



Hawthorne Place

For more than forty years they remained together, touching, each incomplete without the other, together forming something beautiful that neither alone could achieve. Now, for almost two decades, they have sat apart in a basement “junk” room, collecting dirt and anything else that might be strewn upon them: A sleeping bag, several milk cartons, an old print that needs reframing, a pair of shriveled brown panty hose, a mildewed shower curtain, a small hand vacuum cleaner, and a black canvas overnight bag. So much stuff one can barely see them, much less sit upon them, the two sections of my mother’s couch.

Ironically, as I think about the symbolism of the couch being something I can’t live with or without, I fear that it actually may now be impossible to remove it from the junk room. Two doors lead into this space. The door from the body of the house is conspicuously narrow; there is no way the couch could get through this portal. The other door leads into what used to be a garage, but during a remodeling of that space, the door frame through which the couch originally entered the house was narrowed, and hence, it, too, may not be able to accommodate the couch’s removal.

From time to time, I think what my mother might say if she saw her once treasured piece of furniture sitting so ignobly. She would say, and she would mean it: “You have made such a loving, beautiful home for yourselves and your children. What do you need an old war-horse like that for anyway? Get rid of it! Get rid of everything you don’t need. It’s only going to be a burden for you and your children someday. Make yourself happy. You deserve it.” She would definitely have used the term “war-horse,” the same term she used for describing the giant piano concertos of Beethoven, Brahms, Saint-Saëns, Dvorak, Liszt, Tchaikovsky, and Rachmaninoff.

They were meant to stand end to end, ten full feet of sofa, the one section with the arm curved to the right, the other with the arm curved to the left, yielding an impressive sweep that stood at the end of our living room in the house on Hawthorne Place, a street on Chicago's north side, just off Lake Shore Drive. Dramatically, the sofa rested in the front bay window which practically embraced it and provided a bench on which stood a carved wooden Chinese figure of a bodhisattva, almost five feet high; the statue served to protect, I always imagined, anyone fortunate enough to sit upon the couch. What a vantage point a seat on the couch offered: From here one could peer across the expanse of the living room to the music room, a space separated from the living room by tall mahogany Doric columns.

At the ends of the couch were matching mahogany tables on which stood lamps with bases of slender wooden Japanese maidens. In front of the couch was a coffee table, its surface covered with a tan leather-like material. A wood-turned structure, the table's legs were actually its surface now curled under itself. Ash trays and a candy dish always sat on the coffee table. Given its design and surface covering, one knew this was not a place to park one's legs. Matching armchairs were positioned to face one another at the ends of the table.

The interior of the brown brick house was truly handsome. Even as a small child I recognized this. The high-decorated ceilings and tall doorways added to the elegance of the rooms. Much of the decor was the work of a man by the name of Harold Walsh, a fit man with horned-rimmed glasses, his dark hair always combed straight back to reveal a smooth, curved forehead. Mr. Walsh, who always appeared to be sporting a tan, was the first person I ever saw wear light tan and khaki colored suits with sky-blue shirts, colorful ties, and saddle-brown loafers with tassels. He was also the first man I ever heard use the word "swatch." In fact, he brought a lot of swatches for my parents to inspect. Every chair fabric was selected by Harold Walsh, as was the fabric that covered my mother's couch. Mr. Walsh also selected the colors for walls, ceilings, and alcoves. At the proposal stage, I couldn't for the life of me see how he narrowed down his choices. *That* blue was to be the ceiling of the living room? And *that* lavender was going in the dining room? What was wrong with white? And yet, when the rooms were completed, the colors proved surprisingly perfect. And Mr. Walsh would ask me, "Do you like it, Tommy?" I'm sure I nodded yes.

I rarely sat on my mother's couch, the magnificent view notwithstanding. When, as a child, I sat in the living room, an occurrence that normally meant important guests had arrived and my sister and I were expected to spend time with them, I sat in one of the striped matching chairs facing each other down the length of the coffee table. More specifically, I sat on the chair nearest the entrance hall as if unconsciously I wished to be near the exit. From this location, I could look out the window facing east toward the Johnson's house, a pink brick home with cream-colored window trim that essentially blocked our view of Lake Michigan. All of this, of course, was before houses like the Johnson's were razed and giant apartment buildings constructed. On second thought, it probably wasn't an unconscious decision to sit in the chair nearest the entrance hall.

Actually, there was one spot on the couch where, on occasion, I would sit if only to enjoy a particularly silly experience. Ideally, the places to sit were at the two ends where the curve of the arms commenced. Where the couches met, and they narrowed slightly at this juncture, was the least ideal position, as invariably one felt the joint beneath them. I never sat on the joint when I didn't experience the image of being on a toilet. I imagine everyone conjured this sensation, just as they probably imagined that the couches could suddenly separate and they would fall through.

