

## Aunt

by Rebecca McClanahan

Yesterday we spent the afternoon at the lawyer's office, drawing up our wills. My husband's took only a few minutes. "I'm taking all my parts with me," Donald said when he got to the organ donor section. "Everything else goes to you, if I die first." If you survive him, is the way the lawyer put it. I laughed, thinking of Great-aunt Bessie. Every morning she'd study the obituaries. "Listen to this," she'd say, smoothing the crease in the newspaper. "Mr. Etheridge is survived by his wife Matilda. Doesn't that just slay you? Survived by. Any wife who can survive Bo Etheridge, she deserves to get everything."

After an hour Donald shook his head, lifted his hands in surrender. I had been pausing at each line, considering the left eyeball, the right. I want every organ, every possession accounted for. For one niece, the piano and gold pocket watch. For another, Aunt Bessie's century-old baby shoes, black leather with button clasps. Who will want my diaries, notebooks, the family reunion of words collected in my books? My property will be put into a trust to be divided equally for the education of the nephews and nieces. There are fifteen of them, a tribe of borrowed children, mine for the asking. So I ask. One by one I try them on, wear them a day, a week. The best of both worlds, everyone says. Enjoy them, but when you've had enough, send them home where they belong. I think of the fledgling: It is wrong to touch a baby bird, to leave your scent, for when the mother returns to the nest, she will know you have been there.

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Maybe some of us were meant from the beginning to be aunts. Maybe we are too weak to bear the full weight of a child. How many times have I had this nightmare--a baby being sucked from my hands out an open window, and me left holding the sack of its nightgown. Maybe the powers-that-be give children to those who can survive the love, who know when to let go, who won't die if they suddenly find themselves holding an empty nightgown. My mother must have known from the start that I would never have children. I needed a guide for that other road, the road my mother had not taken.

The night Aunt Bessie arrived, I was sitting cross-legged on my bed, reviewing the events leading up to World War II for the test the next day. When I heard gravel in the driveway, I

walked to the window and lifted a slat on the venetian blind. Dad was opening the door to the passenger side, and I watched as she emerged from semidarkness into the glare of the porch light. In a few minutes she stood in the doorway of my room holding a brown suitcase, her navy blue wool coat stuffed so tight that the buttonholes squinted. And as I watched, an amazing thing happened. She started out plump, then sweater by sweater, blouse by blouse, skirt by skirt, she shrunk until she stood before me a hunched, scrawny sparrow of a woman in a brown taffeta dress with glittery buttons.

I ran into the kitchen where my mother was stirring a pot of stew. "Why me?" I screamed. Mother just shrugged and smiled, as if that were answer enough.

"Why me? Why not Claudia or Jennifer?"

"They're night owls, honey. Aunt Bessie's an early riser like you."

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By the third day the battle lines were drawn. I divided the dresser. Lining the mirror on my side was a row of eight dolls that I dutifully dressed each morning, a three-tiered jewelry box that played "Around the World in Eighty Days," a cache of plastic pop beads and initial bracelets, a pair of clip-on earrings I was not yet allowed to wear, and a grainy five-by-seven of Ricky Nelson that I had scissored from Teen Magazine. On her side, arranged on a doily, was everything she had unzipped from the satin pouch of her suitcase: a gold pocket watch, tweezers, a box of Polident, a framed picture of Lord Byron, a huge black purse with a clamp like an alligator's jaw, and a photograph of a sad young woman. My mother said it was Aunt Bessie's wedding picture, but I didn't believe her. I had seen plenty of wedding pictures--the bride radiant in a flouncy veil and pearls, her white-toothed groom bending over her as they cut the cake together, hand over hand, grinning into the camera.

No, I decided, the woman in this picture could not possibly be a bride. She was standing alone in a shapeless gown. Her head was bare, her hair yanked into a knot. Not the silky chignon the women on Wagon Train wore, just a tight thin knot without ribbon or other adornment. She was turned sideways, her head bent low. And instead of holding a bridal bouquet with streamers, she held a single rose, which drooped as if it were falling from her hand. My mother assured me there had been a husband and that he loved Aunt Bessie so much he built her a home in Stockwell, Indiana, with an oval window embedded in the front door, a home filled with beautiful things like linen napkins pressed just so in the drawer of a heavy chest that stood in the

entry hall. I didn't believe that either. "If Aunt Bessie was really married," I said, "where are the grandchildren?"

