

K. D. Miller/ SUNRISE TILL DARK

Aunt Ella was fire-marked, from her hairline all the way down. One side of her face was magenta, and one arm and one leg. I was told that it was not fire but birth that had somehow marked her. Yet the magenta skin looked rougher than the rest, and I always imagined that it would be fiery to my touch.

She and her brother, Uncle George, who was two years younger and was not fire-marked, sipped their soup in unison. I watched them: the same slow raising of the spoon to the lips, the same shuddering sip, the same slow lowering of the spoon back into the bowl.

I was told that they were my father's aunt and uncle, but I did not quite believe it. My father, I thought, was too big to have aunts and uncles. He even seemed to agree, calling them plain "Ella" and "George". And they themselves were surely too old to be brother and sister.

They did not act like brother and sister. Uncle George had not, as my brother had done, drawn a skull-and-crossbones with black crayon on white paper and hung it in his bedroom doorway to keep Aunt Ella out. Nor did she ever sneak into his room, wait there until she heard him coming, then duck past him, screeching.

"Are you guys married?" I asked them once when we were visiting. The second the words were out in the air where I could not pull them back in, I knew I had made another mistake. My father laughed too loud, my mother grew red in the face and my brother began to smile his slow, superior smile.

It was a good day for my brother. He had already caught me taking a second licorice allsort from the covered china dish on the table in the hallway. Aunt Ella always uncovered the dish for us when we came to visit. We were under strict prior instruction from our mother to take just one.

I would study the allsorts, trying to choose. Don't take one of the ordinary little square sandwiches, I would always tell myself. Take one of the wagon-wheels rimmed in coconut, or one of the soft beaded cushions, or one of the white logs covered with licorice bark you can skin off with your teeth. At

last, pushed by my mother's "For heaven's sake, just *take* one!" my hand would jump into the dish, and my fingers close on one of the ordinary square sandwiches.

But on this day, I could not get the black-and-white skinnable logs out of my mind. When I thought no one was looking, I sneaked back down the hall. I lifted the china lid and replaced it miraculously without a clink. Then I peeled the little log I had taken, chewed the licorice and popped the white sugar cylinder into the other side of my sweetening mouth.

That was when I heard my brother breathing behind me. I turned around and saw his slow smile already starting. "Are you going to tell?" He turned his back. "Are you going to tell?" He walked slowly toward the kitchen, where the grownups were. "Are you going to tell?"

Of course he was going to tell. But in his own time. He would wait until we were all home having supper, just before dessert. Then he would open his lips, just like the people in Sunday School stories, and would speak. And lo, our mother would pause with a bowl of butterscotch pudding in her hand, and would turn on me her wrathful eye.

So it was a good day for my brother. I was still trying to decide which was worse—calling Aunt Ella and Uncle George "you guys" or asking them if they were married—when I saw them looking at me. Their twin pairs of blue eyes were very round and young for the moment they were on me, then quickly hooded, bent back down to their soup.



There was something quietly muttering in a pot on a back burner of Aunt Ella's stove. I stroked each porcelaine knob lightly with my finger, waiting for her to tell me not to touch. She did not.

I was being left with Aunt Ella and Uncle George that afternoon while my parents and brother went on some errand for which I was too young, or too small, or too much trouble. "Don't be any trouble," my mother had said. And, without really understanding what trouble was, I had promised not to be it.

Aunt Ella's stove kept fooling me into thinking it might be fun. Big and old as it was, there was something toy-like about all its knobs and gauges. "We haven't any toys here," Aunt Ella said quietly, as if reading my thoughts. She had turned from the kitchen sink she was scrubbing. "Not very exciting, George and me, for a little girl." I pointed to the can of Dutch Cleanser in her hand. "We have that in our kitchen." She looked at it, smiled and said, "Well, yes, I guess just about everybody does." She had a gold tooth on the side.

I came to the sink to watch, standing on tiptoe, mashing my lips against the edge. The white powder turned into a gray paste as Aunt Ella scrubbed the bottom and sides of the sink with a blue cloth. My mother always did this quickly, swiping at it, "lick and a promise", as she said, ending with a short blast of water from the tap. But Aunt Ella loved the stains she was scrubbing out. And she ran the water gently afterward, swishing it in little waves with her cloth, rinsing away every speck of cleanser, then rinsing the cloth itself and hanging it up.

"There. Isn't that lovely?" she said shyly. And it was lovely, the whiteness of it, the gleaming.

