CONCHO RIVER REVIEW

VOLUME 32 NUMBER 1 SPRING/SUMMER 2018

Published by
The Department of English
and Modern Languages
at
Angelo State University
A member of the Texas Tech University System

A WHALE OF A GIFT

Melissa Knox

"Low Tide Whale," said the embossed cream card leaning on the blue-and-white pitcher. That inquiring expression in the whale's eye—it tempted me. He gazed upward at the spume blowing from his head as though questioning his thoughts.

My cousin had wondered—in a wistful moment—whatever happened to her family's whale pitcher, just like the one I was holding.

I thought of her with her new baby in her new house in the suburbs. We saw each other infrequently, but my single-spaced letter brimming with revelations about our mothers must be even now sitting in her mailbox.

I missed her laugh. I poured myself an imaginary orange juice.

As I gripped the handle of the pitcher, I could hardly wait for her to call and compare notes. I could see her smiling at my descriptions, eyebrows raised with delight at the way I'd put together the puzzle we'd been working on together for so long.

"I'll take it!" I said, handing the pitcher to the saleslady before I could change my mind, adding, to go with it, some whale stoneware cups.

We had been in our cups together often, my cousin and I. In our summer after college, we used to sit on the dock of her family's South Jersey summer home, downing daiquiris, gazing at the slightly oily water, and, as the hours slipped by, at the neon, air-polluted sunsets.

This is how I remember her: wry smile, blonde bobbed hair laddered in elegant layers up the back, peach RELAX T-shirt draped over her swimsuit. Every day, we lay on the dock getting Coppertone all over *Vanity Fair* and the local papers, talking about old boyfriends, until she came up with ways to relieve the boredom.

"How about exploring the basement?" she asked, one sunburned afternoon. "Discovery, here we come."

An old red canoe filled with water from winter flooding, mildewed sweaters in cartons, seemed the sole revelations until we came across a warped bureau whose drawers stuck.

When we pried them open, we found family letters dating back to the nineteen-thirties.

"Get a load of this." My cousin handed me a faded blue envelope. Grannie was trying to talk my mother and aunt out of working in a tutoring center "for poor negroes": *They have congenital syphilis, which you will get if they're climbing all over you and THIS WILL INTERFERE WITH YOUR COLLEGE COURSES!*

"A blueprint for the letters our mothers send," I said.

"For their singular mystique," she smiled.

I examined another. My aunt, age ten, writes from summer camp: *Please send me my party shoes, mommie, I really need them; and don't send candy, I'M NOT ALLOWED!*

"Gee," said my cousin, leafing through the letters.

"What?"

"See for yourself." She handed me another one from Grannie to her mother:

I've never understood your temperament as well as your sister's. But there's no need to insult me!

"Because your mother needed her party shoes?"

My cousin shrugged. "You knew Grannie only had my mum to keep yours company. My mum called your mother the little angel child."

"Grannie played favorites—?"

"Drink up." She handed me a beer.

Grannie had loved my mother more? Did that mean Grannie, a sleeping-pills suicide when I was ten, had loved me more? But my cousin never seemed jealous. I'd been jealous when she and her sister had gotten to see the notes, folded like little flowers, one for each of the eight grandchildren, that had surrounded Grannie's body. My mother never let me see mine. *What did*

they say, what did they say?! I asked my cousin, who shook her head dismissively.

"My sister's note had some tripe—you are a true aristocrat!" My cousin cackled. But she did not remember her own, and may never have seen it, having been only six at the time.

She gave generous gifts—when we went clothes shopping together, she bought me scarves or sweaters. She's nearly four years younger, but I thought of her as the elder sister I'd never had, even the mother I'd never had.

My cousin listened so hard that I had a hunch she might have gone through the same experiences. But when I look back, I see that she seemed more eager to hear my stories than to tell her own.

"Listen," I said. I told her how my father used to come into my room at night.

"Tell me!" She listened.

"So the same happened to you?"

