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PASSAGES NORTH

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Martha Grace Duncan

RETURN TO EDEN

Nonfiction by Martha Grace Duncan

*You see, there are all those early memories;
one cannot get another set; one has but those.*

Willa Cather, *Shadows on the Rock*

All my early memories are of my childhood home in St. Paul, Minnesota, the place where we lived for three years and then left, oh so suddenly, when my father decided that some foam rubber he was working on was making him sick. He needed to be in a place where he could work out of doors, he said, where he could breathe clean air and not be poisoned. So he moved us to California, to the place that beat poet Lew Welch describes as “the final cliffs of all man’s wanderings”—to Santa Barbara, which is a paradise by anyone’s standards, but not to me, not then. I didn’t understand it this way at age eleven, but later I would come to realize that, in this life of limited symbols, a life in which we may all have one story to tell, Minnesota was to be my paradise, and California my East of Eden.

When I remember that paradise, in Minnesota in the 1950s, I think first of our house, which looked exactly like the houses you see in storybooks. Yellow, with bluish trim, it stood three stories high, and its narrow side faced the street. Being so tall and narrow, it whispered concealment and mystery. At the same time, it beckoned, with a zinnia-filled window box and blue hydrangea bushes ranged along the front wall. Its door was arched, with a round window in it, like a hobbit’s hole, and surrounded by a latticework forming a small portico.

The inside of the house harbored secret apertures that my sisters and I felt were known only to us, the initiates. A laundry chute traversed the distance between the second floor and the basement. Its metal sides echoed when we shouted “Witch!” to

tease our mother as she washed the clothes. In my bedroom was another mysterious opening—this one in the floor, designed as a primitive fire escape; through it I could save my life in a conflagration by dropping into the closet of the room below. My father had camouflaged the unsightly hole with a table, but I considered it one of the special features of my room and delighted in showing it off to visitors.

It was, of course, my room that I loved best. My father had made it for me in the attic, cleverly fashioning wood-paneled walls with brass latches that could be opened to retrieve stored objects behind them, and building in the essential furniture, including a desk made from a door. My mother likewise had put her stamp on the room, sewing a bedspread in an aqua cotton print, with a ruffled pillow sham to match. She painted my small, black hope chest and gave me a booklet with a pink cover called “How to Have a Prettier Room.” This booklet provided a system for identifying your personality type—“Tomboy,” “Classic,” or “Romantic.” I was planning to be a “Romantic” and decorate my room accordingly.

My father transformed our backyard into a wooden playground. Between the house and the dusty alley, he built a monkey bars, adapting it from an old oak ladder, which he swathed in shiny yellow and blue tape to prevent splinters. For acrobatic stunts, he erected two free-standing bars at different heights; they straddled the space between the crab apple tree and the yellow locust. My friend Mary Lou and I would crouch on the bars, callused hands tightly gripping, hesitant. Then my father would come out and exhort us: “Fall forward!” he would say. “Fall forward and you won’t get hurt!” Our courage barely edging out our fear, we would lean forward until our bodies swung around and hung upside down under the bars; then we would skin the cat and land safely on the ground.

My father hung two swings in our yard—one from the branches of the yellow locust tree, for standing and pumping; and the other from the rotating metal clothes line, for sitting and singing. I sat there swinging by the hour, dragging my feet in the dust as I sang: “Swing high, swing low, upon a trapeze” and “There’s a wideness in God’s mercy like the wideness of the sea.”

Twenty-five children lived on our block, so I rarely felt the want of a playmate. Often, on hot summer days, we would play “War” and “Old Maid” on the Sinicos’ front porch, or drape blankets over a card table to make a shady fort. Other times, we would form two lines in the street, taking baby steps and giant steps in “Mother May I?” or crashing into the arms of the opposing team in “Red Rover, Red Rover.” My favorite game was “Free the Bunch,” a variation on “Hide and Seek” in which the last person who makes it safely back to the base can liberate everyone who has been caught. I loved every aspect of that game: the peacefulness of hiding, the thrill of running as fast as I could to the base, and the cheers of the captives when I succeeded in freeing them all. At the end of the day, my mother might let us take our plates of food to the rock near Hamline Avenue. Trapezoidal, with a flat top, the rock was big enough for three small girls to sit side by side and eat their suppers. We named it “SAM” for Susan, Ann, and Martha.

In wintertime, we would take our red and blue sleds and go sledding down Tarzan Hill, or go ice skating at Edgecomb Rink. I still remember the feel of the sled’s smooth wooden rudder in my hands as I steered it faster and faster down the slope, and the novel sensation of skating backwards, zigzagging on the ice. I’m really getting good at this! I remember thinking, the winter before we moved away.

Even before the end of our time in Minnesota, there were signs of what was coming.

A few months before we left, my father, an inventor at Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Company, quit going to work and stayed in his bedroom with the windows open in the dead of winter. My mother carried his meals to him there and washed the slipcovers over and over to get rid of the poison he thought was in them. In the spring, my father went away for a while, driving to California, coming back, and leaving again. When he returned the second time, it was announced that we would be moving at the end of summer.

Moving was already a way of life with us; we had lived in seven different homes by the time I was eight, and had made several dramatic relocations—from Little Rock, Arkansas, to New York City; from Long Island to a Pennsylvania dairy farm,

and from New Jersey to St. Paul, Minnesota. My parents were ambitious, and like many Americans, they equated moving up with moving on. As my mother says in one of her early letters to her parents: “I’m sure we are really going places and everything will be perfect.” But this last uprooting was to be different for me and, I now believe, different for my father too.

