenings to the Public Library for works of non-fiction, to the Princess Theatre, and to her Maycourt evenings, where she sat in a circle with old women and knitted clothes for the poor. She did the typing every fall for the United Appeal and was vice-chairperson of the Harmony Emergency League, for which position she was given an orange hard-hat that hung ready, on the kitchen wall.

In those days, I admired her because I sensed that she had fashioned a life out of nothing. Now, I think that she was one of those odd people who—like artists, writers—are emotionally unfit for a normal life, who must orbit in a universe entirely of their own creation—if this does not drive them mad.

Those summers I visited my grandmother, I lost track of how many times we ate in a day. We seemed always to be sitting down to a makeshift meal, and this suited me fine.

"Have some potato chips," my grandmother gestured to a glass bowl. "It's always nice to have chips on the table," she sighed. "Wouldn't you like a coke?" she asked me. "Miriam, get Carmel a nice coke." Miriam put down her teacup, got up and went into the kitchen. I bit into a limp potato chip. Everything in that house was stale. Daily, we picked away at plates and bowls of food that had the permanence of a dusty still life. Nothing ever seemed to diminish: cheese curds, butter collapsed in a puddle from the heat, sultana cookies, dull-skinned fruit spotted with flies, ritz crackers, butter tarts, jars of jam, peppermints—all lasted forever.

"Hank Infant called last night when you were at the League meeting," my grandmother said.

Aunt Miriam's eyes flickered for an instant. Then she went back to buttering a blueberry biscuit. "I wish he wouldn't call here," she said coldly. "I wish he wouldn't come around."

"Oh, he was only being nice." Sometimes my grandmother spoke to Miriam as though she were a difficult child who had to be stepped around carefully, coaxed and flattered. "Asking if we needed anything. He put those blueberry biscuits in with our order for free."

Aunt Miriam, about to bite into the biscuit, now set it aside. "They're stale," she said.

"Hank Infant has McKeen's Grocers," my grandmother told me, ignoring Miriam. I knew all about Hank Infant. I had seen him in the store, a florid, rotund man with heavy glasses and large moles on his arms, stamping prices on Rice Crispie boxes and spraying down the lettuce with a hose.

"He's the manager, not the owner," Miriam told me.

"Well, he may not have been one of my brightest students," my grandmother said. "But he was always pleasant and respectful. Used to erase the blackboard for me. He was sweet on Miriam even then. She was in grade nine when he was in twelve."

"He'd failed twice," said Miriam.

"They say his staff loves him because he pitches in and helps at the store. He's not a proud man."

"The dulllest job doesn't bore him," Miriam explained to me.

"There aren't many bachelors left from your generation," my grandmother reminded her, and Miriam rolled her eyes at me.

"There's usually a reason when people don't leave Harmony, Mother. Often there's something wrong with them."

"I suppose you're looking for a more exotic brand of man? A country and western singer, maybe?"

"Mother —" Miriam, bored, looked out the window.

"A trapeze artist?"

"Don't be ridiculous." Blushing, Miriam reached for a peppermint and stuck it inside her cheek.

"A member of Parliament?"

My grandmother was laughing now, and so was I, sucking on soft potato chips, tossing cheese curds into my mouth, swinging my legs beneath the table.

"Anything but a Harmony man."

"A travelling evangelist?"

"Good heavens, no! Not that!" Miriam threw up her hands. She was smiling now. My grandmother's line of questioning seemed to please her after all, as though all these various men were really available and eager to snap her up.

"I don't get it," I said to Miriam. "You should be married. You're so nice."

"She'd make a fine wife."

"Oh stop it you two," Miriam said, self-consciously arranging the curls around her face.

My grandmother thought for a minute. "*You* stayed in Harmony."

"That's different. I have responsibilities. I have you to take care of."

"Oh fiddle!" said my grandmother.

The summer I was twelve, Aunt Miriam fetched me in August as usual from the bus depot in the Packard that had been my grandfather's. She rarely used the car, and when she did she steered it tentatively around the streets of Harmony, gripping the wheel with alarm as though she drove an army tank. But on the way to Sweetland Avenue that day, she sailed straight through a stop sign, then slammed on the brakes, the jolt throwing my suitcase to the floor of the back seat.