"Oh, no!" She shook her head, laughed. "But Dad would get so drunk he'd tear off his clothes and run around yelling in the snow. One of us would have to get him indoors and back into clothes. Or—"

"Or what?"

She paused, as if thinking over her memories.

"Get him on the toilet. Get him off the toilet. The next morning, he wouldn't remember anything."

"But you remembered."

She did not answer, offering me another beer. I didn't want beer—I wanted to talk. I wanted to ask about the time when she thought her dad had been abducted by aliens.

When I reminded her, she smiled and said she'd been eight years old, so hadn't realized he was drunk. Her manner ever jovial, she winked and changed the subject. Her older sister went around saying, "I hate Dad," to anyone who would listen, but my cousin just retired to her room and shut the door.

Another time, we went skinny-dipping. We drove to the beach at sunset, thinking we'd find it empty. Instead we discovered a clambake version of Lover's Lane.

"We'll walk farther down!" she said, and we did, wincing from too-sharp pebbles and branches in our path as we hiked farther than we'd anticipated, sandals in hand. It got dark. We came to a wooded beach area, only to hear two lovers laughing. On we plodded, the feeling that we had to squeeze out an adventure driving us. By the time night had fallen, we came to an empty expanse—broad, moonlit, white-sanded, free of trees.

The only problem remained a wire fence extending into the waves. The fence could be climbed, and as we jumped from the top into the soft sand, I noticed a long, low white edifice up the beach—an institution, maybe a hospital?

"Oh, we can't go here," she said. "That's the convent."

"Aren't the sisters sleeping?"

"Possible, possible."

"Let's teach those nuns how to *live!*"

Laughing, we threw off our sundresses and underwear, ran into the water, the moon rising. We swam to our heart's content, then made our way back to the beach, our legs heavy as beached whales. I wondered if we'd manage an amble back to the car.

Just as we'd cleared the shore and stood yawning in the cool breeze, a siren howled and a massive searchlight flicked on. Floodlit, naked, blinded, we scrounged for our dresses, which we'd dumped in the dark seaweed. My dress was white, so I found it. Hers was black, blending right in with the seaweed. We were almost on the point of abandoning it—our teeth chattered in the ear-splitting din, our eyes clamping shut, even as we forced them open—in the stark light. Then she located her dress.

We ran. I have never climbed a fence so quickly nor sprinted so fast, jogging barefoot over those sharp stones, since we dared not take time to don our sandals. That siren kept blaring, even after we'd cleared the fence and made it to the car. Collapsing in my seat, I gasped, "Thank God."

She chuckled softly. "Don't get your knickers in a twist."

She took her time putting the car in gear, backed out as though we had all the time in the world. Smirking, she drove us to the beach house. I wondered at her amazing calm.

As I write these memories, having become the black sheep, the two of us no longer on speaking terms, I think it ironic that I was wearing the white dress. I wanted to see and be seen and she wanted herself and all else hidden. Neither of us knew that then.

After my cousin's return to the U.S. from her English university, her mother, following mine, started divorce proceedings.

"It was like trench warfare," my cousin reminisced one afternoon on the dock, our skin sizzling in suntan oil, our throats cooling with raspberry daiquiris.

Neither of us could believe our good luck when our mothers finally got their divorces. We had our theories about why the sisters had married alcoholics. ("Something about a problem mother," said my cousin. I figured our grandfather's tee-totaling ways rendered his daughters unable to recognize an alcoholic.)

On my cousin's first Thanksgiving back in the U.S., after over a decade in England, we decided to cook a turkey with all the trimmings.

"She finally told Dad to move out."

"Wow!" I could hardly believe her.

My cousin rolled her eyes. "Last year, Dad made all six of us sit around the dining room table, told each of us to look him in the eye and asked whether we wanted him to leave. Every single one of us eyeballed him, said yes, Dad, I want you to leave."

"What happened?"