Everything about the couch makes me think of my mother. Even the reference to sitting on "the crack," as I called it, reminds me of her telling us that when sitting on a toilet she always feared a rat was going to rise up out of the sewer and bite her tushy. She told this and other tales as well to children and adults alike, many of whom sat on that very couch. If there were a party of three hundred and fifty people, ranging in age from two to a hundred, the one person everyone would remember would be my mother, Gitta Gradova, a concert pianist and an artist capable of expressing the deepest emotions and moods, both in her language and through her fingers. My mother was the last of seven surviving children, and the most gifted, and complex. All the members of her family believed this to be true. James Francis Cooke's remark about magnetism being "one of the most enviable possessions of the successful pianist,"¹ surely applied to my mother.

Idealization or not, no one for me ever possessed her charm, her dazzling talent for storytelling, her compelling style and wit, and her unique intensity when it came to attitudes and judgments. A

Boston critic writing in 1924 had no idea how accurately he described my mother, both on and off the concert platform: "Miss Gradova gave ample evidence that she is a brilliant technician with a gift for eloquent expression, via the piano. . . . Sensuous and introspective, she scales the heights and plumbs the depths of emotional expression. There is no middle ground for her. The emphasis of understatement is a virtue alien to her spirit . . ." ² And from *The Musical Leader*: "In order to do justice to this brilliant young woman and to know how varied are her gifts it was necessary to hear the program in its entirety, for she is a creature of moods . . ." Not so incidentally, this author goes on to say: ". . . she now takes her place with the best of the young coterie of brilliant artists."

In another context, but applicable to my mother as well, Cecil Smith, wrote: "Extreme individualism is the source of nearly every artist's inner compulsion."³ Life and death, seemingly, hung in the balance of every decision, every utterance made by my mother. When my mother was downcast she was intensely downcast, when she was angry, she was intensely angry, and when she was disappointed, she appeared intensely disappointed. This also meant that when she was happy, especially when guests filled the living room and sat upon her couch, she was not only intensely happy, but magically so.

No one offered insights with humor and acuity like my mother. On judging others, she often intoned: "People who live in glass houses shouldn't take baths." Regarding a room that suffocated her: "It was so small you had to go outside to change your mind." On couples who seemed a trifle too intimate: "Beware of people who hold hands all the time. If they ever let go, they'll kill each other." On teaching a piano student the subtlety of successive trills she advised: "The first says life is terribly sad. The second one says, I told you so." Her Yiddish transposition of Kipling's famous line, "You're a better man than I am Gunga Din," became "You're a better man than I am, Jake Levin." Then there was her advice to people ambivalent about unexpected guests: Always wear a coat and a hat in the house. That way, if you like who just arrived, you can announce: "Oh, great, I was just coming in." And if you don't like them you can say: "Sorry, I was just on my way out." For reasons of safety, my mother often claimed she answered the door while simultaneously attempting to quiet our three ferocious German shepherd watchdogs; it was enough to scare off any stranger or delivery boy. So what

if in reality the family's pet was a docile dalmatian who slept all day beneath the pantry sink rarely rising at the sound of the doorbell? And, of course, her spontaneous reactions and quips: If, for example, a guest, while admiring one of her photographs set on the piano, accidentally knocked it over she would say, "Don't bother, I only live here." "Gitta, darling," she might have been asked, "what year were the Horowitzes married?" "Too soon!" And her musing about a famous conductor, "I thought Fritz was born in Hungary—then why does he speak with an accent if he was born in America? He even conducts with an accent!"

No one could tell stories like my mother. You could hear the same story a hundred times and still be enthralled. As her child I would groan, "Not again," but inside I knew these dramatic moments were delectable. It was said that in the 1940s and 1950s, the greatest storyteller in Chicago was a man by the name of Mort Cooper who owned a downtown Chicago men's clothing store. In fact, there was an occasion when I heard Mr. Cooper at his best. He was sensational, his stories hysterical, his gift for recounting fantastic. But Mort Cooper couldn't hold a candle to my mother. Her accents and subtleties of presentation, the incongruity of an elegantly dressed and coifed woman telling barely off-color stories with several dialects was sublime. With deadpan face, she begins:

A couple is having their house painted. One night the husband comes home and puts his hand on the wall which, of course, is still wet with fresh paint.

"*Oi, Guttenu,*" the woman groans.

Of course she has a Yiddish accent.

"You couldn't keep the hand in the pants?"

"What's the big deal?" comes the husband's response in a distinctly different dialect. "Tomorrow, the painter he'll come, he'll touch up. That's what painters do, they touch up."

The guests in the living room are already coughing from all the laughing. My mother is still in character.

Nu, the next day the painter comes.

"Paintner," the woman greets him, "you'll come with me because I want you should see where last night mine husband put his hand."

"Lady," says the painter, "I'm an old man. I'll settle for a cup of coffee."

How many times did I hear that joke and feel the same sensations: slight embarrassment and utter amusement. I heard Peter Ustinov at a party at the home of our family's dear friends, Edward and Ruth Weiss, who lived across the street on Hawthorne Place. Ustinov regaled the guests with a convoluted story I can no longer recall about a one-legged, one-eyed Egyptian conductor. Until hearing Ustinov, I had never heard a storyteller as good as my mother.