"Now I make tea for George. He sits in the sunroom in the afternoon and reads his paper." I did not know about tea. My parents drank instant coffee. Aunt Ella gave me a teabag to look at while we waited for the kettle to whistle. I liked the soft paperiness of it, the whispery sound it made, and the way its dim contents shifted when I turned it.

I decided that the afternoon in this house was longer than the afternoon in my own, and that the same things happened here in the same order every day. This was a comforting thought. I thought it over and over while the kettle whistled and Aunt Ella poured the boiling water glugging into the teapot.

In my own house, I never knew what was going to happen. My brother went off to cub camp, then came home, then went somewhere else. My parents took apart a room of the house, put it back together in some new and strange way, then started in on another room. There was always somewhere that was swathed in plastic or smelled of sawdust. Every other month, I had to go to a store full of shoes where a man measured my

feet. "You're growing *so* fast!" my mother always said, shaking her head, opening her purse.

But nothing changed here. In spite of what the pictures in the hallway said.

"That's George" Aunt Ella told me, pointing a magenta finger at an old brown photograph. We were waiting for the tea to steep. She had explained to me what "steep" was. The photograph she pointed to was of a very feminine baby, beruffled and beribboned.

"That's not Uncle George!" I crowed. "That's you!"

"Oh no it isn't, child. No. Surely you can see that it isn't me." I looked and looked. Then it hit me. The baby's face was unmarked. "I forgot," I said, flushing. She put a hand on my shoulder.

There were so many old pictures of Uncle George, in short pants, long pants, a cap, a straw boater. Pictures that changed in tint from brown-and-beige to black-and-white. "Where are the pictures of you?" I asked. She did not answer. I asked again. A little briskly, she said, "Well, they didn't. My parents didn't, you see. They didn't think it fitting."

I tried to imagine never having to have my picture taken. I decided I wouldn't mind. But perhaps Aunt Ella minded, for she said, almost defiantly, "There is *one* of me." She pointed, this time with the white hand, to a small, cracked photograph in a pewter frame. It was of a young woman in a long-sleeved white dress pulled tight in front and bustled out the back. She had on a white flowered hat that kept her face in shadow.

"George took that one." Aunt Ella said, shy again. "I was twenty. I remember that day. We were all set to go out hunting eggs."

"Easter eggs?" I asked hopefully.



The tiny blown shell was impossibly light in my hand. A breath would roll it off my palm onto the hardwood.

We had brought Uncle George his tea in the sunroom, and Aunt Ella had said, "Lady here to see some eggs, George."

They were kept in labelled shoeboxes, bedded down in cotton batting. Robin's eggs like drops of sky. Speckled eggs—

the speckles blurred, as if dabbed onto the still-wet shells with a watercolour brush.

"We'd go off, Ella and me, whenever we could get away together," Uncle George was saying. "We'd take a blanket and pack a picnic lunch —"

"What do you mean, 'we'?" Something girlish and giggly in Aunt Ella's voice made me look up at her. "I'm the one who packed the lunches. You never so much as made a sandwich!"

"Oh?" Uncle George shot back. "And who carried the heavy basket, Miss, and helped you over the fences, and swatted bees away from you?" There was a laugh hidden in his voice too.

"We'd be out sometimes sunrise till dark," he went on more quietly. "Some days the sun would be so hot even the bees would be heavy and slow with it. So we'd leave the blanket spread after lunch and just sleep. Sleep for hours some days. I remember us waking up once when the day had cooled and the dark was just beginning to fall."

They were quiet for a long time. I began to think they had forgotten I was there. I reached and picked up a gray-and-brown speckled egg.

"You like that one?" Uncle George asked. I nodded. "Hen that laid that one," he said, (he had already explained that all lady birds were "hens"), "knew a pretty good trick. And we saw her do it, didn't we, Ella."

"We did. I remember."

"She'd hidden her nest pretty well, way back deep in the shadows. But as soon as we got near it, she came right out of hiding and pretended to have a broken wing. Flopped around on the ground to lure us toward herself. And once we were a safe distance from the nest, she took off. Flew straight up and away into the sunshine."

"Who showed her how to do that?" I asked.

"Oh, she just seemed to know, all by herself."

"Perhaps God taught her, George," Aunt Ella prompted gently, cutting her eyes in my direction.

"Well, yes, come to think of it, I guess that's what happened."

I decided that no matter how she had learned it, it was a good thing to know. So much better than knowing how to tell

time, which was my current assignment at home.

