...a single charm is doubtful: a diptych

A charm a single charm is doubtful. If the red is rose and there is a gate surrounding it, if inside is let in and there places change then certainly something is upright. It is earnest.
- Gertrude Stein, "Nothing Elegant"

When I think of Dorothy, I worry I've already forgotten her. Sight the least sense of my memory, she felt like an old woman, thin-skinned, and smelled of soda crackers. All I really have are aging words.

In her diaries, or what diaries were collected and kept by her youngest sister, Rita, my grandmother and executor of her estate, Dorothy (Yohn) Smith logged daily, from the time she was thirty-five until at ninety-three dementia began finally to disrupt her memory or the habit, matters of secretarial importance—the places of her going, future appointments, books read, foods consumed, recipes tried and their relative quality as regarded by her tongue (as far as anyone knew she never cooked or baked anything, having only ever served house guests cold cut sandwiches and raw baby carrots and always having brought the same Jell-O and pretzel dish to family gatherings and church potlucks alike, having once done so, goes my mother's version, for a Christmas party in the Seventies and, being thought so dear by all, the guests ate great plates of the stuff quickly thinking she'd feel loved and the mess would be gone forever), financial accounts labeled with cryptic abbreviations and written out (up to twenty-eight a day) as math problems, each done twice, in neatly parallel rows on legal pads and sheets of graphing paper stapled to their pages.

My first memory, the one that by date and detail I can to some degree verify, is of the farm auction, Dale then ten years gone and Dorothy worn down from dusting chaff and corn pollen from the entryway, washing mold from the limestone foundation, climbing three flights to the attic to assure herself no one had been there since she had last, checking same, staring out from a south-facing window at some fellow from Kussmaul, driving his pickup through her drainage, picking soybeans and tasting them, who she did not recognize because, though her husband had not been an especially clever farmer, Dale Smith had relished having done work he could call his own, so the Smith's eighty acres, since Dale had purchased them from his father in 1942 had been tended by his hands only, his and those of his family—his father, his brother, Dorothy's two brothers-in-law, and their seven sons, Dorothy and her sisters and their five daughters, whose work was not thought secondary, my grandfather would say, but so steady and constant that to speak of women's work, particularly the work of Yohn women, would be like speaking of a rain you were standing in. The Smiths had no children of their own.

Sales records show the auction lasted the whole of Labor Day weekend—house on Monday, equipment on Saturday, households and knickknacks after ten o'clock mass. Because Dale's grandparents had lived on the place before him and before and with them his great grandparents, all his father's side, because they, like Dale, had not been unfriendly, but like many of their generations had kept family in the home and been neighborly in the barns and yard, folks were curious. They came from both counties the property sat on to see what shape such a big house took on its insides, to pocket untagged forks and screwdrivers in their dresses and overalls,

to speak ill or well of the sturdiness of furniture, whether or not it was for sale, to eat ice cream and pulled pork and stomp heels at a three-piece band Grandma says the auction house must have hired or had invited itself. To this day when I hear bluegrass, burnt sweet corn fills my nostrils.

People, including her people, assumed Dorothy bought her little ranch house in Lena with money from the sale of the farm. Knowing the Hass fellow who bought it to be, like her, a Lena State Bank man and not like himself, a First State Bank of Stockton one, Grandpa used to say they probably switched the ledger tickets from one desk to the next and charged everyone twice the interest for the trouble of the trade, an accusation he thought rye, I suspect, and one which dogged Grandma in years to come, the youngest of her sister Anna Marie's nine having become the president of the branch in the village of Warren, and so, though fifteen miles off, presumed involved in what most folks presumed nefarious. It may have been. But there's no evidence Dorothy ever did anything unseemly. No one she knew had money, and she did—which left us all a number of puzzles. And at the same time, in her ninety-four years, there wasn't a local murder gone unexplained, a cash register knocked over whose contents hadn't been accounted for, and if she had moonshined, nobody'd seen it, and if they had seen it, it would have been known: temperance never having gotten popular in the area, beer's been altogether too regular to fashion a man a time.