"Oh dear, what am I thinking of?" she said, and her chin, furry with a fine blonde down, trembled.

My grandmother was sitting on a hard chair in the livingroom, quite transformed. She was wearing a navy voile dress with big white polka dots on it, and her feet had been wedged into a pair of black suede shoes whose toes were curled up like old dry snakes. Her hair, recently permanented, had the texture of raw wool.

"Well, Carmel," she said. "You've come to observe the circus."

"Come here," Aunt Miriam spoke quickly from the hallway, with a stony look at my grandmother. "There's someone you must meet." I followed her through the kitchen, where pots were bubbling on the stove, outside. There, on a low canvas chair, under the horny old lilac bush, was a man with a short red beard and wire-rimmed glasses reading a magazine. I stood on the little porch, with its swaying railings, and stared at him.

"Willard, Carmel has arrived," called Miriam stiffly.

He looked up at me, assessing me slowly from head to foot. "So I see," he said, turning back to his magazine. Miriam smiled apologetically at the spirea bush beside the porch. We went back indoors.

"Who's he?" I asked. Then she told me about going to the bus depot early in the summer to pick up a package.

"And this man, a stranger, came up to me and bowed slightly and said, 'I hope you'll forgive me for saying this, but I really can't help myself. I had to tell you' — and he picked up my hand and kissed the back of it so gently — 'I had to tell you that you are simply beautiful.'" She turned to me, defensive. "No one had ever said that to me, in my entire life, not even my own mother."

I had to lean on the counter, so preposterous did I find this story: the idea that someone should call Miriam beautiful. Miriam with the dull colouring of a mallard. Miriam with her furry mottled complexion and monkey's ears. I recognized for the first time her impossible homeliness.

"Well then," she said, "of course, I collected my package, and he was still hanging around, looking out the window at our old Harmony, and well, I had to. I asked, if he had time between buses, would he care for a cup of iced tea. He picked up his gear — a duffle bag and a packsack and a sleeping bag and a pair of skis — and he packed them all rather permanently, I thought, into the trunk of the car. He stayed on for one dinner and then another. Two days later, he proposed to me."

While Miriam was fixing lunch, my grandmother made me close the amber leaded doors between the livingroom and the vestibule and sit down beside her.

"I haven't had anyone to talk to for six weeks, and I feel like I'm going to burst," she told me, and slid her feet out of her shoes, wincing. "When Miriam brought that stranger home — my son-in-law! Oh, the very thought makes me want to weep! When she brought him home, she told me he was a friend of a friend. Imagine the deception! He came for tea, and then kept staying on for the next meal. Miriam kept the house full of good smells. And then a couple of days later they went out very early, while I was still in the shower. Sneaky pair! What was I to do? What could I prevent? How could I have followed them, with these wooden legs? They came back in the middle of the morning, Miriam in her best summer suit — the saffron one with the matching turban she bought to meet Hank Infant's mother. She came into the kitchen where I was struggling with the toaster. Her face was spread with a perfectly ridiculous smile, the coward skulking behind her. I knew instantly they'd been to City Hall. I said, 'Miriam, I fear for you. You've gone soft in the head.'"

"At first I never saw them. It seemed they were always disappearing into the bedroom. A wonder they didn't take their meals in there too! Or Willard was in the bathroom, splashing water around, creating a flood. My John was never vain like that. Oh, don't try to speak to him. It's impossible to talk to the man! I tried him out on the Bible Quiz, and he didn't even know the difference between the Old and the New Testament. He calls himself an itinerant ski instructor. More like a highway robber! I'm saying terrible things, I know." She wrung her veiny hands. "Oh, I've been lonely these weeks! I'm not sure I can see anything clearly anymore. I'm not sure that I'm not dead and this isn't just a hellish dream. Do you think I'm being too critical?"

"No," I said. "He's a liar. He told Miriam she was beautiful."

"Beautiful? And Miriam fell for that? The girl must have been dazed by too much sun. I don't want to be unfair to her, but it seems to me that whatever brains I had to pass on must have all gone to your mother."

