

Baby of the Family

by Gita M. Smith

It is no compliment to tell someone, “You’re smarter than you think you are. Give yourself more credit.” Even when spoken kindly, those words really mean, “You are too dumb to know your own worth.”

I know an exceptional amount about smart and dumb. I am the seventh child of the formidable American baron John D. Rockefeller and last place holder in his brood of feverish overachievers.

The eldest, David, has become a world famous financier and director of the International Monetary Fund. He sends me a yearly, pre-printed birthday card signed by someone on staff.

Kathleen, the next, has a seat in the NY Stock Exchange and runs a bank. In all emails and the occasional written note, she closes with, “Yours truly.”

Monty, the third, graduated summa cum laude from Oxford and kept the academic gown on. He is now a don at Oxford and a specialist in rhetoric of the Renaissance. He calls on birthdays and wishes me “good health.”

George, who started out on the wrong foot and seemed attracted to sports, at first, is now a judge on the fifth Circuit Court of Appeals where he votes, every time, for big business. He vacations every summer at Martha's Vineyard *en famille* and calls late at night to ask if I know where the key to the boatshed is. I never do.

Sheila, a whimsical and musical child, “grew out of” her folly and surprised even herself at how dictatorial she could be. Sheila is the top administrator in the U.S. Department of Education where, every day, she hangs up her phone on the pleas of teachers and principals from all 50 states. At quitting time, she drives directly to a bar on DuPont Circle where she drinks scotch neat with her

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antidepressants.

The sibling born just 11 months before me is my nearest and dearest: Chloe. Her upbringing was delayed when I was born. Mother wanted me to catch up to Chloe so she would not have to do everything twice. When I became of age to be potty trained, Chloe was trained as well.

Years later, when her life took a bad turn, she said, "It was bound to happen sooner or later. I was lucky enough to be left to shit my pants a year longer than most kids. Now my luck has run out."

Chloe, alone, did not undergo the normal Rockefeller scrutiny by our parents because from the earliest age, she was a mathematical wizard. It was just assumed that she would follow her inclinations and go on to get a PhD from some prestigious school and win the Nobel Prize in Math at some future date.

Father didn't have to break her as he had broken the unfortunate Sheila, who only wished to study the violin. Or George, a natural athlete who bested the Olympic record for the mile, just for fun, one afternoon on the track at Yale just because he could. Fleetness and musical affinity and whimsy were, my parents believed, unworthy traits for Rockefellers. Ours was a gene pool meant for the serious exploits of the world. Mother and Daddy used whatever means necessary to mold us into leaders.

If a child resisted, they used cold disapproval, shaming, mocking and if necessary, financial threats.

Which brings the story to me. I, Samuel Harrison Rockefeller, unwanted seventh child, inconvenience to my mother and disappointment to my father, am not an achiever. I am not tall enough for politics, nor short enough to be a jockey. I have no particular talents either intellectual or physical. I am not sickly but neither am I fit. A sedentary life reading books is not the route to health, it turns out.

No, all my parents' urgings, threats and shunning did not crack my shell one iota. They have not remade me in their image and now, as I turn 40, they no longer try. I have every comfort and freedom I desire, traveling when and where I wish. I live off the investments made on my inheritance, which I received at age 21 thanks to my great-grandfather, William. I do not work. I glide through the days of my life.

I see my siblings once a year when we all show up, as if required by law, to eat Thanksgiving dinner at the ancestral Adirondack Rockefeller home. A more sober event you could not find in all of America. It is apparent with every bite how much my siblings hate each other. Competition will do that to a family. No matter how well they succeed, someone else at that table has earned more, written better, been covered with more awards and honors.

All but me. They love me, my siblings do. I am no threat to anyone. They look at me — the baby of the family -- and make a certain face that says, "There but for the grace of God..."

I am the one they draw aside and whisper to. I am the one they gossip with about the others. I am the one invited to come to their "little places" in Spain and Switzerland and Christ Church for a visit. I am the one their jewelled wives and well-fed husbands like to sit with because I will be genuinely interested in news of their children's happiness.

One year, at Thanksgiving, Chloe asked me, "Sammy, how did you do it? How did you escape the Rockefeller curse?"

"Well, partly, they were exhausted," I said. "And partly it was in my nature. I never showed promise. I never *aspired*. And I didn't care if I pleased them."

My sister looked at me doubtfully.

"No, really! I didn't give two shits whether Mother and Daddy were proud of me. The only person I cared about for the first 13 years of my life was you."

Chloe smiled at me with both dimples, which meant she was very pleased. "Then I saved you?"

"Yep," I said. "You made me what I am today."

We hugged, and she pulled a joint from her skirt pocket, and we went up on the roof of our famous ancestral home and got famously stoned under a diamond-studded sky.

