

Cougar

by Daniel Harris

There are watershed moments in everyone's life. Some people call them life-changing events; others call them tests of character. For some people those moments are spread out over years and are barely perceptible, but for most of us there are defining moments that switch the trajectory of our lives from the one state to another. War, accidents, marriages, parenthood, loss of innocence, disease and the death of friends and family can all be switches that redirect our lives, sometimes physically, other times emotionally and mentally.

Time is a great equalizer. Enough time passes and these life-defining moments become integrated into our living continuum, marked only by a small seam in the fabric of our lives.

What follows is one of those moments, though to some people, it would seem a fantasy, perhaps a *Wizard of Oz* era tale.

I was the eldest of three sons, with a preschool sister. Our middle brother had suffered from polio. He was still not fully mobile, nor did he have the use of both arms. During the drama of his illness, I was the keeper of my youngest brother. He was five years younger than I, but destined to be the largest of all of us three brothers. At the time of our brother's polio, my youngest brother was four years old. We spent those horrible summer days together, while our mother visited our sick brother, who was in an iron lung, in one hospital and then drove to visit our father in another hospital where he was recovering from a broken back incurred in a horse riding accident. I was my brother's keeper and caretaker.

Time passes, my father recovers and my brother comes home, weakened and withered.

Within a few years our middle brother gets stronger and my youngest brother gets bigger. My sister is born and we live a good life in suburban Chicago. All is well for us.

I didn't think of myself as exceptional, though I was talented in a number of disciplines. I most wanted to be exceptional as a

musician. At sixteen, I was subbing for some of the best musicians in Chicago. I gave fifty percent of my earnings to my mother, who thought no one my age should make that much money. She never told my father about this tax on my earnings, though it kept her in booze and cigarettes.

My life, contrary to late twentieth century practice, was what would be called normal. There were no vigilante groups looking for child abusers, neglectful alcoholic mothers, or neighbors who disciplined unruly kids. In my Italian neighborhood, if you screwed up, you received corporal punishment. Every woman in the neighborhood was a potential mother. The most frequently asked question was: "Does your mother know where you are?" Life could be tough.

My father was a medical researcher. He was well known in his field and traveled to many conferences to give papers. In the autumn of 1957, he was asked to give a paper at an international conference in San Francisco. My parents decided to drive to the conference, visit national parks and travel down to Mexico. They bought a new 1957 Chevy to make the trip.

To make the trip possible, they needed to arrange for a live-in sitter. They inquired of neighbors and friends about who to hire. They chose Mrs. Klausmann, a widow in her mid-to-late forties, who had been a ranch wife from out West. Everyone had glowing reports of her abilities to take care of a home and handle kids of all ages.

The day of my parents' departure dawned a crisp October day. Mrs. Klausmann drove into our driveway in a 1957 Chevy Bel Air convertible with plastic seat covers. My mother reminded Mrs. Klausmann that they would be gone for five weeks. She gave Mrs. Klausmann five hundred dollars for household expenses and gasoline for her car.

If she ran low of funds, she could ask Mr. Jolls at the bank for more.

Mrs. Klausmann thanked her, but said that probably would not be necessary. My mother introduced her to us kids. My parents kissed

us good-bye. They drove off and my siblings and I entered the Klausmann zone.

The first thing Mrs. Klausmann did was air out the house. The odor of stale cigarette smoke was oppressive. Next she went food shopping with my sister and we boys went to school. She went to bed at nine o'clock, which meant we had to go to bed at nine at night. She slept in my parents' bed, which was adjacent to the bedroom where my two brothers and I slept. My sister had a bedroom across the hall from my parents' bedroom.

We kids had never had a sitter who stayed overnight. We had no idea what to expect. My mother had left a list of our extracurricular activities. These included my music rehearsals and lessons, our swimming team schedule, as well as my music gigs, which took me away from the house until very late most Friday and Saturday nights. The only school nights I was not home by nine were when I played school concerts or had a night swim meet, but then I was rarely later than ten.

My parents left on a Thursday morning. When we woke at six in the morning on Friday, the house was filled with wonderful smells. Mrs. Klausmann had made cinnamon rolls, pancakes, eggs, pork chops, and apple pie with ice cream, as well as homemade bread. We couldn't believe it. Our mother never did anything like this for breakfast. We usually had oatmeal or corn flakes. That was it. Mrs. Klausmann's breakfasts were from some old rural America before we were born.

"Back in Nebraska, we had fifteen hired hands, my husband and his two single brothers and our four sons. That came to twenty-three people for breakfast. They had been up since three in the morning. By seven in the morning, they needed a full meal," she announced proudly. "My mother died when I was born, I was married at sixteen and a mother at sixteen. I've been making big breakfasts for over thirty years."

Even my fussy baby sister ate hardily of this feast. There were four kids and twelve cinnamon rolls and none were left when we quit the breakfast table.