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Telling a story well and rarely, Grandpa used to say, is about all you can do to keep it from becoming a phrase, and a phrase is a tick off cliché, and, well, clichés never really were legends. Best to stick to accounts.

The dead are, after all, first the dead. So much so that reaching back to touch a chest, a neck, I feel a give before the body, and know that body so presently for this that if ever there were life in it, I wouldn't know it again by nature—the way it seems funny now to think of myself as a child playing with my grandfather's pocket change, pretending to the point of belief Lincoln and Washington might talk.

Dorothy died the winter after I turned sixteen, Devin fifteen. We were in the same class in school and divided by nearly a year. Both born in August, the fifth of '89 and the third of '90, I was registered to the class of 2008 by a mother who'd studied Winnicott and Jung in graduate school and he signed up for the same by a mother who was working the farm and machine tooling at the Dura plant and whose own parents, my mother's age, couldn't babysit much because they were both, at fifty-eight, still two-job working.

We were the only two boys in what was called "upper-level math," meaning our state test scores were above average and we were put in the classes of eight or nine girls who were also above average from the time we were ten-nine until the year Dorothy died.

That year our class of forty-five was invited to take course work at the Area Vocational Center, where students so inclined could train in the basics of auto mechanics, welding, pipe fitting, general skill sets toward becoming an LPN. Devin—even his family didn't call him Devin, only Fuzz and derivations—said he had low expectations of himself, meaning, I think, he knew his family couldn't put away for him or his two sisters to go to college but were also of a

subset of rural pragmatists preferencing never to take loans—especially from the government—if loans could be avoided.

Fuzzy studied body work with some seriousness: used to drive around looking for dents on wheel wells and truck doors, offered to fix at cost what he thought he could get out. He sometimes took a loss on a paint job just to try something interesting he found on a farmer's field buggy—Those old Chevrolets, he said, with steel frames, bent in at strange angles. Shit you couldn't replicate.

I never took to automobiles, and while I liked playing football while I played it, never felt any propensity past practical exercise. I went to the weight room after school. I liked to stand above Fuzzy on the bench and watch veins creep over his knuckles while he finished. I liked to hear him tell me I was getting better, because, while he was younger than I was, he was more physical—a lean, buck-muscled boy with a Roman nose too high and large for his face and straight black hair that stood up and gave him his name, ears that leaned away from his head as if to act out a talent for listening.

After the weight room, we would cruise around country blocks in the Mercedes-Benz I'd taken as a hand-me-down from my older sister. The car was tank-like and had a loose stick shift. Fuzz would beg me to drive it, and every afternoon we played a game of thoughtful resistance before I handed him the keys. He would drive—sixty, seventy—too fast for gravel roads, and I would spout plot summaries of the novels I was reading, while Fuzz just sat there quietly, one hand over the wheel.

Aimless driving is a habit amongst teenagers in corn country, or it was from the time after the Second World War 'til the days even farm boys had their own cell phones. Fuzzy must have been one of the last of those driving boys. I, anyhow, was not. My mother bought me a cell early, liking the idea of being able to check in and hear that I was safe. We lived—we live—in a township north of the village of Stockton, seven miles south of Warren, on a farm my grandparents wouldn't, like Dorothy, sell but rented instead with the intent of passing that land to their children and from their children on to their grandchildren and on, into perpetuity, though my mother was the only one to have ever farmed the land herself, and since climbing the ladder from French teacher to school administrator hasn't had the time and so has joined the rest of the family, schooled in education, hydraulics, psychology, fine dining, human resources, art, interior design—I turned the damn thing off and told anyone who called we'd driven too far into the fields to get reception.

Fuzzy and I—I think I can speak for the both of us, though I shouldn't take for granted his silence—saw a little younger than we should have that the Land of Opportunity would distribute its resources to the two of us in different bundles. But, once the car was started, once we'd gotten south of the farmers who knew us well enough to wave us into a chat, if it was April or June and after a rain and he was driving and I'd shut up a while and he'd turned the radio on, I could watch the hills under a neon sky and pretend that wasn't true.

