

SECRET PARAGRAPHS ABOUT MY BROTHER

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THERE HAVE been killings in Cambridge.

They want me to help them find the murderer, but I can't concentrate. The police feel there is a literary connection between the murders since all of those killed (except the nun from California) had belonged to an Upper West Side Video Club in Manhattan that had more than an ordinary number of writers as members. And at one time each had rented either *The Vanishing* or *Vertigo*.

It was the semester I dreamed of my son when he was sleep-walking. That was the winter before the summer of 1963 when my brother went for a drive in his car and was in the accident. I lay across the bed after I put my sons to sleep and suddenly painted one wall in the apartment red. My brother was in a coma for five months. When he woke, he was brain damaged and paralyzed. He died in 1972.

When I'm in Manhattan I retreat to the rooftop of my brownstone and read Russian classics—*Crime and Punishment* is my favorite. Some mornings I walk down Riverside Drive to 72nd Street. I often think about my brother.

Before he joined the Army, my brother went to Ohio State for a semester. He used to stand beneath my window in Baker Hall and practice his Spanish. Then one day he disappeared.

In Florence, July 1961, I didn't know that two summers from then there would be a terrible accident. I had given up writing plays. I had come to feel hopeless.

During that month, after I left American Express, I would often stop at the American Library and read *The New York Times*. One morning there was an exhibit in the window called *The Plays of Tennessee Williams*. It had been a long time since I had thought of Williams but now, as I stood staring at the volumes of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Glass Menagerie*, *The Rose Tattoo*, I realized how much I still admired what Williams

did. Perhaps I could write another play. The work on my desk that I had started in Ghana was an unclassified assortment of pages. I had no idea what form it would take but there was a character, Sarah, who was concerned about her thinning hair and another character, Clara, who spoke of her journey on an ocean liner. I had these characters speaking intensely of Queen Victoria and Patrice Lumumba. And I had a Jesus character who was speaking to my heroine. Perhaps I could write a play again, I thought as I walked back to Piazza Donatello. But no, I couldn't face that disappointment again. No matter how hard I had tried, I couldn't sustain a play in three acts like Williams and I couldn't achieve the density I so loved in Lorca.

Then one day not long after I had returned to Rome to await the birth of my son, my husband arrived from Nigeria. We lived on Via Reno in a lovely apartment with a terrace that faced Rome. One morning, again on the way to American Express, I bought *The Times*. It was a very sunny morning. There was an article about Edward Albee, about the success of his one-act plays.

I had not thought of one-acts since I'd been about twenty-three. They seemed an oddity. But at that moment I decided I would try *one* one-act play and it would be the last thing I would write. I called it *Funnyhouse of a Negro*. The accident would take place the summer after its first performance.

In 1977, I was flying from London to Budapest (on the way to a theater conference) when I met a man who had been in Mannheim around the time of my brother's court martial (1956). He said he now worked for the American Embassy in Haiti. It was a night flight. My fellow passenger did not say why he was flying to Budapest, but he questioned me carefully on my role in the theater conference.

In Budapest soldiers with guns surrounded us as we deplaned in the December night. During our days at the Hotel Royal we were never alone. I bought my sons flutes and saw the Danube. In Berlin I went to see the Reichstag. I thought of Mannheim. Yet I was not able to go there. The conference office had booked me for Hamburg but I didn't go to Hamburg either. I stayed in Berlin and walked around the Alexanderplatz. And took a tour through the Black Forest.

Sometimes I think I still want to go to Mannheim. Would I

have to disguise my motives in order to get my brother's old Army records? Perhaps (I) could unearth the story behind my brother's trial. I want to prove he was treated unfairly.

When he got married, his wife, Felicia, said to me, "I don't know where your brother is half the time."

"What do you mean?" (I always knew where my husband was.)

"I don't know where he is and don't know who his friends are," she said as we sat reading *House and Garden* and drinking Lipton's iced tea.

"Where did he go and who were his friends?" I asked my mother thirty years later.

"No one knew what he was doing half the time. He'd come in at three in the morning. I don't know where he'd been. He changed so after he came back from the Army," she replied.

After he got out of the Army he sought work in the psychiatric ward of Mt. Sinai Hospital. He was seldom without his white orderly jacket.

"Was your brother's nickname Charlie?" asked the undertaker at my father's funeral.

"I never knew my brother had a nickname," I said. "We called him —. And what made you think of my brother?" (He had been dead three years, and it was a different undertaker who had buried him.) This undertaker was a son of one of my father's oldest friends. My parents married in their house in Dayton, Ohio in 1930.

"We were talking last night about your family and someone said, didn't Mr. — have a son called 'Charlie'? He knew it was a nickname."

I said I'd never heard that but I'd ask my mother.

When I got home from the funeral parlor I asked her. She stared at me.

"I never heard that," she said. "I don't know anything about a 'Charlie?'"

Today I still wonder if he had a life as a "Charlie" and if she knew.

This reminded me of years ago and Rosemary and our Italian neighborhood. One summer evening I was playing jacks on the steps when I saw my friends run past my house toward the vacant lot on Signet.

“Aren’t you coming?” someone said. “— and Rosemary are getting married.”

I knew nothing of this and arrived at the edge of the field of weeds to see Rosemary and my brother standing before a boy I’d never seen. Rosemary was in her communion dress and my brother in his playsuit.

Just as I arrived they ran deeper into the field and disappeared.

“They went on their honeymoon,” someone screamed.

When my brother came home toward dark he stopped and stood in front of me at the porch steps.

“Don’t tell mother and daddy I’m married,” he said.

He was six and I was nine.

Cars united them. It was a car in which my brother met his disfiguration. (He was driving to see Felicia.) And it was in a car that my father’s second wife was instantly killed in an accident that killed his spirit. The biggest argument my father and brother had was over a car—the silver-colored Kaiser. My brother wanted to drive it to a party. My father said he couldn’t take the car.

They stood in the center of the living room yelling. I ran down the stairs from my room. My father was small. Was my brother about to knock him down? I started crying. I could see my father was afraid. I feared the worst. My mother was in Maryland on a trip. I was about to run onto the front porch and call a neighbor when suddenly they stopped yelling. My father threw the Kaiser keys on the floor at my brother’s feet.

Soon after, my brother joined the Army.

It was spring when my brother left for Germany. He and Felicia arrived on the train from Ohio on the day the movie *Guys and Dolls* opened in New York. I wanted to go to 50th Street and Broadway. Brando was playing Sky Masterson and the *New York Post* said he would be at the opening.

Often I dream of my father pulling the silver-colored Kaiser into the driveway, the same silver Kaiser in which my brother came back from a drive late one night with blood on the fender. He said he'd hit a dog. It remained a mystery. There were so many mysteries surrounding my brother. During those years, he and my mother would go into the bathroom and close the door.

"Mother, I want to talk to you," he'd mumble and into the bathroom they'd go and run the water loudly. I don't know what they talked about.

My mother would emerge, minutes later, and run into her bedroom. Often I could hear her sobbing.

"What's wrong?" I'd say, trying to open her closed door.

Once, months later, she said, "Your brother may have to go to court."

"Court?"

"I don't want to talk about it." And she walked away.

"Mind your own business," my brother would say whenever I'd ask what was wrong. "Mind your own business."

He died without telling me anything.