We discovered that Mrs. Klausmann made all meals as if we had worked at hard labor all day. She would take my sister, who was four, with her on her shopping trips to farmers' markets, roadside stands and come back with slabs of meat, baskets of vegetables and handfuls of herbs, which she would turn into sumptuous meals for us kids. I was the envy of my pals at school for my lunches. I would trade half a sandwich for a dollar, or a homemade cinnamon roll for a Nutty Buddy or Mars Bar. Life was good.

Mrs. Klausmann was not happy that I was out late on Friday and Saturday nights playing music. Local musicians considered me some kind of prodigy. I was in demand to play gigs all over Chicago. She would scowl at the grown men who would arrive at our home to drive me to gigs. She demanded they bring me home as soon after the job was finished as possible

My usual Saturday schedule was go to swimming practice from seven to nine, warm-up for my music lessons, take the train to downtown Chicago for art class and music lessons. During Mrs. Klausmann's tenure, I would arrive home at five-thirty to a full meal prepared for us kids: soup, roast beef, beans, mashed potatoes, big salad, homemade bread, pie and ice cream.

I would get dressed in my tux, check I had the correct instruments and stands and wait for my ride. As I was about to leave the house, Mrs. Klausmann said, "Make sure you check in with me when you come home. Your mother instructed me to do that."

Well, I played three headliner shows at the Blackstone Hotel that night. Afterward I went with some of the guys to a diner where we had waffles and sausages. The bass player drove me home. He was a back man who lived on base at Great Lakes Naval Training Center. There were never any black men in my Italian neighborhood, so he was very scared. He dropped me off on a main avenue a few blocks from my house.

When I arrived home, Mrs. Klausmann was awake waiting for me.

"Why are you so late?"

"We went for something to eat. It was a long gig and we were hungry."

She was not convinced by my reply, "I don't feed you enough?"

There was no proper answer

"Come into my room when you are ready for bed."

I went to my bedroom, undressed and put on my pajama bottoms, which is all I wore when going to bed.

I tapped on my parents' bedroom door.

"Come in."

Mrs. Klausmann was dressed in a cotton nightdress, sitting in bed with three pillows behind her head.

"Benjamin, I think you were up to no good," she said in a scolding voice

"Believe me, I just went for some waffles and then I came home. The gig didn't end until two in the morning."

"It's almost time for me to get up and make breakfast. I can't believe any responsible adult would keep a sixteen year-old out until three-thirty in the morning.

"It happens. My parents understand."

She revealed more of her breasts, which were full and not flaccid.

"Sit next to me. I want to smell your breath."

I climbed onto the bed, sat next to her and gave her a good whiff of my breath.

"Well, you weren't drinking, but you were eating maple syrup."

She put my hands on her breasts. They were warm and inviting. Without knowing what to do, I began kissing her breasts. She touched my erection, which responded with a major ejaculation.

We lay there for some time. She put my hands on her pubic area. Her hand guided me to her enjoyments. She became hotter and wetter. Slowly she moved my reinvigorated member into her.

"Go slow. Yes, slowly.

She directed my introduction to carnal knowledge. I went to sleep with a new understanding of the potential of women. She made cinnamon rolls.

After my parents paid her and she had left, my mother asked us kids if Mrs. Klausmann was a good caretaker. We heaped praise on

her cooking and caretaking. Our home and clothes were never cleaner.

“Did she feed you enough?” Asked my mother

“Mom, you wouldn't believe the meals she made for us. They were all huge and made from scratch,” said my second brother.

My sister began to describe the meals.

“I can't believe it, I can barely feed you kids on \$500 for three weeks. She gave me back a hundred dollars.

“Mom, said my youngest brother, she drove all over northern Illinois buying food from farmers and roadside stands. We ate like kings.

Is, that true, Benjamin?

Yes, mom, and more.

Mrs. Klausmann only stayed at our home one other time and that was ten years later to care for my teenage sister when my parents were in Europe. My mother tried to use her for other occasions, but she was always booked. Mrs. Klausmann recommended a retired schoolteacher named Emma Shchavelsky. Mrs. Schchavelsky was an indifferent cook, didn't do any cleaning or laundry. She did lie on the sofa in the living room reading mystery novels with our big fat tabby lying on her flabby belly. My dog growled at her.

After the episode with Mrs. Klausmann, we had a standoffish relationship. She was still kind, but she kept me at arm's length. I realized that something had changed in me. The sex mystery had been resolved. I knew my female classmates would never deliver like Mrs. Klausmann without some love component. Of course by the time I was out of school and making my way in the music world, birth control pills, the result of my father's research, had freed up the sexual lives of young women. Free love, actually free sex, was readily available, but I was too focused on my music career to spend the time and money needed to court women.

Reflecting on the episode with Mrs. Klausmann, I wonder if she has ever thought of that night, or whether it was a small blip that slipped into the abyss of her past. Her behavior afterward seemed to indicate that she considered it an ethical, if not moral transgression.

Perhaps a weak moment, when she let her guard down and succumbed to some dormant desire.

Like Proust's Madeleine, the taste of a cinnamon roll, brings back memories of that steamy hour with Mrs. Klausmann. Her introduction to the pleasures of sex was a switch. It separated the foolish naiveté of boyhood fantasies to the carnal knowledge of manhood.