No one, moreover, enjoyed hearing stories as much as my mother. Best of all were the true accounts of people laced with humor, or the hilarious idioms and malapropisms that friends displayed, or that she merely overheard, like the woman in the lobby swooning over the Third Piano Concerto not of Sergei Prokofiev, but of Serge Prokofyoo. And what was tastier than a friend, having just returned from Italy, raving about the food?

"Where did you eat?" my mother only naturally wanted to know.

"I can't remember the names," she was told, "but they were all in the Italian district."

Mrs. Wingerhoff, Ruth Weiss's mother, regularly put forth the sort of verbal errors my mother adored. "It was raining so hard," Mrs. Wingerhoff once told her daughter, "the woman was strangled in the doorway." There was the occasion that a woman got dressed up to the nines and "looked absolutely gorgeous from her heels to her toes." But the best was Mrs. Wingerhoff asking Ruth for a "Kleenec."

"You mean Kleenex, mother."

"No, Ruthie," Mrs. Wingerhoff replied, "I only need one."

Then there were the impressions of people. Given my mother's musical ear, it wasn't surprising that she could capture voices, inflections, and idiosyncrasies that would escape the eye and ear of the average person. One of her many "targets" was the violinist Mischa Elman, a pleasant man who reminded me of Santa Claus; he spoke with a distinctive high-pitched, crackling voice, and a Russian accent to boot. Elman, a man thirteen years my mother's senior, was the most famous prodigy of his generation; he was known internationally by the time he was sixteen. My mother had him to a tee, an act that brought tears to the eyes of family friends who had heard Elman speak.

Then one night, Mischa Elman, who was dining in our home, announced that he understood my mother could do an impression of him.

"No, no," she demurred, "not true."

"Come on, Gitta," he persisted.

"No, really," she refused him again, and once again he pursued her.

Suddenly, she protested in his high-pitched voice. The transition had been so seamless, Elman himself hadn't recognized it. So for an instant the two voices of Mischa Elman were having an argument at our dinner table. When he realized what she was doing, he was flabbergasted but enthralled. He loved it. He loved her. He even informed my father that Gitta was really a great talent, as if my father didn't know.

"Mischa," my mother told him, still in his voice, "*everyone* does you!"

Her stories and impressions invariably left their mark on others, for this was an extremely clever and insightful woman with a rare comedic sense.

Emil Horween, another dear friend of the family, is sitting at the dining room table late one evening enthralled by a dream he is recounting. Indeed, as the narrative of the dream unfolds, it appears that he is within a reverie reliving the events as if they were taking place in the moment.

An amateur violinist and member of my father's chamber music group, Emil has dreamed that he has not only played one violin concerto at Carnegie Hall, but he has played two concertos. Dear, sweet Emil is immersed in the description of the applause, the standing ovation, the clamoring for his autograph in the green room, and the unbelievable reviews. One can see that really he is "there," experiencing it all, when I hear my mother say quietly, and respectfully, "Did you get our flowers?"

My mother was a child prodigy, a pianist of extraordinary talent and strength; a great number of reviews pointed to that strength. In an age when feminism had not quite caught the public consciousness, no one batted an eye when reading words like, "Gitta Gradova plays like a man." When she died, almost nineteen years ago, I remember the words of the obituary writer of one of Chicago's prestigious newspapers. "Do you have any idea who your mother was? How famous she was? How accomplished she was?" the man with a youngish voice asked, clearly stunned that his daily mundane chore of rounding up information about the "recently departed" had suddenly turned into a glorious assignment. "Of course," I responded.

"But whatever you write," I admonished him, with a peculiar sense of anger, dare I say intensity, "there is to be nothing like, 'she played like a man.'"

She did play with amazing force, however, along with great technique, something she always dismissed, for she taught that the technique was merely the obvious means to an end, namely, the creation of something beautiful. Listening to her one would have to agree with Carl Engel's poetic remark: "It would seem that instinct leads the hand, and that the hand awakens the ear."⁴ As her friend and colleague, the pianist Josef Hofmann wrote:

. . . a technic without a musical will is a faculty without a purpose, and when it becomes a purpose in itself it can never serve art. . . . To transform the purely technical and material processes into a thing that lives, of course, rests with those many and complex qualities which are usually summarized (*sic*) by the term "talent," but this must be presupposed with a player who aspires to artistic work.⁵

Technique for my mother was a given in the sense that one worked on it again and again. Yet, she understood, as John Redfield wrote, that it was "little more than the alphabet of interpretive musical art."⁶ In Adolph Kullak's *The Aesthetics of Pianoforte-Playing*, published in 1893, my mother underlined this passage:

Mechanical training is the primary and indispensable condition of pianoforte playing. To the spirit of the same it stands in just the same relation, as the form to the substance, i.e., it is in itself, precisely like the substance, the Whole and differs from it only from the point of view of another mode of contemplation, with which the observant understanding confronts the work of art.⁷

"The piano," according to Michelle Krisel, "that nearly ubiquitous symbol of middle-class aspirations, is second only perhaps to the bed, the most symbolic piece of furniture in the home. It is not only noisy with music, but even when it lays silent, it sings of our dreams and disappointments. . . . To open the door and see the piano in the living room is to come home."⁸ Technically speaking, in my mother's case, two Steinway pianos sat, not in the living room but in the music room curve to curve, as two pianos often do so that the

pianists may look at one another. A bay window in the music area provided a bench for hundreds of pieces of sheet music.