Willard appeared at the glass doors and opened one of them swiftly. "Lunch is ready," he said, smirking, and my grandmother blanched. He went away.

"Get that spoon beside the sofa and help me on with these shoes." She made her way, at twice her old speed, to the diningroom, where Miriam was carrying in hot dishes and Willard was drumming his fingers on the back of his chair. He was a good foot shorter than Miriam, and perhaps ten years younger. I saw that he had soft, crooked teeth.

"Let me help you," he said impatiently, stepping toward my grandmother, but she swung her cane at him.

"What makes you think I need help?"

"You're hanging onto the doorknobs."

"Well, that's what doorknobs are for, aren't they? As long as I can do this by myself," she sank into her chair, "I can be independent."

She looked around critically at the fare Miriam had set out: roast leg of lamb glistening on a platter, beets, a steaming bowl of creamed potatoes, cucumber salad. "These regular meals are plugging me up," she said.

Miriam sat down opposite Willard and took up her napkin. "Willard gets hungry, Mother."

We began to eat, the clatter of cutlery like gunfire in the silent room. Finally, Willard, slicing a beet thinly, addressed my grandmother. "Speaking of independence," he said, "have you thought of retiring to a nursing home? So that Miriam could get on with her life?"

"Oh fiddle!" my grandmother dropped her fork and began to row her cane agitatedly against her thigh. "Some *men* are more trouble than a crippled old woman. I won't go and live with all those old people," she said bitterly. "Miriam's life is here. She's always been free to do as she pleases. I've never constrained her."

"Is that so?" said Willard with latent sarcasm. He picked up a glass of pale wine and examined it, turning his wrist and smiling to himself. He seemed always to be feeding on a private amusement.

"You needn't think you'll get rid of me so easily," said my grandmother. "I've got plenty of life left in me."

"Hmm," Willard murmured skeptically.

Time did not stand still, as it had other summers, what with regimented mealtimes and Miriam flitting around tending to Willard's wants. She went grocery shopping and cooked and washed Willard's sweaty clothes. In the mornings, long after the three of us were up, we would see her carrying Willard's breakfast up to him on a tray, and my grandmother would roar from the livingroom, "Doesn't he have two healthy legs of his own?"

She and I read all day or watched television or played cribbage. One afternoon, dealing out the cards, she said, "I don't think he's a ski instructor at all." The days were hot and the storm windows were still on. She had unbuttoned the front of her dress for relief, revealing a grey slip and her flat speckled chest.

"Maybe he's an imposter. He's wanted by the law," I said.

"No doubt," she said, moving her cribbage peg. "Fifteen two, fifteen four, fifteen six. We'll have the police on our door soon." She pulled a face. "Well," she said, discouraged, "I suppose that's just wishful thinking."

I was enjoying the conspiracy that had blossomed between my grandmother and me. I tiptoed around the house in the hope of bringing back intelligence to her. I watched Willard kissing Miriam's ear in the backyard, and Miriam laughing and sliding her hand under his beard. "Isn't Miriam afraid of being bitten by fleas?" I asked my grandmother. When Willard was in the bathroom, I pressed my ear to the door, listening for obscene male noises. No matter how eternally he washed himself, he always emerged looking unclean.

"Maybe he drinks in the bathroom," I suggested to my grandmother, and she barked and stamped her cane on the floor.

A week after I arrived, Willard began to spend a good deal of time on the phone.

"Talking to his Mafia friends," my grandmother speculated. Once I crept upstairs and pressed myself against the wall outside the door to Miriam and Willard's room. I heard him pause on the phone and say, "Just a moment." In an instant he was out in the hall and on top of me with his hands around my throat. "What do you think you're doing?" he gnashed his furry teeth at me. "You little spy! You watch your step, or you'll be out on your ear. There's a bus leaving Harmony every hour." He let me go, pushing me toward the stairs.

I went to Miriam, who was hanging Willard's laundry out on the line.

"How can you stand Willard?" I demanded. "He's so — he's *weird!*"

She lowered her arms and removed the clothes pegs from her mouth. "Try to like him," she begged. "He's not so bad. Sometimes it's the odd people who make life interesting. And — he appreciates me."