"He said, 'Well, I'm staying!'" She slapped her knee. "He'd never leave his meal ticket." Like my mother, my aunt held the purse strings. They poured cornucopias into the pockets of husbands whose contempt matched the size of the gift.

My cousin and I united over that Thanksgiving dinner after her sister, who had announced she'd like an American Thanksgiving, fell back on the couch complaining.

"Oh! Cooking that turkey! I just can't!" sighed the sister.

"Too stressful," soothed my mother.

"So much preparation," echoed my aunt.

"We'll order in a little Chinese food for you!" chirped my mother. "I can just have leftovers! I'm happy with my breakfast toast!" Her eyes went very wide. "Would you like some espresso? I can make it! I'll just have instant myself."

I thought of previous Thanksgivings with Mom—one year, a wooden spoon left lying on a burner ignited, a merry blaze beginning before the smell of burning fat made me run into the kitchen. The time she forgot to turn the oven from pre-heat to bake. The year she wanted to use a twisted wire clothing hanger to prop up the turkey.

But this year, my cousin and I got our massive bird in the oven, she gloating over "knobs of butter" with which she lavishly decorated it, while stirring swedes-and-carrots, thick with cream and pepper. She made potatoes and most of the vegetables. Neither of us wanted to slide into the family inertia: making that dinner, especially for her, whose brother was known as "Captain Entropy," meant forging a new family—a dynamic one that could triumph over our mothers and ensure that my cousin and I, if no one else, would rise from the ashes.

I made cranberry-orange sauce and corn muffins, plus a few pies. The board truly groaned, with all the muffins and sweet potatoes and Brussels sprouts and pies, the relatives and friends eating everything because it all tasted so great.

My cousin and I smiled at each other across the table.

"My goodness, I don't see how you did all this!" squeaked Mom, affecting delight, her face a mask of horror.

"Have some!" I smiled.

"Oh, I couldn't possibly eat all that!" She pushed the food away. Later she ate off my plate, a slightly annoyed look in her eyes.

Some months later, my cousin and I decided we'd share an apartment. By this time, she had a job and I was finishing graduate school.

Shortly before she moved in, I threw a dinner party. My best buddy, away on a scholarship, asked me to include her fiancé, who would be lonely without her. I invited him.

My cousin brought him a glass of wine, and before I got the meal on the table was already draped over him. She always seemed to understand without judging—but she could never be trusted around anyone else's man. I thought her daring, bold.

I pulled her into the kitchen, said, "Hands-off-the-merchandise-he's-my-best friend's-fiancé."

"OK!" She offered a salute, the private to the general. But she cocked an eyebrow, so I knew she felt annoyed. He was fair game. Who was I to tell her what to do?

When I came in with dinner, she had her head on the fiancé's shoulder and was plying him with wine. He sat stonily in his chair, but my cousin is awfully pretty. By the end of the meal I heard, "Oh, please, take me uptown! I'm sooo bored! It's late—I need a ride home! Won't you take me?"

I could see the man's embarrassment, but also his attraction to her. He smiled.

My best friend would kill me. She would wonder whether I'd set up a meeting between my cousin and her fiancé on purpose. But I envied my cousin's freedom—I'd never have her guts.

And yet, much as she irritated me, I admired my cousin. Her enthusiasm at the sight of recherché boutiques, her raucous laugh upon discovering a pop-up edition of the Kama Sutra, her bloodhound's nose for the perfect chocolate *vol-au-vent,* her lunatic, satiric humor that kept me in stitches—these remain with me even now, more than quarter of a century later.

No, I adored her. Unflappable, efficient, staring down the male Wall Street traders who couched every financial conquest in a violent sexual metaphor, she seemed the brave one. I loved sitting around the table after work listening to her tell tales of fending them off. I relied on her competence and practicality—she'd helped me figure out my first credit card, understanding that my jitters got in the way of my learning anything new. Operating instructions for household appliances, detailed

multilingual assembly plans for large pieces of furniture arriving in Ikea boxes never fazed her, while they floored me. When we wanted to make more money, it was she who came up with the idea, just when the AIDS epidemic sent the stock of prophylactics soaring, of a mail-order condom company. A complete failure as a business, our venture offered us amusing afternoons stretching brands of condoms over the necks of wine bottles, which got vigorous hand jobs.