Never conceiving of her playing as noisy or invasive, but as comforting, actually, I have vivid recollections of her commencing her daily practice sessions. Having first adjusted the height of the piano stool by turning the smooth black knobs on the ends, she then carefully removed her two slim gold wedding bands, placing them on the shelf of the piano. Then the familiar finger exercises commenced and gradually a series of warm-up exercises that were constituted by her composing a rhapsodic, lyrical, and always romantic piece of music that came from heaven only knows where. A phrase would be repeated only if her fingers betrayed her, or she might momentarily return to some elemental finger dexterity exercise. Evidently, she agreed with James Francis Cooke: "To one whose individuality is marred by carelessness, let me recommend very slow playing, with the most minute attention to detail. Technically speaking, Czerny and Bach are of great value in correcting carelessness."⁹ Czerny and Bach were indeed in evidence during the dexterity portions of the practice sessions, as my mother believed, along with Daniel Gregory Mason, that Bach was forever modern: ". . . and perhaps most of all it is modern in its inexorable logic, its subtlety and variety, and in its poignant, deeply emotional expressiveness, which is always held within the bounds necessary to supreme architectural beauty."¹⁰ Bach's music, Neville Cardus observed, "was persistently seeking to inflame our imaginations with dramatic and pictorial suggestions . . ."¹¹ In my mother's own words: "Each concert I give stands out as a big event in my life; I imagine that it is a great religious rite I am about to perform—to take the silent pages of the great Bach and recreate them."¹² Speaking with the critic Eugene Stinson, my mother, twenty at the time, reported:

But the greatest of all is Bach. He dwells on the heights. His subtle intellectual analysis exceeds anything other writers have achieved. He is not purely emotional, neither is he wholly cold and concise as so many pianists have portrayed him. I shall play his "Italian" Concerto next season. It will be a new interpretation, I believe. It will be a softer Bach, not a composer who seems to say, "See, here is my cold logic," for me that is not the way his music appeals to me. But at least it will show the public that I am not a "one-composer artist."¹³

After minutes of being inflamed by Bach, however, she returned to the mystical concerto.

I often listened to her practice, but I never wanted to communicate to her that I enjoyed listening. Realizing that I did, however, she played my favorite Scriabin, Chopin, Liszt, and Scarlatti pieces, or she would sing foolish ditties she knew would make me laugh. To one of the orchestral melodies of Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto she would sing: "I used to practice ten hours a day / it used to scare the neighbors away." She even sang a song that forever emblazoned Schubert's Unfinished Symphony in my brain: "This is . . . the symphony . . . that Schuuuuubert never finished." Then there was the perfectly ludicrous, "Sarah won't you come for a walk / Sarah won't you come for a talk / Sarah won't you come for a walk, for a talk, for a schmooze / *Aye, Gadalía* / What kind of fruit do you like? / What kind of fruit do you like? / It starts with a 'K' and it ends with an 'Ach,' KREPLACH!"

None of this, however, was as impressive to my sister and me as her inborn and somewhat freakish gift of perfect pitch. Periodically, probably when sensing she was in a particularly good mood, we tested her. One of us would poke at a key: "What's this?" "B-flat," she would answer from her seat at the far end of the dining room table. "And this?" "There's a C and an A-sharp." Now we used two hands. "This?" "In the left hand there's a D, B-flat, A-sharp, E, and in the right hand there's an A, C, F-sharp, G and, what is that, another B-flat?" She was always right. She could even hear the individual notes when I sat on the keyboard, for which I was admonished by my father, but not my mother who was too busy concentrating on discerning the individual notes beneath my tushy. "Schoenberg!" she would yell out to anyone who was around. "My son's a Schoenberg proponent."

Occupying our home on Hawthorne Place was a rather lengthy list of relatives and maids, a cast of people that changed from time to time but surely constituted the essence of an extended family. There is no calculating the benefits my sister Judy, older than I by three years, and I derived from these good and kind individuals. My father, the patriarch of Hawthorne Place, was a man given to assuming the paternal role, with all its nuances and obligations. A noted physician, he was knowledgeable in a variety of fields, ambitious, and a person totally devoted to Asian art and chamber music, which he

played religiously once a week in the music room. Although he spent long hours most every week of the year practicing medicine in several hospitals and his downtown office, which meant that he was away a great deal of the time, Hawthorne Place was also the site of his medical research.

