

Perfect Tense

I can't remember the scene in the photographer's studio, but I know in my heart that Dad coached me, "Sit up straight. Hold your sister. What's the matter with you?" In the picture, she and I wear identical white organdy pinafores over our lace-trimmed panties and our soft clear skin. Crisp ruffles run down our backs. Our father's mother, our fancy grandma, had hand-rolled the edging on the ruffles.

The photographer may have jiggled a stuffed bunny to amuse us, but only my sister is smiling. I, aged four, straddle the photographer's bench, balancing her in front of me, concentrating, trying to do what an impatient Daddy exhorts, "Stay still, tilt your head."

I'm trying hard.

She and I are beautiful, perfect. The portrait sat on the mantle for years. The date penciled on the back said "1949," so it must have been early summer, before the pinafore met with a fatal accident on the night of The Beverly Hills Country Club outing, just after I turned five.

In late August of 1949, I was being dressed and coiffed to accompany my parents as well as my father's mother and step-father, Grandma and Grandpa, to a posh nightclub in Newport, Kentucky, The Beverly Hills Country Club. This would be my second trip.

I'd seen the floorshow the previous year. When the chorus girls floated across the floor in high-cut satin bathing suits and high-heeled shoes, I gasped at their glittering allure. I'd seen my mother in her full-coverage panties and cotton bra, but she had been merely exposed. I kneeled in my chair on scabby knees, leaned my still-dimpled elbows on the brass rail at the end of our table, and swooned.

That trip, my father carried me into the casino in the crook of his arm, the wool of his suit coat prickling my skin. I loved being taller than everyone else, and he let me pull the arm on the slot machine. Being with Daddy felt glamorous. At home he'd sing my sister and me to sleep. I

can still see him standing in the half-open bedroom doorway, dark haired and handsome, crooning the lyrics to “I Love You Truly.” Sometimes he’d coax a feather out of our down bed pillows and draw it across our cheeks. “Tickle me more, Daddy,” we’d both scream. “More.” I adored that version of Daddy, but I feared the Daddy I met if I disappointed him.

The club, an hour across the Ohio River from our home in Cincinnati, was run by a mobster from Cleveland who booked first class entertainers like Milton Berle or Lena Horne, and Grandma’s favorite, Ted Lewis. Lewis, a former vaudevillian and clarinet-player, fronted a popular jazz band. He wore his tattered top hat at a tilt, leaned into his audience and cried, “Is Evvv—rybody Happy?” I can still hear the sound-warping 1940’s microphone. For his closing number, called “Me and My Shadow,” Lewis danced a soft shoe with a black dancer sliding on cats’ paws behind him, synching his every move with Lewis’. It brought down the house.

I worried throughout the routine that the black dancer, most probably a man named Paul White, was going to mess up. I thought his part must be very hard, because when Daddy danced with me, I would stand as far away from him as I could and still be able to put my left hand on his arm. I needed space to drop my head and watch his shoes. “Hold your head up, Claudia. You don’t dance that way.” I felt nervous with Dad, sure that my awkward dancing would disappoint him. I didn’t understand that Lewis and White had rehearsed, that Dad and I could have rehearsed. When Lewis would take a quick step back, I’d be struck for a split second with a terrible dread, then be amazed when White deftly reversed course with him.

As long as Ted Lewis played the Beverly Hills and Grandma’s health held out, we celebrated her birthday there, allowing her to relive her youth. Information about Grandma’s youth, and by extension Dad’s childhood, trickled into my consciousness in remarks not meant for my ears. She had loved dancing as a young blonde and too often left my fatherless, toddler Dad with her younger sister while she went out “till all hours.” Dad had been born “across the river,” in Covington, Kentucky, the town next to Newport. Covington has gentrified considerably over the decades, but when I was a kid, both my parents described it as a “bad place” and would not take us there. I imagine my grandmother, part of a large family, growing up

in a cramped row house, longing for stylish gentility, and instead learning to brawl.

In 1929 when Dad was fifteen, Grandma married Grandpa, and with him came financial security. By the time I appeared in 1944, she had acquired a sanctimonious air and a mink stole, but she and Grandpa got into physical fights, and she was known to start them. She smelled of Chantilly and propriety, but had trouble matching her verbs to her pronouns. “He come” and “she don’t” peppered her conversation. Although Dad’s spoken grammar slipped into the same cruelly identifying irregularities, he too had a thirst for anything refined or elegant.

To avoid his querulous home life, Dad spent Saturday afternoons at the “pictures,” escaping into films starring dapper leading men like Rudolf Valentino and later William Powell or Fred Astaire. Dad once confided to me how he had loved the handsome view of life that floated across the screen, how he had wanted his life to be that perfect.

One of my earliest memories, long before I knew about Dad and the “pictures,” is my third birthday lawn party. Cocktail-sipping adults drifted around our quarter acre backyard, hardly the verdant venue one might expect for a lawn party, but as close as Dad could get. I’m sure my fancy grandma was in attendance, sporting a voile afternoon dress, and I’m just as certain that my mother’s parents weren’t—their strategic absence avoiding a clash of in-law cultures.

My mother’s parents, the Rouses, probably spent that afternoon at their kitchen table, each with a bottle of Hudepohl, listening to Waite Hoyt broadcast a Reds’ game from Crosley Field. What my mom’s mom cared about was the home run total of the Reds’ famous first baseman, Ted Kluszewski.

Dad found baseball boring and beer drinking gauche, and I agreed with him. Fancy Grandma and I lunched at the art deco Netherland Plaza.