When we discussed money, my cousin revealed that her father got beef and beer when the kids had to live on spaghetti and Kool Aid. Her dad refused to work, declining to accept his veteran's payments. That he never minded mooching off his wife was no surprise. Even after my mother's divorce, it was Mom who paid for my father's new apartment. Whenever we asked our mothers why they continued to pay off our fathers, they shrugged or sighed and offered condescending smiles, chiding us, "They need it."

My cousin and I teamed up to meet men. We talked about "commitment." She sympathized when I spoke of my longing for a man who enjoyed holding hands. One of my boyfriends had always dropped mine with apparent distaste even when he seemed to want to kiss me.

"I want him to love me," I sobbed after a break-up.

She shrugged. When her eyebrows rose, I knew she thought me a fool for love.

"You can't really tell them stuff like that." She shook her head. "They figure you want a house and a disposable income."

"Is that what you want?"

She laughed. I longed for her total self-control, her take-charge attitudes, and her ability to form a five-year plan. I always felt helpless around my feelings, which burst out all over the place. Indulgent when she saw me crying, she seemed above and beyond such storms herself. If only I could develop more maturity, more patience, I'd be serene, like her.

One day she came home from a date, knocked on my door, beckoned me with the canny look that I loved.

"I made him say it!" she said.

"What?"

"I made him say he loves me!" She waved her hand, flashing that glint of gold around her ring finger.

"So you're—going to get . . . ?"

"I told him I was just going out for a pack of cigarettes—that was our joke, but I acted like I meant it." Her eyes danced.

What was the matter with me? My heart was always dangling from my sleeve, and my cousin was going to live happily ever after. I was a bridesmaid, my feelings calamitous, because when I told my boyfriend I'd been dreaming about my cousin getting married, he bolted. My cousin and I shared everything, but now she would settle down to the American dream in the suburbs, and I would dry up in Manhattan.

At her wedding, she was so nervous she felt physically ill, but she said that was normal and I believed her. She got pregnant almost immediately, and within two years became a nursing mom, an entire train ride away.

Our lives had naturally separated. Having finished graduate school, I'd gotten an assistant professor job and then a fellowship to study biography. I returned to some of our family papers, both the ones my cousin and I had found in the basement together so long ago and others I discovered in libraries. Granddad had written letters to Anaïs Nin, whom he first met when she applied as a young woman to be an artist's model, and whom he painted and sculpted. His work appeared in galleries, was sold to her followers, and eventually enhanced biographies of her. Nin became a family friend, invited to dinners and outings with her East Coast husband, Hugh. The letters to my grandfather sound flirty, but my mother claimed he hadn't married or had any sexual experience until he was forty when he married Grannie, who was then seventeen. Was he closeted? Mom had once come to me giggling with a portrait he'd painted, asking, "Guess who?"

The girlish face seemed vaguely familiar—a long jaw, soft, submissive eyes, a pompadour of brown hair heaped like Lady Astor's in the Sargent painting. When I couldn't identify the person, Mom revealed that it was Granddad, who'd painted himself as a woman.

I wanted to write a book about the letters between my grandfather and Anaïs Nin. The idea percolated and I visited libraries, photocopying letters, and interviewing Nin's West Coast husband—who poured me a stiff margarita with which I poisoned a potted plant, before enduring a wild car ride through Silver Lake to a restaurant where, despite pitchers of margaritas, I failed to learn anything more.

I tried a different tack. From a hotel room in Los Angeles where I sat on a white chenille bedspread, photocopies of Nin's letters from the UCLA library and sheets of questions spread around me, I called Mom in New York, my mind filled with the earthquakes I feared. And there was one coming, but not in Los Angeles.

