

The Gift of Illness

It's late afternoon; the sun is angling down
toward the west, bathing everything in a rich gold
that gilds house walls and dusty streets.
Even shadows take on warm taupe and tawny hues.
I'm ambling down a quiet lane heading for home – home!
My breath catches in my throat for a moment and
I stop just to savor the taste of that word on my tongue.
I am home...

I lean against a garden wall like an old friend
and gaze lovingly down the lane to where it
bends round a corner. I walked this self-same path
as a child, scuffing along, watching small puffs of dust rise
as I headed home to Mama and supper.
I would waltz in the door and Mama would hug me,
then scold me for the condition of my shoes before
sending me to wash up. It was a pattern that never failed:
dust in summer, snow in winter- Mama's reaction was always
the same, predictable as the sun rising over St. Martin's or
the leaves on the apple trees turning gold in September.
With Mama around, you always wore shoes;
you could be lounging about naked as a Botticelli cherub,
and Mama wouldn't object – as long as you were shod.
I even remember her going to bed once or twice
with her own shoes on--! I have sometimes wondered
if the naked human foot were somehow an affront
to her sense of order and rightness, something uncontrolled
and wanton. There must be a story there somewhere...

I smile in fond remembrance; I thought I knew her so well.
After all, she was Mama: baker of bread, washer of laundry,
and mistress of a thousand other details that kept us
safe, well fed and reasonably happy... always busy,
always doing, seldom sitting still, quick and flitting
as the small birds in the garden she so loved -
until that last illness that finally slowed her down,
then stopped her altogether...
It started out as just a cough, nothing serious,
but then she began puffing climbing the stairs

and had little energy for the myriad small things
that had filled her days and framed her life...
My last visit home had been to see her again
before we carried her to St. Martin's...

It had been a golden autumn day, warm and lush;
Onkel Fritz and Karl had brought her down into
the garden that morning, placing her gently
in a corner that would catch the sunlight all day.
I had pulled up an old wicker chair that Papa
had made and settled in, adjusting the blanket over her
while keeping an eye on Ethan, then a toddler,
as he lumbered about the garden like a minute bulldozer.
He would bring his small treasures and discoveries to us,
cooing in delight or babbling excitedly, saying things
only Mama seemed to fully understand...

That day passed slowly, like honey dripping from a comb.
Mama and I talked of everything, and nothing.
And sometimes we just sat in silence,
enjoying the moments we could share
because we still could share them...
Tante Luisa brought out lunch, then supper.
Ever practical Anna brought out the old tape recorder
to catch Mama's stories in her own voice.
When Ethan fell asleep on Mama's lap,
Anna carried him in for his nap.

People drifted in and out all day, stopping by to
share their time, their love and their memories.
In those hours I learned more about Mama than I had
in all the years previously. I came to know her not just
as my mother, but as Dorothea Mayerhoff:
how she got the scar on her right knee,
where she used to hide so Oma couldn't find her for chores,
how she and Papa would sneak off to St. Martin's
and make love in the sacristy because their parents
wanted to put off the wedding until after the harvest,
but no one objected to them going to church together.
Father Peter found them once, but as a young priest
he'd only made them bring flowers to the church in penance...
On and on her memories flowed: funny, tender,
sometimes somber, sometimes painful,

but always moving, always poignant – just like Mama.
It was her parting gift to us, this divulging of herself,
giving as she had always given...

The sun had set and the first stars were just peeping out
when we carried her back in. She was tiny and bird-light in our hands,
golden from the sun and rosy with reminiscence, eyes sparkling
and head high. We tucked her in and I sat by her bed for a bit
before she drifted off, holding those fragile fingers in mine.
By morning she was gone, a gentle smile on her lips,
her hands folded as if in prayer. Beside her
on the coverlet lay her well-thumbed Bible.
I didn't need to open it to know where she'd been reading...

Illness comes like a thief, breaking into our lives,
tossing aside our small plans and ransacking
the order we attempt to create around ourselves.
But illness can also come as an unrecognized guest,
forcing us to slow down, to step aside from the
frenetic pace of life and look at what we have;
to savor today because we know it won't last.
And the guest does not come empty-handed.

The gift of illness is the gift of time:
time to sit, to laugh, to remember;
time to hold hands, then let fingers slip apart
and come to rest in laps, on knees like open flowers;
time to hold, to cherish, to say good-bye...
The gift of illness is the recognition of mortality
and the preciousness of life, of love, of now.

Thank-you, Mama.