All our previous moves had been designed, ostensibly, to foster his career. The move to Minnesota reflected a promotion to “Idea Man,” a reward from 3M for my father’s one great success as an inventor. He had invented the Magic Bow Machine, which makes the pompons with all the loops that you see on Christmas and birthday presents. Our move to California, by contrast with the earlier moves, was inspired by a fear of danger in the place we were in, not a dream of success in the place we were going to. In fact, my father had no job in California at the time we moved there. When he did find work, it was as a salesman for a pharmaceutical company. He would have many jobs in sales during his lifetime. Unlike the job at 3M, however, none was on the path he had set for himself when, in high school, he embarked on a quest for fame and fortune.

I did not fare well in beautiful California. I appreciated the flowering plants—the hibiscus, fuchsia, and bougainvillea—and the hummingbirds, unknown in Minnesota. Nonetheless, I developed symptoms. I lost my independence, became afraid to go to school, the movies, church, anywhere. Every morning on the way to the bus stop, I vomited on purpose, to ward off further ills.

As the years passed, my symptoms lessened, or rather they took a more acceptable form: that of compulsive study and avoidance of human relationships. I came to love social studies, especially world geography, with its exotic-sounding places such as *tundra* and *steppes*. I spent hour after hour learning the beautiful Spanish language, becoming a fourteen-year-old expert on the imperfect subjunctive, the form of the “might have been.” Years later, thumbing through my old Spanish workbook, with the picture of Don Quixote on its golden cover, I saw, at the top of one page, a heading as familiar as a favorite doll: “Use the Subjunctive with Verbs of Desiring, Wanting, Preferring. *Desear, Querer, Preferir.*”

In time, I graduated valedictorian of Santa Barbara Junior and Senior High Schools, went on through Occidental College, and embarked on a Master's degree in Latin American Studies at Columbia University. Throughout these years, I rarely looked back. The only sign of my undiminished love of Minnesota was my unfailingly joyous response to cold weather and snow. Then, when I was nearing the end of my first year in graduate school, my father—who by then had spent time in a mental hospital and been diagnosed as paranoid—shot himself in the temple one April morning.

I once heard a celebrity reply to the question, posed by a journalist: “How did your father's death affect you?” His answer could serve for me as well: “I came to.” As horrible as it was, the tragedy transformed me. I became less bookish and turned outward to people again. In a psychoanalytic textbook, years later, I found a name for what had happened: “traumatic cure.”

In my fortieth year of life, I awakened early one morning out of a dream. In this dream, I was back in Minnesota gliding on the ice. When I woke up, a great sadness came over me, thinking about Minnesota and all that I had left behind. I felt so strongly that the move was a break, a change that could never be undone. And I thought to myself: I have never even been back.

I had booked a room at the only place to stay in our old neighborhood, a rather shabby motel on a highway, with construction going on, and I wondered whether I would not have been better off staying in the St. Paul Hotel, downtown. Frances, a former neighbor who still lived on our block, had volunteered to pick me up and show me around. At my request, she drove me first to the rock named Sam. Wanting to be alone, I asked if I could get out and walk to the house from there. I went over and embraced the rock as an old friend.

I walked up the street to our house. Everything looked the same as in the pictures I had taken with my Brownie camera; there was the Junkels' H-shaped driveway, where we used to roller skate; the Sinicos' screened-in porch, where we had played cards; and Rabbi Plaut's elegant white house, where I had gone many times to borrow the Oz books. Frances thought it would

be all right to unlatch the gate and enter the backyard of our house. It too was just the same, if a bit smaller than I remembered. Suddenly I understood why I had put off my return for so long. It was unbearable to think of the life I might have lived and had not, no longer could. Frances took pictures of me standing by our house; I am unsmiling and somber.

That evening, in a Japanese restaurant, Frances and her husband Frank told me their recollections of my father: “We loved your dad,” said Frances. “We thought he was brilliant.” Frank said: “He was a very bright, imaginative, witty fellow. I always had a feeling he could do anything he wanted to do; with all that talent, it’s just too damned bad.” They wanted to know more about the end of his life. I started to describe how my father had lived alone in a shack with a shotgun in a corner and rats running freely through the rooms, but I just became upset and left most of my dinner uneaten.

As we left the restaurant, daylight still lingered in the sky, and we drove to my old house, where Frances had arranged for me to meet the current owners. When we arrived, I was taken on a tour by the owners’ children: nine-year-old Michael and five-year-old Shelby; as well as Muffin, their fat, calico cat. Michael and I hit it off instantly, chatting like old friends about the quirks of the house and my attic bedroom, which was now his. Upon reaching the second floor, I excitedly predicted the location of the laundry chute; it had been painted over, but was still visible. As we stood looking at it, I said: “The place I really want to see is up there,” and started up the steep attic steps with Michael and Shelby following.

The room had not changed; there were the same sharply inclined walls with knotty pine paneling, the same ceiling that was only five feet wide at its level part, the same bannister and built-in book case, now rather dilapidated. The hole in my bedroom floor was still there, and Michael lifted the table to show me just as I had done with my visitors some thirty years before. We sat on Michael’s bed and I looked around at the pictures of teenage athletes that now adorned the walls. Suddenly, my eyes spotted something familiar. Rising, I walked to the closet, where I seemed to recognize the pounded copper pull on the door. On closer inspection, I was sure: it was the

same pull that had been there when I was a child; certainly it was ancient, for one side of the crescent-shaped pull had come off the door and was hanging down. I curled my fingers around the cool metal and said: “My father put this here. The last time I touched this pull, I was eleven years old.”

After a while, we trooped down to the basement; it had been refinished since the days when my mother, as the witch doing laundry, listened to our echoing cries. Shelby picked up a long rope with red handles. “Do you want to play jump rope?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said gaily, moving between the two children. “Not last night/ But the night before/ Twenty-four robbers came/ Knocking at my door” I jumped toward the twirling rope.

