

The Lovely Troubled Daughters of Our Old Crowd

WHY DON'T THEY GET MARRIED? You see them around town, getting older, little spinsters already, pedalling bicycles to their local jobs or walking up the hill by the rocks with books in their arms. Annie Langhorne, Betsey Clay, Damaris Wilcombe, Mary Jo Addison: we've known them all since they were two or three, and now they've reached their mid-twenties, back from college, back from Year Abroad, grown women but not going anywhere, not New York or San Francisco or even Boston, just hanging around here in this little town letting the seasons wash over them, walking the same streets where they grew up, hanging in the shadows of their safe old homes.

On the edge of a Wilcombe lawn party, their pale brushed heads like candles burning in the summer sunlight, a ribbon or a plastic barrette attached for the occasion—I can see them still, their sweet pastel party dresses and their feet bare in the grass, those slender little-girl feet, with bony tan toes, that you feel would leave rabbit tracks in the dew. Damaris and Annie, best friends then and now, had been coaxed into carrying hors d'oeuvres around; they carried the tray cock-eyed, their wrists were so weak, the devilled eggs slipping, their big eyes with their pale-blue whites staring upward so solemnly at your grinning grown-up face as you took your devilled egg and smiled to be encouraging. We were in our late twenties then, young at being old—the best of times. The summer smells of bug spray on the lawn and fresh mint in the gin; the young wives healthy and brown in their sundresses, their skin glowing warm through the cotton; the children still small and making a flock in the uncut grass beyond the lawn, running and tumbling, their pastel dresses getting stained with green, their noise coming and going in the field as a kind of higher-pitched echo of ours, creating their own world underfoot as the liquor and the sunlight soaked in and the sky filled with love.

I can still see Betsey and my own daughter the night we first

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met the Clays. They had just moved to town. A cousin of Maureen's had gone to school with my wife and sent us a note. We dropped by to give them the name of our dentist and doctor and happened to hit it off. April, it must have been, or May. Cocktails dragged on into dark and Maureen brought a pickup dinner out to the patio table. The two baby girls that had never met before—not much more than two years old, they must have been—were put to sleep in the same bed. Down they came into the dark, down into the cool air outdoors, hand in hand out of this house strange to the two of them, Betsey a white ghost in her nightie, her voice so eerie and thin but distinct. “See moon?” she said. Unable to sleep, they had seen the moon from the bed. The Clays had moved from the city, where maybe the moon was not so noticeable. “See moon?”: her voice thin and distinct as a distant owl's call. And of course they were right, there the moon was, lopsided and sad-faced above the trees just beginning to blur into leaf. Time (at last) to go home.

Now Betsey works at the paint-and-linoleum store on Second Street and gives guitar lessons on the side. She fell in love with her elderly married music teacher at Smith and went about as far as she could go with classical guitar, even to Spain for a year. When the Episcopal church sponsored a refugee Cuban family last winter, they called in Betsey for her Spanish. She lives with her mother, in that same house where she saw the moon, a gloomy place now that Maureen has closed off half the rooms to save on heat. The Clays broke up it must be all of ten years ago. There were some lovely times had on that patio.

Betsey sings in the Congregational choir alongside Mary Jo Addison, who after that bad spell of anorexia in her teens has gotten quite plump again. She has those dark eyebrows of her mother's, strange in a freckled fair face—shaped flat across and almost meeting in the middle. Both the Addisons have remarried and left town, but Mary Jo rents two rooms above the Rites of Passage travel agency and collects antiques and reads books of history, mostly medieval. My daughter invited her over for Christmas dinner but she said no, she'd rather just sit cozy by her own fire, surrounded by her things. “Her nice old things,” was how it was reported.

Evelyn Addison liked nice things, too, but in her case they had to be modern—D.R. sofas covered in Haitian cotton,

Danish end tables with rounded edges, butterfly chairs. Where are they, I wonder, all those heavy iron frames for the worn-out canvas slings of those butterfly chairs we used to sit on? A man could straddle one of the corners, but a woman just had to dump herself in, backside first, and hope that when the time came to go her husband would be around to pull her out. They had an authentic 1690 house, the Addisons, on Salem Street, and curiously enough their modern furniture fit right into those plain old rooms with the exposed beams and the walk-in fireplaces with the big wrought-iron spits and dark brick nooks the Puritans used to bake bread in. It may be that's what Mary Jo is trying to get back to with her antiques. She dresses that way, too: dusty-looking and prim, her hair pulled into a tight roll held by a tortoiseshell pin. Her mother's auburn hair, but without the spark rinsed into it. None of these girls, the daughters of our old crowd, seem to wear makeup.

