

What Memory Holds

by Jerry Ratch

There's this sepia-toned photograph, which my mother gave me, of my brother and me when we were still both youngsters. In the picture my brother's dressed in a skimpy checked suit whose sleeves were already too short for him — on its way to becoming my own hand-me-down — and a white shirt with a wide open collar. His face has a hopeful look to it, and he's sitting with his arms around my middle, his plump little baby brother Robbie. Together we're seated facing in the same direction toward the left, as though we're mounted on a pony, or a bicycle built for two. Already he was beginning to sprout up like a giant seated right behind me.

There's still a hint of baby fat to my cheeks and to my chubby little arms. It looks like the photographer must have had a real struggle to get anything at all out of me, judging from the sorry effort of a smile on my face. Both my brother's eyes and mine are looking off slightly to the side when they snapped the picture, and our hair is cropped close to the skull up the sides with only swatches left on top. They have me dressed in something meant to absorb spills, and my hands are out of the picture frame in front of me, probably holding onto a block, or a toy car or elephant to keep me busy.

My forehead is huge. I have a philosophical look about me. But it could also be that I'd simply been fussing plenty just before the picture was taken. My eyes seem sleepy though as if from a foreknowledge of some sort, whereas my brother's eyes are much bigger, dark and round. Harris has the appearance of one who is more innocent, interested and accepting. Happy even, to be alive.

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A Letter from My Mother: Bess

Dearest Helen:

Lately a coyote has been coming around during the night. It's been waking me up. I read something once about coyotes possessing the souls of those you've lost. It sure is a peculiar sound they make, and it's right outside my trailer too. It's not like the howling noise they make in the movies. I don't know what is wrong with those movie dogs, because in reality it's like a cross between that kind of a howl, like in the movies, but mixed with something else entirely. It's like something that might come out of a giant rooster, but a rooster who is hoarse.

When he wakes me up in the middle of the night like that — especially when the moon is out, bright and silent on the land — I think of my son Harris, and I have to wonder right then if it's him coming back to say something he might have left unsaid. I know how much I was loved by him. He looked out for me, and there is a certain sadness in that kind of howling.

The first couple of times I heard it, I wondered if his wife Quebec heard it too, in her trailer, and was maybe thinking of him. I just wondered. They weren't married but one day, only the one day. I don't know why Harris waited so long to marry her, staying on instead with that Francine. I guess I never will understand completely that kind of behavior, swingers and the like. That wasn't the kind of life for me and my Otto.

But then I stopped wondering about Quebec and just let the loneliness of the howling creep under my skin, and let it have its way with me, that's all. Quebec's got her own life to lead; she's going on without Harris now. We have reached a peace with each other and don't have that much to talk about, when you get right down to it.

Of course, it could also be my Otto who is out there on these nights, the coyote. It could be him. On Sunday it will be two years to the day that Otto passed on. Maybe he's calling me home, Helen. He was such a good man! How much I miss him!

PS: Helen —

I'm enclosing a part of something I wrote for our Oral History Project down at the Senior Center at Lake Elsinore; and this is also to let the world know that all I have left, my fifth-wheel trailer and all of my belongings inside it, and the space I own, #91, is to go to my younger son Robbie, or to you. You were always my favorite sister, dear Helen, and I wanted you to have everything if it ever came down to that, so that it doesn't end up in the hands of somebody else. (We were each given five minutes to talk at this Oral History thing. How can you say anything in five minutes, I want to know? It's crazy! But here goes...)

Everybody comes into the bookstore, and they call me Bess. They all know me around here. Funny, it used to be Bessie when I was young and met my Otto. When I first met him, it was Bessie and Otto, everywhere we went. We would go on trips everywhere on his motorcycle. He'd take me in his sidecar all over Chicago, on fishing trips up to Wisconsin, Minnesota; up to Michigan, along the sand dunes by the Lake. I had an aunt who lived in Michigan City, we would go to visit her in the summertime. We were so in love, and we made great adventures all over on Otto's motorcycle, and he would take me with. It was always Bessie and Otto, Bessie and Otto, everywhere we went.

His parents would come over to our house to play pinochle with my parents. We lived on the same street on the South side of Chicago. Otto and I would sit in the front room and write: "I love you," in the steam on the windows while they played cards. He was such a handsome man. All the girls in high school were jealous. They said he looked just like the Duke of Windsor.

But then his father lost their roofing business, because a man got paralyzed when he fell off a roof. He sued and got the whole company, because in those days they didn't have insurance. They had the largest roofing company in Chicago at the time. They owned

one of the very first automobiles. Otto's father drank himself to death after that.

Then we were married. That was in 1931, in the heart of the Great Depression. We went out to the suburbs, and in Villa Park we found a house. The real estate agent was a very kind man named Harris. He took a liking to us and helped us buy our house with no money down. We both had to work long hours to make the payments. I worked as a bookkeeper in an office. Otto met his partner right in front of the gas station that they ended up owning, it was on the North side of Chicago near Humboldt Park. They worked at it without making much money for the first three years, to get the business going. Everything I made as a bookkeeper went into paying off the loan on our house. We had to pay it off in three years, or the bank would take it back. It was called a bullet loan. You had three years to pay it off, that was all.

Everything Otto brought home went to feed us, and we had nothing left over for anything else. Those were hard times, the Depression. The one thing I regretted was that the motorcycle trips stopped altogether. Then in 1938 I gave birth to my son. We named him Harris after the real estate agent who helped us get our house. Then, instead of Bessie and Otto, Bessie and Otto — it became Otto and Bess. I don't know why that happens. . .

It was in the middle of the War, 1944, that I gave birth to my other son, Robbie. That boy really gave us a good scare when he came down with polio in 1953, but I loved them both, equally. They were both such good boys.

Then, following Harris's lead, we all came out to California.