"She had one baby," my mother answered. "But it died before it was born. It was a long, long time ago." I could not imagine history that ancient.

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By the third week I was wishing Aunt Bessie dead, or at least transported to my sisters' room. I hated her oldness--the swish of taffeta down the hall, the clonk of heavy heels, and the mechanical clack of her loose dentures. Many dentists had tried to adjust the dentures, but Aunt Bessie had a crooked jaw, and when my father finally located a specialist and paid hundreds of dollars for two sets that actually fit, she lost them both--one in a field in Pennsylvania where we'd stopped to pick blackberries and one at sixty-miles-per-hour, in the cubicle bathroom of a Greyhound bus. Finally in desperation my father settled for an economy set. Every night I'd pull the covers over my head and try to sleep as she propped up a pillow, switched on the night-light attached to the headboard, and clacked her way through National Geographic, Browning's "Last Duchess," seed catalogs, fairy tales, detective magazines, Reader's Digest, whatever she could find. She always ended with Byron. She didn't read silently with her eyes like normal people, but she didn't exactly read aloud either. She simply moved her crooked jaw a little and whispered, just enough movement to set her dentures clacking. That was the last sound I heard at night.

And in the morning I'd wake to the fizz of Polident in a glass by the bed. I'd look up through bleary eyes for my first sight of the day--Aunt Bessie leaning at the waist and pouring her powdered breasts into a stiff brassiere. She'd stand by the mirror and pluck a stray whisker from her chin. This disturbed me: a woman with whiskers. And not only whiskers. All over her body, hair sprouted in unlikely places--from her nostrils, her ears, migrating from the places where I judged it should be, the places where it was just beginning on me. She never shaved her legs, yet they were smooth as the legs of a rubber doll. The pits of her underarms were hairless. Even her eyebrows were missing. She'd sketch them in each morning with a small black pencil that she kept rolled in a hankie. Old maid, I'd hiss beneath the covers. Then when she was gone, swishing down the hall, I'd crawl from bed and dress for school, where girls with real eyebrows were gathering in the halls.

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I had long since given up my dolls, but every Sunday I volunteered to dress Aunt Bessie for church. She was the only grown-up small enough and old enough to be under my control. Looking back, I wonder why she let me use her. Maybe she liked the attention. Maybe the feel of young hands was so comforting that she bore the humiliation.

I started with her hair. It wasn't the silver floss of my grandmother nor the spongy blue-gray of widows whose hair is constructed each Saturday morning. Bessie's hair was the muddied gray of leftover snow. She'd lean over the kitchen sink and I'd lather up the Prell. Wet, her hair was fine as a baby's. Her scalp beneath my fingers was pink and exposed, and I could hardly stand to look at it. I'd squeeze the wet hair into a towel, then coerce a rattail comb through, making parts for the yellow rollers--a row down the center from her forehead to the nape of her neck. Then pin curls on each side, above her ears.

It was the year of bonnet hair dryers; my mother had gotten one for Christmas. When I placed the plastic daisy bonnet onto Aunt Bessie's head, it slipped toward her eyes, over the scratchings of what was left of her eyebrows, their shapely arches having long since swirled down the drain with the Prell. I'd set the timer for ten minutes. With each minute, her face reddened and chapped and she talked louder and louder as if it were my ears that were covered. When the timer went off, I unrolled the curlers one by one and for a minute she was a Shirley Temple doll, the ringlets tight and shiny from the heat. Then the artistry, the teasing and back-combing at the crown to give her the fullness I'd seen in Ladies Home Journal. Then two curls on either side of her forehead. I'd swirl them inward until they resembled ram's horns. "Cover your eyes!" I'd shout, and Bessie's hands would jump to her face while I sprayed Aqua Net until she choked and begged "No more!" I'd pat her hair, shoot one final spray, and she would smile. A little blush on her cheeks, a little pink lipstick. She'd replace the eyebrows herself while I held the mirror.

Bessie's hands were strong and fearsome, her yellowed nails like talons curving in. The manicure was the final challenge: the taming of a wild thing. First I clipped the thick nails, then filed them into ovals. I rubbed cream into her hands and fingers. Her skin was thin, stretched over knuckles knotty as roots, nothing left but bone and gristle. I'd choose Avon, some childish pink or coral, and begin painting the nails. Two coats. Blow on them to dry. Then the dress. The black crepe or the navy blue taffeta? Maybe the white blouse with a cameo pin. I chose for this Sunday a flowery chintz my mother had made, pale green with yellow zinnias and a ruffled lace

collar. "Fine," Bessie said, and I slipped the dress over her head, over the safety-pinned strap of her brassiere and past her crooked hip. I zipped up the back and she was done.