My mother's two brothers, Jack and Mark, were handsome, gentle men who, from my mother's standpoint, married strong women. I know she always worried about them. Her sisters, Fanny, Annie, Rosie, and Leah were, in their youth, exquisite beauties. "Especially Annie," my mother would say. "My God, she was such a beauty!" As a boy, I couldn't see it. My Aunt Annie gorgeous? Now, however, when I look at the aging photographs of these women, I see precisely what my mother saw. Annie's claim to fame was that she not only appeared in many of the Yiddish theater productions staged by my grandfather, but on one occasion, when her dress hem got caught on a curtain hook, she actually went up with the curtain, much to the delight of the audience, and the chagrin of my grandfather.

Annie was married to Harry LeVine. A sailor in World War I, Uncle Harry served as a grandfather figure to me. Called Herschel by my mother, Uncle Harry ate every single food doctors claimed would kill a person by the time he was forty; however, Uncle Harry lived longer than anyone else in the family. While my father was served egg beaters, Uncle Harry ate his daily eggs, the white and the yellow, and claimed that long life was all a state of mind. Harry was living proof of what my parents' friend Harry Lackritz used to call "happy tissue."

Uncle Harry played baseball with me because my father rarely had time. Endlessly he threw me grounders and pop flies all the while offering radio-like commentary; he never seemed to tire of the activity. By this point in his life, the once red-haired man was bald, but when we played, he often shook his head as if he were throwing back waves of hair that had fallen over his eyes. Together we watched on television our beloved Chicago Cubs lose most of their games, "Come on Cavaretta, Cav it out there," Uncle Harry would implore the screen. And often he reminded me, "If at first you don't succeed, suck lemons!"

A traveling salesman, Uncle Harry proudly drove his Chevrolets hundreds of thousands of miles with his samples stored in the "back end," for he never used the word "trunk." He sent me postcards from almost every state of the Union. I kept every one, even

cataloging them alphabetically by state. Perhaps I was the son he never had. Perhaps there was something else, something having to do with the utter simplicity of love.

Aunt Annie and Uncle Harry lived with us for a time at Hawthorne Place. They occupied the guest bedroom in the middle of the second floor, its bay windows directly over the bay windows of the music room. My Aunt Fanny and her husband, Joe Hornstein, lived for years in the two-bedroom apartment on the third floor, its small kitchen owning the home's best view of Lake Michigan. The third-floor apartment was reached in two ways. One either ascended the stairs to the second floor and then passed through a door opposite the guest room to reach a second set of stairs leading to the apartment, or one could enter the house from a side door that opened onto the driveway and ride an elevator first to the main floor, a distance of some ten feet, and then to the second floor where one emerged at the base of the stairway to the third-floor apartment. The previous owner of the house, apparently, was disabled, and so his family had the elevator installed. My friends loved the elevator, but it regularly got stuck with someone in it, which meant that one had to push the red alarm bell button. Rescuers then retrieved a crank from a cabinet at the top of the elevator shaft and literally cranked-up the elevator inch by inch.

I spent some happy minutes riding the barely two-person elevator, but far happier hours on the third floor with Aunt Fanny, a registered nurse, who, when I got sick, gave me what she called A.M./P.M. care. Mostly, I spent time with her son Howard, a cousin whom I have always considered to be a brother, and a man of extraordinary talents. Howard remains a magnificent jeweler, potter, woodworker, watercolorist, tennis player, and golfer. Before retiring, he was an eye surgeon specializing in retinal detachments. With me watching, and occasionally holding the glue or some pins, Howard, whom my mother loved as a son, the perfect one at that—she called him "How"—made gorgeous model planes, cars, and boats. I shall never forget sitting alongside him in his little bedroom under the eaves watching him bend pale white balsa wood which he had soaked in a bucket of water into the shape of a sailboat's prow. It was safe with Howard on the third floor. I missed him deeply when, as a young military physician, he went off to serve in Japan following World War II.

Howard was also an accomplished clarinetist. I recall one evening when he sat in with my father and his chamber music

colleagues to play the Mozart clarinet quintet. No one loved the performance more than my mother. I remember thinking it was sensational, and I had recently played the recording that Benny Goodman, no less, had made. To a child, Howard was better than Benny. He was even better than the legendary Reginald Kell. The only thing better would have been that I could have played some instrument well enough to compete with, that is, have the opportunity to play with the quartet, and my mother.

Fanny, Annie, a series of maids, one of them a short, rotund woman, named Emma, with the most perfect disposition, were part of a cast of women who shared in raising me. Emma always sought to calm my mother and make the home serene. She was someone with the skill to put my mother in her place; my father was the other one. I had only the courage, or was it the temerity? God only knows what Emma thought of my mother's dark moods or, during my adolescence, our endless arguing. A woman of constant good cheer who traveled for hours everyday to take care of us, and who lived her life with facial scars left from a severe burn, Emma never complained, never sighed, never grimaced, as my mother often did, and as I now do as well. Never did I catch Emma sitting at the kitchen table looking disheveled with her head in her hands, as so often my mother did.