Mom's voice got spooky—as if she were in a trance: "Oh, no, Da wasn't gay."

"Why do you think that?" I asked.

"Oh. Well . . . he loved little girls. He painted Nin because she seemed like a little girl. He used to love it when little girls sat on his lap. He told them stories; he loved to see their eyes get all round. He and I were . . . chummy."

Her voice got even quieter. Although I was dying to ask exactly what she meant, some instinct made me keep silent, and then Mom continued.

"Well, if you want to get Freudian about it, there is something else I've never even told my sister. I was very close to Daddy, and when I was little I used to come and stand next to him and he would put his hand under my skirt and stroke my legs and bottom, but not on the genitals."

Exactly what my father did.

"I never thought there was anything sexual about it"—my mother's voice rose as she said this—"or had the feeling he was

aroused. It was just a close, warm, feeling. And then when I was thirteen and I got my period I realized that this would be awkward, and I withdrew, and he didn't try to do it again."

I marveled over my mother's confession—she'd actually remarked, "I didn't want his hand to get all bloody," as if I needed that explanation. As far as I was concerned, there was blood on his hands from way back and forever.

Mom became the child who never grew. She dressed in baggy clothes that concealed her breasts or she wore a newsboy's cap.

Cross-legged on that bedspread, speed-writing my questions and Mom's answers, I could not wait to talk to my cousin—the key we'd so long sought together had appeared and turned in the lock. How had we failed to catch something so obvious? Our fathers drank, after all, and because Granddad tee-totaled we thought he must be different. My memories of him remained dim: a soft-spoken, rueful face, a kind old man in a bow tie who'd died when I was seven and when my cousin was four. I remembered being angry with him for dying before I could give him a creature I'd molded from clay in art class and painted just for him. And here I was now, unveiling his great big clay feet.

My grandfather's portrait of himself as a priggish looking woman—no wonder. It was he who wanted to be *Very Much a Lady,* the title of his unpublished novel and the phrase he had used to describe Anaïs Nin when she first came to pose for him in 1922. A lady could appear to be unsexual. On a 1935 visit, Nin regaled him with her written accounts of erotic escapades with Henry Miller and others; Granddad wrote, "This affected my tummy and I thought I might 'fwow up.'" He was fifty-nine when he wrote this—and expresses himself like a five-year-old boy confronted with adults *in flagrante.* Nothing went by its real name—"whenever ladies have sawdust," began my grandfather, attempting to explain to my mother why Grannie cried so much. A child at heart, he seems to have sought sexual satisfaction only with other children, alas, his daughters. My mother recalls his

telling her, "Whenever your mother and I have picnic, she won't look at me over breakfast."

Our mothers acted like little girls because they felt like little girls. They'd never grown beyond the time when their fathers fondled them. I could understand that—in so many ways, neither had I.

As I ended my letter I speculated on what Granddad might have done to my aunt: Mom had so emphatically insisted that Granddad could not possibly have touched her sister that I knew he must have done so. I urged my cousin to play the detective: *And what about that painting Granddad did of himself as a woman? Does your mother have anything like that? (And could you maybe collect this or any other piece of evidence before you ask her any question that might induce her to destroy it?)*

Even in my feverish enthusiasm, I got that our mothers had been keeping a very big secret for a very long time. What I didn't get was how much my cousin would want to keep the secret, too, in spite of or because it was such an open one—collectors of my grandfather's paintings and sculptures considered his pedophilia old news.

The day before I bought my cousin that whale pitcher for her birthday, I'd sent the real present, the answer to our questions, that long letter revealing everything I'd learned about Granddad. I'd sent a book proposal too, outlining my thoughts on Nin's and my grandfather's letters. That ladylike manner of Granddad's, the aesthetic, un-athletic tilting of the hand that I'd taken for gay in both my grandfather and father—though, with my own father, I knew better. Dad had a girlish manner. He'd come into my room, drunk, moaning, burying his face in my hair, weeping, and stroking me from neck to ankles.

