



RUNNING AWAY TO HOME

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Running Away to Home

Looking at it now from the narrow, winding street, there's nothing remarkable about the house on Fordham Lane. Nothing to suggest the character of the family who once lived there, no hint of the shouts of delight, frustration and good-natured ribbing as the family watched their beloved Jets play brilliant and lack-luster football (occasionally in the same game), the laughter and spirited conversation that typified Sunday dinners or the remarkable woman at the center of it all.

Gazing from the street, I imagine the chestnut wood floors and deep upholstery she chose for the living room, the framed family photos she took adorning the tables, the portrait of two boys she painted hanging on the wall. Dominating the dining room, an enormous table laden with scrumptious food she cooked sat atop the beautiful rug beneath it. A quarter height wall she designed beckoned to the den a few steps below. Drawing the eye exactly as she intended, floor to ceiling windows suffused the room with natural light and the peaceful beauty of Motts Creek, a bucolic pool of water. Nature, too, seemed to cooperate with her vision; the water, marsh and sky a hypnotic vista of muted grays and blues interrupted by the frequent gull and by the silent planes sliding gracefully by in the distance.

I stand at the edge of the driveway and picture the bright, white kitchen with its gleaming counters interrupted by trays of delicious desserts she baked. Although the November wind chills me now, the shiver intensified by the grief of recent death, I try to feel the warmth that drew me in more than a half century before, the unconditional love and acceptance that filled me up whenever I crossed the threshold of her home.

Straining over the wind whipping off the water, I can almost hear her voice coming from the kitchen—my four-letter first name shortened to one elongated first syllable rising at the end with her expectant and welcoming shout.

“Lis?”

I smile through stinging tears, a montage of hundreds of moments careening in my head. My mind suddenly stills, settling on an especially potent memory.

Running away. Running away to the house on Fordham Lane. Running to her.

The decades slip backward to the late afternoon after an especially rowdy argument with my brother. He had called me “Metal Mouth”, my braces being an especially sore topic. Coupled with the tortoise shell glasses and my gangly legs and arms that seemed glued onto the wrong body, my self-image was at an all-time low. Blows were exchanged and blood spewed from my brother’s mouth. I seethed with anger at him. And at my mother who immediately took his side after seeing the damage I did to his face before he bested me. My mother intoned the only words I feared, “Wait until your father gets home.” His temper legendary, this threat carried considerable clout.

Running into the darkening afternoon, I hopped on my royal blue Royce Union bike and sped out of my driveway. My father had promulgated many rules about where I could ride, when I could go and how I could get there: an extensive list of streets to be strictly avoided, sidewalks to remain on, times at which I was forbidden to ride and neighborhoods in which to never travel committed to memory. Being an excellent rule follower, exceeding my clearly demarcated boundaries never entered my mind, until that afternoon.

Crying, enraged and reckless I rode, my feet knowing the way that my head was too muddled to realize I peddled; to the house on Fordham Lane, to my mother’s oldest and dearest friend, the cool mother I didn’t have.

(Come to find out years later that her daughter thought *my* mother was the cool mother *she* didn't have. Funny how that works, isn't it?)

The house on Fordham Lane sat precisely 1.7 miles from my house, however, it may as well have been in a different county. Following the circuitous route that led to the tranquil, waterfront Paradise only possible by breaking every rule set for me.

She didn't seem surprised when she opened the front door to find my sniveling self. She hugged me and asked me if I wanted a brownie, that she had just taken them out of the oven.

Sitting in the kitchen eating one of her tasty chocolate confections, I poured out my just barely teenage heart, whimpering that I ran away, that I wanted to come live with her, that I was misunderstood, unloved and worst of all—ugly. At that last adjective she snorted. While I hoped for some reassurance that none of my perceptions were correct, instead she disappeared, calling over her shoulder that she would be right back.

Miserable, I ate another brownie while I waited. And waited.

When she finally returned, she was holding a handful of mostly black and white photographs. She laid them out on the counter in what soon became clear was chronological order-- two cute little girls wearing eyelet dresses—two grammar school girls, one looking confident, the other looking shy--two young teens, all braces and glasses—a sweet sixteen lunch table surrounded by vivacious girls, the two most attractive seated beside one another--two stunning young sorority sisters in party dresses and makeup—two photos, each of a beautiful bride and handsome groom—two more photos, each lovely woman holding an infant.

"See," she said once she had placed all the pictures down on the counter. And I did see. My mother and her best friend, together through every stage of their lives. But I had never seen them like this; arranged to watch them

growing up, to see the awkward stages they each had endured, just as I needed to endure mine.

She put her finger on one particularly unflattering photo of my mother. “Ugly duckling,” she said with a full throated “Hah”. “And beautiful swan,” she added moving her finger to a photo of my parents, my mother with her high cheekbones, full lips, and the tiniest waist accentuated by the cinched suit jacket she wore over a pencil skirt. Katherine Hepburn had nothing on my mother, I thought.

It was dark by then. She didn’t ask me. She matter-of-factly said, “It’s time to get you home.” She put my bike in the trunk of her car and off we went, her car retracing the route I had ridden a few hours earlier. We rode in silence. I stared stoically out the window as I contemplated all that I had done that afternoon. I had cried so much that I felt dried out and too exhausted to speculate about the consequences.

When we arrived, the two friends quietly conferred in the living room, leaning into one another so I couldn’t hear. Suddenly they were laughing. From where I was dawdling in the foyer, the slate floor cold through my sneakers, I could see their two hands each holding one side of a photograph. I could guess at the one they held. My mother as the ugly duckling.

They both looked at me, their eyes filled with merriment and tenderness. In that moment I felt awash with loving gratitude for my mother’s best friend, for my second favorite mother.

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Now standing in the November chill on Fordham Lane, my grief a chokehold against my throat, I take out my cell phone to find the voicemail she left me just days before.

“Lis?” it began.