Unlike most mothers, my mother didn't have to prepare breakfast, lunch, or dinner. She didn't have to do laundry, she didn't have to go shopping, clean a bathroom, make a bed, pick up a stitch of clothing left on the floor by a thoughtless son, because there was always Aunt Fanny, or Aunt Annie, or Emma, or most importantly, Aunt Leah, the final member of the ensemble.

Leah Weinstock was what they called in those days an "old maid." Thin, frail, with a weak but persistent cough, Leah was always cold. Sometimes she wore two sweaters over a long-sleeved blouse. In retrospect, she might have been diagnosed anorexic. Leah lived in our home all of my life, sleeping in the smallest of the second-floor bedrooms, a room probably intended as a laundry room; my sister and I occupied far larger spaces. There was barely space for Leah's bed and a small dresser; there wasn't even room for a chair. My cousin Raymond, who knew our family well, was twenty years old when he learned that Leah was not our maid.

Leah was painfully self-effacing; she practically made herself invisible. Like a cat, she walked without sound. No one knew when

she entered or departed a room. She ate dinner with us every night, picking at the food she herself had prepared. She joined us at the table as well when guests visited, but she hated to be seen by what she called "visiting royalty," for she never imagined herself properly dressed, sufficiently handsome, or significant. She always sat in the kitchen at the small table in front of the radiator on the north wall, sitting sideways on her chair as if at any moment she were about to rise. Her entire demeanor bespoke a desire to occupy as little space and consume as little oxygen as possible. She never once acted in a self-interested manner; she never once intruded on anyone's life. I never remember Leah using the bathroom which she shared with my sister and me, and Uncle Harry and Aunt Annie as well when they lived in the house. She bathed when we weren't home so that she would not be in our way, but there was never a trace of water anywhere to indicate she had utilized the room.

Leah was totally devoted to my parents who, after all, provided her with food, clothing, housing, medical care, a nursing home when she grew too ill and infirm to remain in our home, and even a cemetery plot. My parents cared for her, but breakfast times, especially, became scenes of insufferable verbal abuse thrown at her by my mother whose dark moods were intensified in the morning. Leah absorbed it all, and, at some level, understood it all. She never fought back; she always defended my mother: "She's just not herself this morning," she would say. "She didn't get enough sleep. She's in a bad mood. Go ahead, Tommy, eat your breakfast."

I did my best to protect Leah. "Everything to help and nothing to hinder," I facetiously would shout at my mother, citing my school's motto as I turned my back on her and stomped out of the kitchen. My words only fueled the fires and protected Leah not one bit. The two sisters loved and needed each other. Leah surely admired my mother's talent and the career she had constructed. Whether she unconsciously symbolized for my mother their own mother, Grandmother Sonya, or even their father, Grandpa Joseph, I shall never know, just as I shall never know whether Leah received the childish rage my mother could never direct toward her father for sending her off alone as a child to New York to study the piano, or her mother for allowing it to happen. Perhaps she resented Leah because, by fiat, or instructions from her parents, she was designated her older sister's custodian. Perhaps my mother longed to occupy the role of care receiver rather than care giver, child rather than

parent. Whatever the reason for my mother's irrational verbal attacks and at times utter disapproval of Leah, and often just seeing her sister in the kitchen every morning was enough to cause my mother to explode, their dance together was wholly disturbing; it was as though she was saying: "Are you still here?"

Several times a month Leah visited the west side home of one of her sister Rosie's sons, Al Rosenfeld and his wife Frances, and their three children, as well as the home of her brother, Mark Weinstock, his wife Jeanette, and their three children; six cousins who, for some reason, I rarely saw. It was evident these visits made Leah happy. The Rosenfelds and Weinstocks constituted her family, along with my sister and me. Significantly, photographs of these two families sat upon the small chest of drawers in her bedroom. There were no pictures of my sister and me.

Born in Budapest where her itinerant actor parents were performing at the time, Leah traveled nowhere in her adult life but to Michigan with us in the summers, and to those two west side apartments, the visits providing periodic reprieves for her. I worried often that she would never return. Leah cooked for us, and did chores around the house that I should have done, like walk our dalmatian, Patsy. Had I been faithful at least in this task, I could have prevented one of the most dreadful events of my childhood. Leah, holding the dog's leash, headed down the back steps from the small enclosed porch leading from the kitchen. At the top of the stairs, Patsy spied an animal and bolted. Instinctively clinging tightly to the leash, Leah was yanked down the steps; her face smashed against the concrete pavement. Fortunately no facial bones were broken, but the lacerations were extensive and deep. I was horrified, but as was my habit, I wouldn't let myself cry. I went to my room, busied myself with one thing or another, and felt the force of guilt in the same way I did after the battles with my mother, which reached a ferocious crescendo during my adolescence.

