

Flat Champagne

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It's a Saturday night in the autumn of 1960, long enough after supper that there's no chance my mother is going to issue a last-minute bathtub order. In fact, I'm golden to stay up for at least another hour because nothing is going to get her off the couch before the champagne bubble world of *Lawrence Welk* comes to its usual accordion and fiddle, or accordion and clarinet, or accordion and some other silly instrument, mashed-up ending.

My father, a jazz musician, is downtown at a club on Yonge Street. My baby sister is asleep in her crib. And my younger sister, Beth, is somewhere in the house—defacing a Bible, a dictionary, or one of our precious picture books. I'm nine and Beth is eight, and we're both attached to the picture books, both still think they are ours to do with as we want, even though they were our father's first. I've tried to put *Chicken Little* and *Grasshopper Green* out of harm's way, but when Beth finds the books, she writes things in them like *I'm afraid, I want my mommy!* In the back of A.A. Milne's *When We Were Very Young*, she's written our address, but she's misspelled the street—it says we live at *11 Horror Hill*—and she's printed our phone number with all the figures backwards. Beth will write on

anything she can get her hands on, and she never seems to stop talking. Increasingly her talking, sometimes shouting, is about things that don't make any sense.

And me, well, I'm sitting at our pull-down kitchen table where I spend a lot of time dreaming about things. On Saturday nights, I'm usually dreaming about being Janet Lennon, the youngest of the four sisters from Venice, California, who sing their hearts out every week for Lawrence Welk. When I hear them being introduced, I leave my post at the table and stand at the top of the stairs where I can see the TV. But I don't go down to the den to sit beside my mother because what I really want is to get back to the table as soon as the song ends, to play with my Lennon Sisters Cut-Out Dolls.

The dolls are made of cardboard punched out of the first page of the book. To me, they are beautiful. I line them up on the table and admire their sparkling hair and perfect makeup. Each sister has a wardrobe I cut from the book using a sharp pair of nail scissors, carefully guiding the point around the pleats, frills, and cuffs, always careful not to cut off any of the tabs. I need the tabs to fold the edges of the clothing over onto the dolls. The shoes are tricky, especially around the heels, but the toughest to cut out is the gorgeous lemon yellow swing coat that belongs to Janet. Every time I play with Janet something deliciously Lennon-sister-lemon-pie-happy swims through my mind.

I love playing where pleasure laps at the shores of beauty, fame, and talent without letting myself get too specific about what I am doing. Because getting specific means admitting I'm escaping a distressed mother tuning out with Lawrence, and an unwell sister scribbling and muttering in the basement. So I sit in the relative quiet of our after-supper kitchen, the air still full with the pungent smell of the spaghetti we've wolfed down, and I trace my scissors around the silks, brocades, and embroideries of a perfect life, careful to cut around the difficult edges, the unexpected corners, vigilant not to cut off the life-linking tabs. When everything is ordered and cut perfectly, I can forget that even the lemon-chiffon swing

heaven of Janet's coat could be destroyed. It is after all just a piece of paper, like any other, and it can be written on, made to hold a list of bizarre and forlorn words.

And the worst of it is that I am playing with sister dolls instead of with my own sister who just a year or two before was my best friend.



There is a scene I replay in my mind. We are at the cottage and a gang of us is pulling away from the dock in one of the boats. Either it is our plywood runabout with its noisy 3 hp Evinrude or it is the Chapple kids' rowboat named *Cinq* for the five of them and for the auditory pun. It's odd because in the replay there's no noise except for my father calling, yet we pull away with some authority, which makes me think we are under power. We are going somewhere to which Beth has not been invited. She is standing on the dock with her orange lifejacket and Dad is saying, *Take Beth with you.*

Dad looks sad, Beth looks sad. We do not come back. Situations like this make him ask me, *Would you kick a cripple?* His logic is simple, and evidently, yes, I would kick a cripple.



By early adolescence Beth has a full-blown writing obsession. She still underlines words in the dictionary and ticks sad words in the Bible, but she's gone beyond that. None of the pens or pencils in the house work, they're either dry or broken. No piece of paper is safe from complete obliteration. She is no longer able to go to school because there is no school where it is safe for her to go. The education system doesn't yet have any of the concepts of integration and acceptance. The troubled kids, whether they be juvenile delinquents, young addicts, sexually promiscuous, or mentally ill, all end up at the same vocational school where they can do maximum harm to one another and receive little specialized help.

Beth looks like a confused visitor in most of the family photos: the Christmas gift frenzy, the Halloween spectacle, photos even of

her own birthday party. The camera captures an image of someone brought in to observe the traditions of a group of humans who are not wired the same way as she. Her idea of getting organized is to write lists:

Experience Thoughts
Funk and Wagnall Thoughts
Excited Thoughts
Lord Thoughts
Almighty Thoughts
Miracle Worker Thoughts
Jesus Thoughts
Patronized Saints Thoughts
Canonized Thoughts
Open Minded Thoughts
Giggling Thoughts
Laughing Thoughts
Needing Thoughts

The list reads like a type of want ad: *Seeking Normal Thoughts*. And it's born in the mind of someone who has schizophrenia, or autism, or brain damage at birth, or some other unknown genetic predisposition to madness. The experts are all over the map, and I am terrified when they come to the house to take our fingerprints. Terrified they will find I have the same *crazy* whorl. I watch to see if their eyes light up or gleam in a different way after they look at mine. But then no one ever gets back to us because nothing is conclusive and the professionals don't like uncertainty, and my mother withdraws into further lockdown because the current trendy theory is that schizophrenia is born in generations of bad mothering. And all of it is insensitive and dehumanizing and leads me to be suspicious of the medical profession, who spend a lot of time talking about the tragic disease my sister has, as if we are all watching a car wreck on television involving no one we know.