I know that on the afternoon of the lawn party, honeysuckle bloomed against our split rail fence. I’m certain that candles flickered behind hurricane globes, that Japanese lanterns were strung between clothes poles, but I retain only one enduring memory: I was running toward the house, and just as I approached the kitchen stoop, my father grabbed me by the

arm, pulled me off my feet, and started whacking my backside. My pale dress printed with pink flowers flew out in front of me with each smack. He hissed, “You’ve ruined your party!” My three-year-old brain had no idea how I’d accomplished that.

I was in my thirties when the “ah-ha” moment struck me. I realized that Dad had created an imaginary scene that day and cast himself as the man he wanted to be, that he did this with his whole life. I no doubt behaved like a tired and over-feted three year old, and flipped the scene from *Cary Grant with Daddy’s Little Princess* to *Sweaty Average Joe with Unruly Embarrassment*.

By including me, and later my sister, in the Beverly Hills outings, or dinner at The Golden Lamb, or opera at the zoo, Dad attempted to prepare his girls for a wider, finer world. Mesmerized at four by Saint-Saens’ *Danse Macabre*, heartsick at nine for *Madame Butterfly*, I lapped up the Readers-Digest-condensed-version of culture to which Dad exposed us. I adored the same world he did and can’t remember when I didn’t want to be good enough to belong to it.

An hour before departure for the Beverly Hills, Mother scrubbed me pink and dressed me in the white organdy pinafore and new black patent Mary Janes, then sat me at a walnut dressing table. While she clipped a big bow at the back of my head, Dad buckled a slender Hamilton watch under his wrist and knotted his tie. He said, “Make that bow tight. I don’t like her hair hanging in her face.”

Mom held the clamp for the bow in her teeth and pulled on my hair with both hands till the skin on my scalp stood up. I loved the pretty way I looked but hated the tense and uncomfortable way I felt.

That night, my sister had already been transported the short distance to Grandma Rouse’s, and was probably munching on home-baked cookies while I dressed. My life seemed to present two choices: either walk a perilous path trying to please Dad and be rewarded with wondrous adventures, or find comfort and acceptance from oblivious people who sat around their kitchen table drinking beer and listening to ball games. I chose to risk humiliating failure, but, oh, how I longed for some comfort.

In the triptych of the dressing table mirror, I watched Dad tuck a linen handkerchief into his breast pocket and turn to walk downstairs.

Mom sat me in the middle of my Martha Washington bedspread and held my cheeks in her housework-chapped hands. “Stay still and don’t make Daddy angry.”

But I was too excited, and went running after the sounds of Dad’s leather soles as they slapped against the kitchen linoleum, then echoed down the wooden basement steps. He was opening the door between the basement and the garage when I caught up to him.

“I’m just getting some air.” Dad cupped his free hand behind his Zippo. “Stay inside. The garage floor is slippery and you’re all dressed up.” He smoked with one hand, stuck the other in his pants pocket and sauntered down the drive.

Across the street from our house was a park with swings and teeter totters, a merry-go-round, a pool, and kids who never went to night clubs, a place where on a normal day little girls raced down the slide on sheets of wax paper and little boys splashed water at other little boys. Once I’d watched an older boy drag the merry-go-round to a stop to let a younger boy climb on. That sort of masculine generosity inspired a poignant ache.

A late afternoon breeze sneaked into the garage. One foot crossed over the threshold. The summer noises were quieting down, and I couldn’t hear many kids playing in the park.

Then the voice of a big boy sang out, “You can do it, Sport. Hey, Buddy, good job.” I felt that poignant ache. My Mary Janes started to run through the garage toward his warm disembodied voice. They couldn’t stop themselves.

Neither could they negotiate the slick garage floor, and I went down on my belly, grinding grease and grit and blood into the pinafore. For a split second I was caught in a vortex, sucked back from everything I reached for. No more chance to join Daddy as his darling little girl. No more chance to find the big brother behind that encouraging voice. Dad grabbed me up, only this time I was too big to dangle in mid-air. The Chesterfield trembled in his lips, and he smacked his open hand against my panties and against the skin on the backs of my legs.

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

He flicked the cigarette into the yard with his middle finger and dragged me sobbing into the basement.

“I said stay inside.” He forced me up two flights of stairs to my mother. “We’re not taking this child with us. Look at her. She’s ruined.” I could feel his pounding heart. Then, he pulled his cuff below the end of his coat sleeve, smoothed his hair, sighed and walked back downstairs.

“It’s okay.” Mother hugged me. She doctored my wounds with Mercurochrome and pulled a worn cotton nightie over my head. The nightgown felt like relief. My legs dangled off the edge of the bed and I stared at my bandaged knees. I knew I was banished to Grandma Rouse’s. Not adorable enough to go along. To be acceptable in his world, I needed to be like the picture on the mantel.

Having engaged our smiles, the photographer would have pressed the shutter which would have stayed open about one thirtieth of a second. A child probably breathes once every three seconds, so the photographer recorded about one ninetieth of one breath. For one thirtieth of a second, one ninetieth of a breath, we were immaculate and perfect.

Years later in my high school Latin class, I would learn to refer to the past tense, to anything immutable, anything frozen in history, as the perfect tense: the child in the picture sat perfectly still. Anything fluid from the past, anything involving a continuing movement or the passage of time, is called the imperfect tense: the child was running through the garage when she fell, and then the father was dragging her, and she kept sobbing.