Upon returning from school the next day, there in the kitchen was Leah, the bruises appearing even worse, but milk and graham crackers laid out on the table for me as always, for I loved nothing better than mashing the crackers into the milk until they reached the texture of soft mortar. My mother always joked that if "the concoction," as it was called, wasn't particularly tasty, I could always tuckpoint the brick work on the outside of the house. I ate my scrumptious graham crackers and milk very slowly, savoring every

mushy mouthful. Sometimes when my mother was around, I took the glass and spoon to my room. When she wasn't, I sat with Leah. This description is as accurate as it is simple. We just sat. I don't remember more than a few words ever being spoken. It was quiet in the kitchen with Leah, and in those moments, the kitchen, actually, wasn't all that ugly.

There were relatives on my father's side as well who looked out for me, although none of them ever lived at Hawthorne Place. My Uncle Charley, the manager of several Balaban and Katz movie theaters in downtown Chicago, always let my sister and me into the glitzy stage shows on Saturday afternoons. My Uncle Philly hosted me in his Milwaukee home on several occasions. And then there was Bess Sawyer, Auntie Bessie, as we called her, who never failed to bake an apple pie for me when I visited her which was often, especially during the summers when I went to play with her son, Raymond. Auntie Bessie always gave me the first slice, even before her husband Herbie. Knowing full well I could eat the entire pie, Bessie, in the little ritual that eventually formed, would then offer me a second piece.

"Oh, no, Auntie Bessie," I would demure disingenuously. "I couldn't."

Bessie would smile down at me. "Force yourself," she would say, pronouncing the words with an exaggerated New York accent: "Go ahead, try, Dolly, fawce yourself."

Finally, there was my Uncle Jack Weinstock, my mother's brother, but someone my father considered a brother as well. The term brother-in-law wasn't close enough to describe their involvement. J. J. to his children, Yankel to my mother, Jackson to my father, his golfing partner, and Uncle Jack to Judy and me, he was a wondrous character. A man with dark wavy hair and the appearance of always needing a shave, my mother's spirit rose palpably when he visited us which was just about every summer; he brought his two children, Frankie and Sally Ann who were almost the same ages as my sister and I, to our lake house in Union Pier, Michigan. Aunt Sally, typically, remained behind in their Salt Lake City, Utah home. The Michigan life, apparently, was a bit too rustic for this woman who preferred the social world of country clubs and fancy eateries. Union Pier in those days was shorts and jeans country, no-mascara country. There wasn't a fabulous restaurant for miles. There was, however, a bowling alley and a penny arcade, the Palladium, filled with pinball machines and a jukebox.

Anyone familiar with baseball can recognize at once whether a child can throw a ball within the first couple of tosses. One either has that naturally graceful motion or one hasn't. Jack had it. I loved playing catch with him on the beach, which we would do day in and day out, because with Jack, you were in the presence of a genuine ball player. Better yet, the man had stories, like breaking the bank at the blackjack table at Monte Carlo. In his wallet, he carried a well-worn article from the *New York Times* in which his financial bonanza was recounted in scrupulous detail. There was, however, no article recounting the following night's loss of the entire amount. I personally think people would have bought anything Jack tried to sell them because he was so engaging, so entertaining. It is hardly surprising that he established a highly successful insurance business in Salt Lake City.

Several times each summer, Jack, accompanied on the piano, of course, by his sister, whom he called "Geets," did his Eddie Cantor and Al Jolson impressions. They were so good his own children weren't embarrassed by them. I shall never forget this athletic man who grew even more handsome over the weeks as his skin turned brown from the sun, strutting about our Union Pier living room, clapping his hands together in front of his face, and singing in a voice you would swear was Jolie himself: "I've been away from you a long time . . . I never knew I'd miss you so . . ." These were the opening lines to "Swanee." His Jolson impression was sheer rapture. The more we laughed and cheered, the more he enjoyed what he was able to do for us. In fact, this was his manner and all the rest of my extended family offering love. There were no "I love you's," no talks with me, unless I had gotten into trouble, no long embraces nor arms around shoulders, no pats on hands, except the ones from Leah, no genuine affirmations or expressions of pride that I recall. Love came mostly in the form of happiness, amusement, and performance. It came in the form of seeing my mother happy.

Sitting across the dinner table from Jack in the screened in porch, he to my father's right, me, as always, to my father's left, I knew some routine was about to occur. He may have looked serious during the first course, but somewhere down the line he was going to pull off some caper. There. There it was. Oh, my God, Jack was starting to pull out his upper teeth. Look at my mother's expression! Look at Leah and Annie and Fanny! Oh, my God, how disgusting, his teeth are actually rattling into an empty glass. Oh, my God! Look at this!