Every day Beth fills hundreds of pages with her lists, a type of mad slam poetry. She can't organize her thoughts but she can organize her lists. I get through high school by pretending I belong to another family and trying to ignore what goes on at our house.



Three things happen in the summer of 1969 that have an unlikely but dramatic impact on me. First, William Lennon, father of the Lennon Sisters, is killed by a delusional fan who believes William stands in the way of his marriage to sister Peggy. Then, Charles Manson and his ragtag family, composed primarily of girls not much older than myself, go on their Helter Skelter rampage. Finally, Neil Armstrong becomes the first human to set foot on the moon. All of this makes a spicy stew in my head. I learn that shitty things happen to nice people, shitty things happen to famous people, and there really are no limits to time, space, or whatever can happen in the universe.

I am a university dropout working as a bank teller in the day and lying in bed at night not sleeping. Like most eighteen-year-olds I have big questions in my mind, but I'm not too sure how many others' questions go anything like this: *Should I kill myself because I've had random thoughts that my sister and my family would be better off if she were dead, so therefore I am no better than that deranged creep Charles Manson—I, too, am a murderer—and for that I should be put to death or at least locked up, and since I don't have the guts to kill myself, should I do something horrible and stupid like Manson to get myself locked up, or should I join a convent and let the nuns figure me out, but since I'm not Catholic should I just go ahead and kill myself now?*

I start searching in earnest for that crazy fingerprint whorl of mine.



By the mid-1980s, Beth is in her thirties and still living at home where she's left alone to rant most days because no one can take being with her for long—it has become her *Horror Hill*. When I look into her face I can see even she can't stand to be with herself anymore. She's

become a disappointed member of the 999 Queen Street West asylum crowd in downtown Toronto. She visits a psychiatrist regularly on the tenth floor of the Clarke Institute of Psychiatry. Intermittently, she's lived unsuccessfully in two different group homes, one of which was across from the 100 Huntley Street headquarters where the spectre of religious salvation became a fascination for her, and in both of which she's been sexually assaulted. And it's very hard to say exactly whose fault any of this is.

But by December 1984, I figure I've grown up, I've gone to law school, I'm going to be able to figure this out. Except what am I really doing? I'm dropping in for the requisite five-day Christmas visit with family, I'm circling around Beth like I'm still getting used to the idea of her being related to me. And I'm holding out a three-ring binder saying, *Here, unravel it yourself—tell your own life story*. So she does. She writes an autobiography entitled *One Girl in the Crowd* and she starts it with the simple admission, *I was born with childhood schizophrenia. What must or must not be behind my schizophrenia puzzles me to this day!!!*

She has a much clearer view of it than I. I can't even look her in the eye without dissolving. I retreat back to Vancouver where I have moved to get away from it all, but I don't really get away. She is inside me like a grain of sand in my heart.



Years later, I am home again for the holidays and the family has driven to the group home where Beth lives north of the city. She tries her best with her appearance, but she is often clothed in smelly sweatpants and a stained T-shirt. The staff at the home is overworked, and Beth no longer has the skills to take proper care of her hygiene. She has developed an unnatural fear of hot water and frequently tells us about the resident who made a bath with scalding water and suffered a fatal heart attack. I don't know how much of the event is relayed accurately, but the impact is real enough.

Beth shuffles down the icy path of the home toward the car. She

is carrying her tattered black vinyl purse. I look inside the purse and find nothing in it but scraps of paper so covered in writing there is hardly any white left on the pages. When we get home, I take the contents from the purse and put them in a Ziploc bag. I am treating the rubble like a museum artifact, trying to distance myself from its sadness. I still have the contents, in the bag, together with the card she gave me that year. It says, *I'm so glad you are here with me at Christmas*. She's resisted writing anything more on the card except the words *with the best of my love*.



There is something I knew when I was young that took me almost fifty years to get back. After years of struggling, and mental health warehousing for Beth, she has moved to a group home near me in Vancouver. One day, we are in her bedroom at the new home and David Bowie's "Let's Dance" comes on the radio. As we sometimes used to do, we start to dance.

She's the one with schizophrenia, but I'm the one who's lived my life in a delusion, a dream that I bring respect and non-judgment to her. When I deal with Beth, there is no artifice from her, I'm dealing with her where she's at—no amount of cajoling, manipulating, or bribing will put her into another state, another need, another moment. But when she is dealing with me, she is working with a manipulator, a con artist, someone who too many times has put up a front of compassion and caring while secretly thinking this is too hard, she is too smelly, too difficult to be around. But on this day, she has on her blue eye shadow and her baby pink lipstick, she's had a bath, and we're dancing. Out of nowhere I tell her, *You're my best friend*. She just looks at me and says, *I know*. For the moment all her wiring is intact and I know that she knows.

I didn't even realize how much of the friendship I'd lost until it came back. To love someone who is complicated requires you not to think too deeply sometimes, to simply put on your party makeup and dance.