My grandmother appeared at the door in time to see Miriam shoot Willard's stained underwear out into the sunshine.

"Can't you dry the underwear in the cellar? You might just as well broadcast our business to the neighbourhood! It's indecent!"

Miriam sighed. "Mother, we are legally married. I can show you the certificate."

"Don't do that. I might tear it up!" She went back to the livingroom, stamping her cane all the way.

Miriam posted a notice on the bulletin board in McKeen's to advertise typing services in order to help pay the extra food bills. We could hear the thunder of the typewriter from downstairs. One afternoon when my grandmother was sleeping, I went upstairs and watched Miriam, her long, rigid fingers hammering furiously at the keys. She flung the return arm across with such vigour that I was afraid it would sail through the wall. Finally she stopped, flexed her fingers and rolled her head, her hand flat on her long neck.

"I have a funny story for you," she said, and we looked at each other for a moment, both wishing, I suppose, for our old companionship. I realized how much I missed our weekly walk to the library, and Thursday nights at the Princess Theatre.

"I saw Hank Infant in the grocery store. He came up behind me when I was tacking up my notice on the board and he said, 'Miriam, oh Miriam,' wagging his head like a puppet. 'How could you do this to me, Miriam?'"

I gave her a cold look. "Poor Hank," I said, turning on my heel. "I know how he feels."

After that, a stretch of rainy days seemed to charge Willard with nervous energy. He carried his skis from the basement up to his bedroom, where he scraped the old wax off them, leaving the shavings for Miriam to sweep up. He performed sit-ups and Jumping Jacks up there. Downstairs, my grandmother and I watched the diningroom chandelier sway dangerously.

"This is not a gymnasium!" she snapped. "He'll bring the ceiling down!" Above the shaking of the house, Miriam's typewriter clattered on.

Close to the end of my visit, my grandmother and I were watching *Leave It To Beaver* on television about four o'clock on an afternoon when water teemed down the windowpanes. The house was quiet for a change. The only thunder we heard was the real thing, rolling out of the sky. Halfway through the programme, Miriam came into the livingroom, her shoes seeping water onto the floorboards. We had not heard her come in from delivering a typing job. I saw that her face was mauve with excitement.

"I've been searching for Willard," she told us rather breathlessly. "I can't find him anywhere. Where's he gone?" We looked at her unsympathetically. My grandmother turned back to the television.

"I don't keep track of Willard's whereabouts," she said. "But I'd enjoy a cup of tea."

"I went upstairs and noticed the closet open," Miriam went on. "I saw that his clothes were gone. The drawers are empty. All his things are gone, even his skis from the basement. Everything." She looked at us hopefully, as though she thought we might be conducting some kind of practical joke. I got up and stood at the piano, picking softly at the keys.

"Did you see anything, Carmel?" Miriam asked.

"No," I said without looking around. "I didn't see him at all. I was in the attic."

I felt her eyes on me, and finally I turned to face her. I saw what I might have known all along: that she wished she'd been given my beauty.

"He's cleared out, then," my grandmother declared, clasping her hands. "Praise the Lord! We're well rid of him. I didn't like him. I didn't trust him. I was convinced from the start that he was false-hearted."

"It can't be," Miriam frowned and looked at the streaming window. "Oh such a day?"

"He was after our money."

"What money, Mother?" said Miriam with rising impatience.

"Well, this house, of course, is worth something."

"This house is falling down!" said Miriam, and her voice faltered.

"It provided Willard with a roof over his head for two months, didn't it? That's what you were to him. Food and shelter. No more, no less." She sighed with relief. "I feel like a sherry, suddenly. Miriam, would you mind?"

Miriam went out, past the umbrella she'd left open on the hall floor to drip dry. We heard her open the walnut cupboard in the diningroom. She returned with a glass of bronze liquid, handed it to my grandmother and went softly up the stairs, still in her wet shoes. My grandmother sipped greedily on her sherry and licked her lips like a cat. She frowned.

"I feel happy, but I don't know why."