The New Year's right after Fred had moved out, I remember walking Evelyn home from the Langhornes' up Salem Street just before morning, an inch of new snow on the sidewalk and everything silent except for her voice, going on and on about Fred. There had been Stingers, and she could hardly walk, and I wasn't much better. The house-fronts along Salem calm as ghosts, and the new snow like mica reflecting the streetlights. We climbed her porch steps, and that living room, with its wide floorboards, her tree still up, and a pine wreath hung on an oak peg in the fireplace lintel, hit me as if we had walked smack into an old-fashioned children's book. The smell of a pine indoors or a certain glaze on wrapping paper will do that to me, or frost in the corner of a windowpane: spell Christmas. We sat together on the scratchy D.R. sofa so she could finish her tale about Fred and I could warm up for the long walk back. Day was breaking and suddenly Evelyn looked haggard; I was led to try to comfort her and right then, with Evelyn's long hair all over our faces, and her strong eyebrows right under my eyes, we heard from on high Mary Jo beginning to cough. We froze, the big old fireplace full of cold ashes sending out a little draft on our ankles and, from above, this coughing and coughing, scoopy and dry. Mary Jo, about fifteen she must have been then, and weakened by the anorexia, had caught a cold that had turned into walking pneumonia. Evelyn

blamed Fred's leaving her for that, too—the pneumonia. Coughing and coughing, the child, and her mother in my arms smelling of brandy and tears and Christmas. She blamed Fred but I would have blamed him less than the environment; those old wooden houses are drafty.

Thinking of upstairs and downstairs, I think of Betsey Clay at the head of her stairs, no longer in a white nightie seeing the moon but in frilly lemon-colored pajamas, looking down at some party too loud for her to sleep through. We had come in from the patio and put on some old Twist records and there was no quiet way to play them. I was sitting on the floor somehow, with somebody, so the angle of my vision was low, and like a lesson in perspective the steps diminished up to her naked feet, too big to leave rabbit tracks now. For what seemed the longest time we looked at each other—she had her mother's hollow-eyed fragile look—until the woman I was with, and I don't think it was Maureen, felt my distraction and herself turned to look up the stairs, and Betsey scampered back toward her room.

Her room would have been like my daughter's in those years: Beatles posters, or maybe of the Monkees, and prize ribbons for horsemanship in local shows. And dolls and Steiff animals that hadn't been put away yet sharing the shelves with Signet editions of Melville and *Hard Times* and Camus assigned at day school. We were all so young, parents and children, learning it all together—how to grow up, how to deal with time—is what you realize now.

Those were the days when Harry Langhorne had got himself a motorcycle and would roar around and around the green on a Saturday night until the police came and stopped him, more or less politely. And the Wilcombes had put a hot tub on their second-story porch and had to run a steel column up for support lest we all go tumbling down naked some summer night. In winter, there was a lot of weekend skiing for the sake of the kids, and we would take over a whole lodge in New Hampshire: heaps of snowy boots and wet parkas in the corner under the moose head, over past the beat-up player piano, and rosy cheeks at dinner at the long tables, where ham with raisin sauce was always the main dish. Suddenly the girls, long-legged in their stretch pants, hair whipping around their faces as they skimmed to a stop at the lift lines, were women. At night, after

the boys had crumped out or settled to Ping-Pong in the basement, the girls stayed up with us, playing Crazy Eights or Spit with the tattered decks the lodge kept on hand, taking sips from our cans of beer, until at last the weight of all that day's fresh air toppled everyone up toward bed, in reluctant bunches. The little rooms had dotted-swiss curtains and thick frost ferns on the windowpanes. The radiators dripped and sang. There was a dormitory feeling through the thin partitions, and shuffling and giggling in the hall on the way to the bathrooms, one for girls and one for boys. One big family. It was the children, really, growing unenthusiastic and resistant, who stopped the trips. That, and the divorces as they began to add up. Margaret and I are about the last marriage left; she says maybe we missed the boat, but can't mean it.

The beach picnics, and touch football, and the softball games in that big field the Wilcombes had. Such a lot of good times, and the kids growing up through them like weeds in sunshine; and now, when the daughters of people we hardly knew at all are married to stockbrokers or off in Oregon being nurses or in Mexico teaching agronomy, our daughters haunt the town as if searching for something they missed, taking classes in macramé or aerobic dancing, living with their mothers, wearing no makeup, walking up beside the rocks with books in their arms like a race of little nuns.

You can see their mothers in them—beautiful women, full of life. I saw Annie Langhorne at the train station the other morning and we had to talk for some minutes, mostly about the antique store Mary Jo wants to open up with Betsey, and apropos of the hopelessness of this venture she gave me a smile exactly like her mother's one of the times Louise and I said goodbye or faced the fact that we just weren't going to make it, she and I—pushing up the lower lip so her chin crinkled, that nice wide mouth of hers humorous but downturned at the corners as if to buckle back tears. Lou's exact same smile on little Annie, and it was like being in love again, when all the world is a hunt and the sight of the woman's car parked at a gas station or in the Stop & Shop lot makes your Saturday, makes your blood race and your palms go numb, the heart touching base.

But these girls. What are they hanging back for? What are they afraid of?