It was, of course, all a trick, the teeth a handful of coins that earlier he had hidden. At the end of the routine, he fished the coins out of the glass and gave them to the children. And if we laughed with relief at the spectacle that had just taken place, he laughed with us, which made *us* laugh even more. I laughed so much at and *with* my Uncle Jack, a man I loved so dearly that my wife, Kay, and I named our son after him, I never bothered to consider that he, like my mother, struggled with some degree of depression. As I reflect back on him, I can easily see the sadness. I don't know that he was unhappy in his marriage and that the summer trips were meant to nourish him. Although in my darker moments, I have to laugh at the thought that a man feeling blue would travel two thousand miles to be bolstered emotionally by my mother. Still, the visits together were good for all of them, my mother, moreover, having publicly proclaimed in 1937 that she intended "to learn about Utah and the music the pioneers brought with them from the east—it's so different!"¹⁴

My parents mourned for months when Uncle Jack died. His death crushed my mother. There was a story that, because it was a weekend, this humble man refused to trouble a doctor on his days off at the first signs of intense cardiac pain. I know my parents refused to believe anything but that his death was preventable. Jack's son, who at the time was working with him in the insurance company, decided to leave J. J.'s office exactly as it had been when Jack was alive. Nobody used the room, nobody even thought of moving the smallest object on his desk. I've always wished there was a room somewhere belonging to my parents that remained intact as if magically one clock in the universe had been permanently stopped, even if entering this imagined room might evoke a shiver of sadness.

I was six or seven when the four of us—Leah remained home—traveled to Salt Lake City for a Christmas vacation visit with my Uncle Jack and his family. What is better than train travel, especially in a cozy berth at night, one's head propped up on several pillows, peering out the window as the train speeds through little towns, their lights twinkling in the darkness, the sound of the clanging alarm at the railway crossings, and the steady click clack of the wheels on the tracks? Then the train slows and comes to a stop and one attempts to find any name that might offer a clue as to where one is. This description could well have been written by my mother, these are essentially her words, for she, too, loved train travel, but only when she was surrounded by her family. If a train took her

away from loved ones, the charm of it all disappeared. I can't imagine what she felt as a child when all alone she left by train that first time for New York.

We traveled to Salt Lake City in luxury, two adjoining bedrooms, almost every available space filled with suitcases, briefcases containing my father's research, and shopping bags brimming over with colorfully wrapped presents for the Weinstocks. And of course my father's violin case. Late one morning, we arrived in Cheyenne, Wyoming. Snow covered the ground and a chilled wind whipped across the station platform. After inquiring of the conductor regarding the length of the Cheyenne stopover, my father took my sister and me into the station to buy some food and magazines. I felt a trifle nervous. What if the train left before we returned? My father assured me there was plenty of time.

I was just reaching the main lobby of the terminal when I saw our train pulling out. Already starting to cry, I yelled for my father and sister and raced toward the open platform, but it was too late. The train was slowly picking up speed. Then, as if it were a movie, I saw my mother, still in her white night-gown, at the window of our bedroom compartment. Helplessly, she looked out at us. It was horrible. Again and again I cried, "I'll never see my mother again. I'll never see my mother again."

I have no recollection of how my sister reacted to what turned out to be a rather inconveniencing fiasco, but I do remember my father's main concern was his fiddle. Whatever plans might be made, would my mother remember to take it off the train? The reunion came early that evening, for it took us a full day to reach Laramie. My mother had received a telegram instructing her to get off the train with all the baggage and wait for us. Whenever I wish, I conjure up those moments of exiting the train in Cheyenne. I feel the tension that there might not be enough time to enter the station, and then the scene of my mother passes before my eyes, and I collapse in tears. "I'll never see my mother again." I have no recollection whatsoever of our Laramie reunion with her.

I was never happier than when I conspicuously spied on my mother's practice sessions. At these times, I never sat on the couch. Nor would I sit in the high-backed easy chair behind the piano bench opposite the bay window. Instead, I crawled under the piano and lay down pretending to be bored and appearing as if I wanted to

nap. From there, of course, I heard the sound of a piano as no one ever does, and watched her pedal, always fascinated by the way her foot lifted just in time to keep a note from lingering too long in the air, thereby making it impossible for the next notes to find their proper home.

I jump ahead many years, for I was a little boy when I went to my bunker beneath the piano, to the occasion of my first visit to Rome. Like all tourists, our family, one morning, visited the Vatican, making our entrance into the fabled St. Peter's Basilica. We turned immediately to the right to view Michelangelo's *Pietà* but gradually I was drawn to the great golden canopy constituting the central altar. Those who have seen it recall how it soars toward the ceiling of the cathedral, its ornate columns appearing to revolve as a result of the carvings and designs. Suddenly, I felt I had been to this altar before. I knew this golden structure from somewhere. In fact, the altar put me in mind of the gold leaf paint on the underside of a piano, my own personal childhood altar. It is not a stretch to say that music was the religion of my childhood, and Hawthorne Place was my inspirational temple.

But my childhood was never about religion and institutions. Inevitably it was about the central figures of my family, the caretakers and providers, and in some instances, the care witholders and deprivors. It was about neither music nor musicians, merely mommies and daddies, daughters and sons, aunts and uncles. And in this one instance, in this one life anyway, it is mostly about mommies.