

I Remember Kitty D.

by Linda Simoni-Wastila

I remember lying in the dark on the narrow couch made into a bed and listening to the soft slap of cards, the clink of ice in glass, Gram's laughter, throaty and smoke-infused. Grams let my sister Lisa and me call her Kitty, short for Katherine Kelly, which made Mom's mouth turn into a hard line. When Kitty came to visit, the house turned topsy-turvy, a snow globe shook too hard. Out came the table leaves, the extra chairs from the basement. Me and Lisa moved our pillows and pajamas to the sewing room.

When the car arrived, Kitty bounded out, lipstick-stained cigarette dangling, silver hair tightly teased. We could not escape her hug, smelling of peppermint and Aqua-Net and Jean Nate. Grams always drove. After he stretched his legs, he slipped Lisa and me a buck or two, sometimes shiny silver dollars, which I kept in the cedar jewelry box along with my picture of Jesus and the sugary cork from a Drambuie bottle.

The afternoon dragged. I paced the house on tip-toes, waiting for Grams and Gramps to finish resting their eyes. At four, Dad sliced limes and poured the first highballs. Grams and Mom sipped gin and tonic, Gramps drank bourbon and water, and Dad drank Scotch with soda. When everyone gathered at the kitchen table, Dad let me pull the thin plastic band that opened the new deck of cards. My eyes watered from smoke and laughter.

After we played a few rounds of rummy, the adults shooed us from the kitchen. I don't remember dinner, only cheese, sweet, small pickles that set my teeth on edge, and bowls of salty Chex mix. We ate on trays set before the television. When Lisa nodded off, I snuck back to the kitchen and stood beside Grams. The cards flashed in her hands, her rings slipping around the knuckles of skinny pink-polished fingers. I remember wishing Mom was like her mother, wore nail polish, smiled instead of frowned. Around midnight, Gramps slung Lisa over his shoulder and carried her up the stairs. I followed close behind. But I never slept. Instead, I snuggled under

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covers with flashlight and book, listening to their merriment, trying to fathom the stories they told over the smack of cards, the shouts of Pinochle.

I remember lying on the living room floor, books and papers scattered. The slant of the December sun warmed me. Kitty hovered, an anemic ghost. I studied midterms—biology, organic, analytical, physics. She asked for vanilla pudding, the only food she could keep down. After Gramps died last winter, she stopped eating. Grief, Mom said, and nagged her at every meal to eat more. But Kitty never ate much, pecked at food like a sparrow. Without talking, I rose from my books to give her what she requested. Mom had made up three boxes of pudding before she left yesterday, but most of it remained in the Tupperware container. Kitty crept upstairs to the sewing room made up for her visit. I remember she moaned, soft, as if trying to muffle her noises. The toilet flushed. All went quiet. I remember thanking God for the quiet, hoping she would leave me alone with my books, not knowing next week the barium would leak through the pinholes in her intestines and kill her.

I remember lying on my side on the gurney, air blowing through the vent, the room blazing cold and white. I remember the cool of betadine smearing my lower back, the gentle way the nurse adjusted the flimsy gown to cover my backside. I shivered. She must have sensed I was scared; I had never had surgery, never birthed a child.

“Your last name sounds familiar,” she said. “My best friend's daughter married a boy with your last name, forty years ago. I remember the wedding. My friend wore a pink satin dress, I hemmed it for her. Oh how Kitty loved her daughter. And her grandchildren.”

And she patted my side with small, firm circles, and I remember how the air warmed, how I stopped shaking. The anesthesiologist

arrived and slid a needle in my arm. She held me, we counted back from five, and a numbness settled over me, a white peace, and Kitty was there, comforting us both, forgiving.