I yawned. The sun in the room was making me drowsy. Aunt Ella sat down in a chair and pulled me up onto her lap. I leaned back against her breasts, my eyelids heavy. Her hands were clasped in front of me, magenta over white. I reached a finger and touched the magenta skin. It did not shudder or flinch. Then I touched the white skin. There was no difference in temperature.

Suddenly I pulled my finger back. "Am I being trouble?" I asked. Uncle George grinned at his sister. His teeth were as white as his hair, but he hadn't any gold ones. "No," Aunt Ella said. "You're not."

Music was coming in the window — tinkly, one-note-at-a-time bell music. "Carillon," Uncle George said, checking his watch. "We hear it every afternoon. Comes from over there." He pointed out the window to a steeple poking up above the trees.

"Sh-sh-sh-sh-sh!" Aunt Ella had stiffened. I twisted and looked up at her face. Her chin bobbed with each note, and her eyes yearned. Uncle George was leaning forward in his chair now, his good ear cocked to the window. Almost in unison, they said, "Blessed Assurance." Then, in a high, shaky voice, Aunt Ella began to sing the hymn, in time with the picked-out notes. I could feel the singing in her body, and could hear the soft minor note of her digesting lunch.

I fell asleep. Not a deep sleep, for as I was dropping off, I remembered something that puzzled me and kept me floating near the surface. I remembered my father telling my mother that as soon as they were grown up, George and Ella quit going to church. Quit altogether. Never went back.



When the noise of my returning family woke me, it was as if all three of us had been asleep. Aunt Ella kept hold of me, her quickening breath the only sign that she had heard my mother's "Hello? Folks? We're back!"

I had a strange, half-asleep thought — that my parents and brother were a dream from which I had almost awakened. That this was where I really lived.

Aunt Ella still held me. At last Uncle George caught her eye. She unclasped her hands as he began struggling up out of his chair.

I thought suddenly of the eggs, and was afraid for them. Afraid of my mother's quick impatience, my father's big voice, my brother's cool, weighing eyes.

But the eggs were gone. Uncle George must have put them away while I slept. Or perhaps I dreamed them.



"Did you say thank you to Aunt Ella and Uncle George?" my mother asked me as we were going down the porch steps on our way to the car. I was forever forgetting to say these two words that were for some reason so important, forever disappointing her. The time would come, very soon, when I would say an automatic "thank you" to every adult I encountered.

I did not answer my mother. "You *didn't* say thank you, did you?" she sighed. She could always tell every single thing I had done or had not done, just by looking at my face. "All right then, we'll wait for you in the car. March back inside and do it."

But that house was for tiptoeing, not marching. I made no sound as I went down the long hall, hardly glancing at the covered dish of licorice allsorts. I stopped near the entrance to the sunroom, where they both still were. They did not see me.

Aunt Ella was standing behind Uncle George's chair, arms circling his neck, cheek resting on his white head. He took one of her hands in his and kissed the fingers. Then he turned it over and gave the palm a long, slow kiss. She slid the fingers of her other hand inside his shirt collar. Very slowly, in widening circles, she began to caress his neck and shoulder.

I held my breath. Then I began to back soundlessly away from the door to the sunroom. I knew only that I had found something not meant to be found, and that the tiniest noise from me would somehow shatter it. When I was halfway down the hall, I turned and ran the rest of the way on tiptoe.

In the car, my mother looked at my flushed face and said, "What? What is it?"

"Nothing." I ducked my head. Now my brother's eyes were on me too. I could feel my cheeks getting hotter.

My father was about to turn the key and start the car. My mother put a hand on his forearm to stop him. "Now come on," she said. "Something happened in there. Did you break something? Were you any trouble for Aunt Ella and Uncle George?"

"No!" I squeaked miserably.

"Well," my mother said, pulling the button up on her door, "I'm going back in there and ask them." Her hand was on the door handle.

"I *did* do something!" I blurted. My mother turned and looked at me. Her hand was still on the door handle. "All right," she said evenly, "you'd better tell me what."

"I took another licorice allsort!" I wailed. "I took one of the little logs! And I ate it!"

Slowly, my mother raised her hand from the door handle and pressed the button back down. She caught my father's eye, and for a moment the two of them looked like they were trying not to laugh.

Then, as my father started the car and my mother took a deep breath, revving up for the requisite talking-to, I began to feel light. I felt lighter and lighter all the time I watched my mother's mouth move. And soon I was so light that if there had been no top on the car, I would have been flying.