"Remember?" I wrote, picturing my cousin's raised eyebrow and delighted smirk as she read my letter. "Here's the bombshell!" I added.

This was my whale of a gift. Granddad was like our fathers.

For days after I'd mailed the package, my cousin neither called nor wrote. I didn't know what to think. I'd hoped to please her with the whale pitcher, and had looked forward to hearing her say she was happy to get one just like the one they'd had when she was seven. I started to wonder whether she ever received the package, then whether she might be ill. Had something happened?

Finally, I called. "Hi, it's me."

"You just got carried away, didn't you?"

"What?

"I opened the envelope—the baby cried and I had to lay your.. *letter* on the kitchen counter. What if the maid had read that thing?"

I was stunned. Her maid? Her illiterate maid? Her maid who barely speak English?

"But—you remember what we talked about on the dock, right? Our fathers. The—the—just everything—makes sense now. Two molested sisters marrying—"

She cut me off. "It's a stretch." Her voice suggested the patience of a Kindergarten teacher addressing a devilish child. Calm, with a faint hint of irritation. As if I'd told a tasteless joke, or a pointless one.

"But—"

"You wanted scandal. Or money. Curious, your wanting to write about Granddad. Curious, not writing about your own father." A low, enraged tone had crept into her voice.

"I thought you'd want to know! It's what we talked about on the dock, so often!"

"This is family! I object!"

"I remember!"

"You were asking me to spy on my mother!" Now she was yelling.

"But don't you remember all the things we talked about on the dock—?"

All the favorite moments of my life with her and with her siblings—these were the only times when I warmed to family:

we had the same laugh, the same voices, the same gestures. We resembled one another. I thought of my cousins as previously undiscovered brothers and sisters.

"I object! None of this is true about Granddad!"

She didn't remember how much we had talked. Or she did. I'll never know.

Back in the Upper West Side apartment, every evening after work when I lived with my cousin, one of us would pop our Rosie Vela cassette into the tape player:

Livin' is only a Fool's Paradise.
I'm into somethin' and nothin' feels right.
Givin' is only to get somethin' nice . . .

Try as I might, I couldn't get my cousin to see what I saw—or at least to admit it. I'd believed I had an ally, a sister—but for all those years I'd been the one who couldn't see clearly—yes, about Grandfather, but also about my cousin. Nothing could be worse than discovering that the person on whose understanding I had pinned every last hope had never existed. I'd invented her, casting her in the role of big sister because I'd imagined she was calmer: I'd thought of her as a mom because I needed one.

"Mum said he never touched her!" my cousin had raged when I called to apologize.

"I see," I said.

"Putting your hand on a kid's bum is not sexual. Don't be ridiculous."

Not wanting to admit to myself at the time that I'd already lost my cousins—that really, I had never had the relationship I imagined—I apologized. For me, the younger generation of our family had always felt like an army building a better way of life than our mothers had experienced or provided: my cousins and I

would collaborate in understanding the past in order to improve the future. Nothing could have been farther from the reality.

"Let's put it behind us," my cousin said with an air of satisfaction. She had everything she wanted—the perfect house, the shiny kitchen, the husband who brought home the bacon. We both knew what was in those dusty boxes and now we knew why, but the dream of discovery remained mine alone. I wanted the boxes wide open, the whole mess of the basement out on the dock, my mother's confession unfolded in the sun. My cousin wanted the secrets packed away, the dust undisturbed, the boxes deep in shadows. She wanted me out of her life.

I spent an afternoon in front of an open window, willing myself to lean out too far and let gravity take its course. Occasionally I pulled back in, called friends, reached only answering machines. I forced myself to shut the window.

I still long for that paradise in which, like identical twins, my cousin and I drank the same drinks, cocked the same eyebrow, cracked the same jokes. We stood shoulder to shoulder, warding off our mothers, giving each other strength. We had seemed a team, shaking our fists at stupidity, parsing our past together. If there's anything to the idea of redemption, my cousin had been that for me.