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We saw each other—in the halls, in pre-trigonometry. I'd embarrass myself to make him stay, would buy him dip, would beg favors, would challenge the Army recruiter who stood in the halls every few days at lunch time to a push up contest so that, when I lost, Fuzzy would come challenge and soundly beat him. At my peak, I could push up forty times, Fuzzy upwards of

seventy. The recruiter, I think his name was Sgt. Daniels, claimed, fresh, he'd do a hundred straight. I never saw it, but worried truth in that.

Several months after Dorothy died Grandma finally decided it was time to empty the ranch house and sell it. Had it been anyone else—Grandpa even—I think she'd have gotten right to the task at hand, as was with all things her habit. But Dorothy had been special to her, elder sister and friend. When they were younger, they and their husbands had shared farm chores, played euchre at night, put money in the same shoe box to send my aunt and mother and uncle all to college. Grandma took a long time to come around to the idea Dorothy could be gone. And when she finally decided to attend to the business of death and sorting, she simply walked up to me and told me to get a friend to help. If it'd get it done quick, she'd awful well pay him. So I called up Fuzz, and the two of us drove Grandma over to Lena, and while she went through the dishes and drawers, she asked us to bring everything up from the basement.

Fuzz was in a poor mood that day. Anika, the only girlfriend he ever kept for more than three or four weeks, had dumped him the night before, and that must have been one of the first times because he hadn't yet gotten stoic about it. Kept saying, Give me your phone, and taking it and calling her to no answer and cussing while he handed it back and disappearing with an ottoman or nightstand up the stairs. A couple years later, after another split, he would join the Army and settle the argument by marrying her, so when he tripped an IED in Zhari Province meant for a truck, Anika became the beneficiary of his military life insurance and a pair of dogtags she later gave me. I've heard they buried him in a pair. Mine are pristine copy.

We didn't know any of that at the time. We were two boys differently unhinged. I'd say, Let's get this couch up. It's heavy. I'm gettin' tired.

He'd lift his end and ask, What’s she payin' us?

How the hell should I know, I'd say. And we went on like that, ramming chair legs into walls and chipping varnish off the railings, until around four o'clock Anika finally returned twenty or thirty calls to tell Fuzz he could go fuck himself.

Bitch, he said, not to her but me. I gotta go, man.

Sucks, I said. We went up the stairs to tell Grandma it was time to leave, and she went downstairs and worried the damage we'd done and still asked if we couldn't stay.

We did, because there was nothing else to do once she'd asked, and because Fuzz didn't take enough pleasure in an argument to drive back to Stockton and have it out with Anika. We carried up the last few lamps and curtain rods. I vacuumed the floors, smelling of moth balls, all their shag in furniture patchworks of faded green, while Fuzz opened the one basement closet, large and packed inside with piles of file boxes so high he had to weave hand through box corners and the top of the jamb to even begin. He took ten or fifteen minutes getting out the first two or three boxes, and when he'd made the project easy access, if not all that reasonable, he gave up and said, Fuck it.

Fuck it, I said. I switched off the vacuum. Before it stopped whirring, Fuzzy had hauled back and kicked one of the boxes. Made a dent the rough shape of his shoefront. He sat down next to it then, complaining about a toe.

I said, Man, don't do that shit.

He said, Shit, there ain't nothin' in here but your dead aunt's trash. He took a boxtop off and chucked it at me. It spun disc-like and turned near vertical before landing at my feet.

I said, You are a weak Nancy pissass. I thought he'd hit me. I wanted to be hit. But he just sat there, one hand pressed to the carpet so hard his wrist bubbled out from the skin, throwing Dorothy's legal pads in my direction with the other, and the pads, pages splaying, each fell short.

Fuck you, I said. Fuck you.

You are a bitch, he said. He'd emptied the box of legal pads but didn't but want to touch me. He crawled over to another box, while I stood dumbly holding the neck of the vacuum, waiting for him to come. Stood, while he took from that box bankroll after bankroll of quarters, while he threw them at me and missed every time, and the rolls sunk holes in the drywall and cracked open, drowning coins into the carpet.

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