

Disassembly

by Kathy Fish

I'm sidled up to the bar at the Knights of Columbus Hall. It's 11:00 in the morning on New Year's Eve and we've just buried my dad. I ask the bartender to splash some more rum into my drink. I call him "barkeep" like we're in a saloon. I'm the only one here drinking, but I'm doing it for my dad. He insisted there be an open bar.

"I've been sitting right over there, trying to figure it out," the woman says. "The paper said he had seven sons and one daughter and I said to myself, I have got to see this poor girl."

She's short and squat, bedecked with a dozen or so necklaces and gold and silver chains. Her bosom stands between us like a very large Christmas present.

"It's Joy, right? The unmarried one."

With effort, I focus, but she's juddering like an old film reel.

"My name is Barbara Lee," she says. She looks at my right hand, the one holding the highball glass, and brushes crumbs from the corner of her mouth. "I didn't know your father at all. I just like coming to these things."

She appraises my clothes: I dress like a communist.

A small, male relative in a three-piece suit has been running rings around the buffet table. Now he's changed course and seems intent on tackling me. I step aside just in time and he barrels right into a loaded coat rack and is boomeranged back a few feet, landing on his back. Wailing ensues.

My nephew comes harrumphing up, apologizing, lifting the kid to his feet. I press my palm to my aching head.

Barbara Lee is still yammering. On the other side of the hall, my oldest brother climbs up on a platform and waves his arms, calling out to the rest of us, the siblings, for a photo. It's because of me, the sister, the one who moved so far away, that we have to do this when we can. Even, and maybe especially, if someone has died.

"Say, where'd you get those necklaces?" I ask. "I want some."

"Walgreen's. They're on sale."

"Will you take me?"

The barkeep pours the rest of my drink into a Styrofoam cup and tops it up. Barbara Lee helps thread my arms through the sleeves of my coat.

She drives a vintage VW bug. Riding along with my shoulder practically touching a stranger's, I feel like someone who's been given a day pass.

"Do you want to talk?" she says. "You know. About your loss?"

"Nope."

"Oh that's a relief." She starts singing along to the song on the radio. It's an old Supremes song. "You know, this is just what I needed," she says. "Maybe it's weird, but I'm happy."

"I'm just sort of happy," I tell her.

The Walgreen's is dilapidated and post-apocalyptic. Bins of discounted Christmas decorations and candy and gift sets ugly up

the aisles. I keep my sunglasses on. Barbara Lee hustles ahead as I sip my rum and coke through a straw. I start to shiver again the way I did at the cemetery, as if I'm being disassembled.

I catch up to her in aisle ten. The bin of tangled necklaces resembles a snake pit. She extricates several and loops them over my head. I feel them there against my chest, lending me weight and substance and possible sparkle.

"Damn. These aren't really me," I say.

"Are you kidding?" she says. "These are everyone."

We find a mirror in the cosmetics aisle. Barbara Lee peers into it with me and all I can focus on is her round face, now registering vague disapproval. Back at the Knights of Columbus, my brothers have probably stopped wondering what happened to me. Maybe the thing is over by now. They have gathered up all the pictures and mementos of our dad's life and hauled them away.

I take off the necklaces and hand them to her. "I should get back."

I buy some Excedrin and she buys a Snickers and a marshmallow Santa and we sit in the car while she eats them.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry," she says. "It was a hoot."

She starts the car and there's more old Motown playing on the radio. She cranks the volume and I adjust the seat until I'm practically lying down. Barbara Lee and I sing along with Aretha in loud and fantastically off-pitch voices.

My brothers insist that I stand right in the center for all family photos. It is our custom. And one of them will say, a rose among thorns! and another will forget to put down his can of Bud. There's a very old photo of all of us scrunched together on a couch, the bare and dirty feet of the youngest ones sticking out at the camera. I'm the baby, sitting on my oldest brother's lap, arms outstretched, like Ta-Da!