We would never again be a team. I would always miss her.

My aunt invited me to lunch and, wagging a finger, told me that she wanted to set me straight. Granddad had no sister. Therefore, he'd painted himself as a woman because he wanted to know how his sister might have looked. That painting didn't have anything to do with wanting to be a woman.

Then came the reason for my lunch invitation: Granddad had never molested her, so he could not possibly have molested my mother, right?

I said I could not predict that, and my aunt started begging.

"Look, I told my children how wonderful my father was, because their own father was so terrible. You just can't take that away from people. If you take that away . . ." Her voice faded. She was pleading with me. I saw in her expression that she was

letting me know that I was right in all my discoveries about my grandfather. She, too, as a child experienced a "special" relationship with him, but she thought it was wrong of me to discuss it.

"You know, he is not your personal property," she snapped.

I'd brought with me a brown mailing envelope containing photos I never intended to show my aunt. I needed them as one needs in desperate situations some talisman—a crucifix, a mezuzah, a lucky rabbit foot: those photos were my moral support. My grandfather had taken eight-by-ten black-and-white photos sometime in the late nineteen-thirties, and they showed my aunt and my mother naked on a beach in fluid, balletic poses like romantic woodland sprites; both were girls were teenagers at the time, and their breasts and pubic hair showed. Imagine Maxfield Parrish teaming up with Lewis Carroll.

As my aunt's voice droned on, I became so afraid I'd believe her—and I partly wished that I honestly could—that I kept reaching over to my bag to pat the envelope with the photos. Those were real. I could touch them and look at them. Yes, even if my mother, my aunt, my cousins, and the rest of the world told me I was wrong, I could look at those photos and reassure myself that I was right.

Before the debacle, I'd asked my mother about the photos. With ferocious merriment, she had said, "Oh, he wanted to take pictures of his daughters growing up."

In the middle of writing this essay, I went through every file in my office, and none of them contained the photo. Then I phoned my mother at her assisted living facility.

"Mother wanted photos of us in the altogether, since we were growing up," she said. Her father had indeed taken those pictures.

"I was dancing with seaweed in my hands in the water!" She seemed proud.

But would she send them to me?

"Yes, when I find them."

Then: "They might be a little X-rated for your children," she said, her voice thin and high.

When I finally unearthed the photo, it was just as I had recollected. What I had never observed is that my mother's eyes are closed. The sun was in them, yes, what girl wants to see her father taking a photo of her naked fifteen-year-old self? How could she live with knowing she was displaying her breasts and pubic hair to him? According to Mom's note on the cardboard cover, her mother had wanted these photos taken.

I'm a fool for love. In the way that you press a bruise to see if it still feels sore, I still listen to that Rosie Vela tape my cousin and I used to play. I reminisce—the great escape from the nuns and their searchlight, almost having to run home naked, it hadn't thrown light on my cousin.

I had been the one to suggest that the two of us teach those nuns how to live.

What could have been more absurd: at the moment when my cousin had wanted me to play the mother and reassure her that Granddad had been nothing like our fathers, I had wanted her to play the mother and pat me on the head for my wonderful discoveries. Meanwhile, our actual mothers continued to be permanently out to lunch—yet here we were, the seekers, the detectives, or so I thought, following in their footsteps, pushing into shadows the clues we thought we wanted.

Occasionally I still imagine my cousin pouring herself a glass of orange juice from that blue-and-white whale pitcher. I hope that the pitcher is still sitting on a kitchen shelf, still being used, not covered with dust. I'm glad I didn't pour myself out that window—instead, I have poured out these recollections, getting dusty in the process. Flipping through old journals, old letters, old photos, I found Anaïs Nin and a grandfather handsomer and younger than the one in my childhood memories. Beside him stand two little girls, my dark-haired smiling mother and my

freckled, bemused aunt, Nin smiling down on her, as though realizing that her mother did not.