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I grew three inches that year, sailing past Aunt Bessie's lopsided shoulders. The waistbands of my dresses rose; saddle shoes that were fine one morning pinched my toes the next. I was Alice in Wonderland, a fever dream pulsing out of control. It didn't surprise my mother. "Kids grow at night," she said matter-of-factly. "That's why they wake up hungry. It's hard work." One night I woke with excruciating pain in my calves, as if my legs were being stretched on a rack. I kicked off the covers and grabbed my knees, pulling my calves in close. The night-light switched on above my head and Aunt Bessie sat up, turning her face toward me. She was a drawing pad sketch, a gesture, a jot, the mere suggestion of a face. Eyebrows, teeth, the hair-sprayed pouf of morning hair were missing.

She sighed a self-satisfied sigh, as if she'd been anticipating this moment all her life. "Growing pains," was all she said, yet even that was garbled, delivered, as it was, toothless. She creaked from her side of the bed and walked in semidarkness to my side. She rubbed her arthritic hands together. Carefully she folded back the covers and touched my shoulder, coaxing me to turn. Then she rummaged in the headboard shelf and I smelled wintergreen as she squeezed Ben-Gay onto her hands.

Why I gave in so easily, I still don't know. In daylight she was the last person I wanted, the last person I would have imagined touching me. I could have called for my mother; she surely would have come. But I was helpless in the pain and confusion of this newest trick my body was playing, and Aunt Bessie's hands went right for the hurting place. They kneaded and rubbed and tamed the pulsing muscles of my calves. Her knotted hands, the protruding veins, the fingernails I'd painted pink just that morning. She squeezed more ointment from the tube, warmed it between her palms, and began again to rub my calves. After awhile, the pain stopped. My tears stopped. And, for the moment, I stopped growing.

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Nights when Donald is working, I drive across town to see my niece and nephew, delighting in the small hands running a brush through my hair or slapping red polish on my nails. "Walk on my back," I say to my niece, so I can feel her plump feet kneading the kinks. Yesterday she called me into the bathroom to read her a "potty story" while she sat on the toilet.

Her pudgy hands gripped the rim of the seat, and her training pants had slid to her feet. The skin of her thighs was translucent. Beneath it ran a fine river of blue vein. Sometimes I crawl into my nephew's bed and curl behind him, press into his warm back and touch his chest, feeling the heartbeat, holding my next breath until I feel his. Last month when he turned two, the outside world found him. It landed in dirt creases on the back of his neck. While I wasn't looking, he learned to sweat, and now instead of the powdery baby scent, his smell is the smell of a wet puppy.

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I recently discovered in my parents' antique trunk a leather diary marked 1897. It is Aunt Bessie's diary. In it are recorded the small moments of her seventeenth year. The handwriting is as eccentric and unpredictable as she was, at times painstaking in its perfection, at other times scrawling and nearly illegible. There are entries of anger and self-pity, loneliness and disappointment, then sudden wild-geese flights of joy. She wishes for the words to come more easily. She longs for the power to express the sting of a sleigh ride, the red burn of sunset, the taste of oyster soup and apples. Usually she borrows the words of others, Longfellow and Byron mostly, only occasionally breaking into songs of her own, recalling the gleam of sun on a field "ridged with frost" or a sky "cloudless except for a few fleecy ones in the east." As I read the diary, it begins to make sense--my hunger for words, my very choice of vocation. I want to thank her but she is not here.

The night nurse said she would call for us, the grand-nieces and -nephews, her voice down the hospital corridor unrolling our many names, beginning and ending with mine. She died alone, between shifts. A stranger dressed her and parted her hair and brushed rouge across her gray cheeks. She was buried on a muddy April afternoon, just a few miles from her birthplace. Now all these years later I hold her to me--a tribal instinct perhaps. Or perhaps I simply want to give back some of the words to the young woman in the diary. I sit in my study where shelves of books line the green walls. I finger the dictionaries and search for what lies beneath: aunt. From old French, ante, an offshoot, hall leading toward the main room. Latin root, amma: mother. Or amare: to love. As in amigo, as in amour. As in amateur, one who works for the bare love of it.

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