"Willard's gone," I told her. I was looking through the sheet music in the piano seat.

"Willard who?" she said, then added, angry with herself. "I forget names. I'll forget yours in a minute."

The day before Willard disappeared, I had gone up to the attic while my grandmother read the Bible and Miriam was out grocery shopping. It was a hot, sticky afternoon. I opened the wardrobes containing my grandmother's old clothes and had just stepped into a green velvet dress when I heard someone on the second-floor landing. To reach the attic, it was necessary to open a trap door and pull the Jacob's ladder down from the ceiling. I heard the squeak of the hinges and had just enough time to draw the dress up before Willard sprang from the top step of the ladder into the attic.

"I didn't know this place existed," he said enthusiastically, surveying stacks of hat boxes, an antique wheel chair, cartons of books, oil paintings, a dressmaker's mannequin. Then he noticed me standing awkwardly, clutching the dress closed behind me, and he said, "Here, let me help you," and stepped up confidently behind me. He began to fasten the little impossible buttons, taking his time, and I hoped that he had noticed—he *must* have seen—that I was old enough to wear a bra. A light perspiration broke out on my neck. "There," he said, finally. We were standing in front of the mirror, and I saw that his face too was glistening from the closeness of the attic. The light behind us was silver where the sun filtered through the dust in the air, and the smell of the roof timbers was strong. Then he reached up and touched my right ear, gently.

"Your ears are beautiful. They're like seashells," he said. He surveyed my blonde hair, which was piled up on my head, wisps of it falling down around my face. "You're a good-looking girl. You've got your grandmother's looks. Poor old Miriam was passed by."

It was only then that I saw how Miriam might have been swept away by Willard at first, by his audaciousness and his poetry, and by the physical strength I felt in his hands when he buttoned me up. He moved away and began to poke through boxes of books and old clothing. He pulled a pair of rusty men's skates from a box. "I should take these with me when I go," he said. "Recondition them just for fun." His uncharacteristic cheerfulness made me suspicious.

"You can't have those. They belong to my grandfather."

"*Belonged*," he corrected me, and slid his thumb down one of the blades. "Steel wool and oil would get this rust off."

"Take them where?" I asked.

"Oh," he said lightly, "I'm going away. I'm leaving."

"But you can't. You're married!" I said, not that I wanted him to stay.

He shrugged. "Who's to stop me? Miriam? She wouldn't know how to keep a fly in a bottle. I have my work. You may have noticed there's no skiing within a hundred miles of here. I couldn't take this place much longer, anyway. This house and this disastrous town. As I said, there's a bus leaving here every hour." He looked at me sharply. "Don't tell Miriam. She might try to tag along."

"No, I won't," I said quickly. I thought he wasn't very smart. Of course I would tell her. "Where do you think you'll go?"

He grinned at me. "Oh, ho, you're a tricky one, aren't you? Too smart for your own good. Let's just say not too far but far enough." He hung the skates over his shoulder and moved to the trap door. "Remember," he winked at me. "We have a secret," and he hopped jauntily onto the ladder.

That winter, I was whitening my skates on a section of *The Globe and Mail* on my parents' kitchen floor, when a picture of Willard leapt up at me from the sports page. The caption said he had won first prize in the American Olympics in Colorado. He was a bona fide skier after all. He was pictured grinning, with a pair of sun goggles hanging around his neck, wearing a vest with the number 11 on it. I saw that one of his teeth had been knocked out. Had Miriam seen this? I wondered. I pictured my grandmother coming across this same picture in her paper; I saw her tearing the picture out and shuffling to the fireplace with it. It would have been easy for me to cut out the photo and send it to Miriam, but I didn't do this.

I went on polishing my skates, drawing the sponge applicator slowly over the toe and around the lace-holes. Into my mind came a satisfying picture of Miriam attending the Maycourt evenings in her saffron suit. Miriam at Harmony Emergency League meetings, her face steadfast and fatalistic beneath her orange hard-hat. Miriam in the semi-dark at the Princess Theatre, a box of popcorn balanced on her knee, the silver light from the projector room striking her erect shoulders.

Yes, I thought comfortably, everything had turned out for the better.