

Sin

by Nonnie Augustine

Sin

by Nonnie Augustine

After my mother died, I met Aunt Shirley.
I found her in dozens of snapshots piled in falling
apart cardboard boxes we hauled down from the attic.

Small girls, with huge bows bobby-pinned
right on top of their heads, play with three
little brothers on Staten Island sidewalks.
Faces solemn, they pose in First Communion
veils in front of Sacred Heart Church. I once
wore white lace gloves like theirs to Mass.

Teenagers during the Great Depression,
they wear their dark hair in the same page-boy style,
dress to show off their tiny waists, smile in every picture.
(Did they help each other sew those outfits? How lovely they
were!)

In my parents' wedding pictures, Mom wears an ivory satin gown.
Her train curls all the way down the church steps. Shirley,
Maid of Honor, wears a knee length dress. (I wish I could see
the color.) My father's in his Army uniform. It was July, 1942.

Shirley laughs with a sailor she dated, and there's a photo
of her with Joe Louis, the fighter! (Dad told me they'd been
friends.)

I found a studio portrait taken of my aunt after the war,
but then she disappears from the boxes.

My Aunt Shirley, who had a good job in Manhattan,

who had her own apartment off Washington Square,
who was in love with her best friend's fiancé,
slept with him and became pregnant,
who was the most devout Catholic of the bunch of them,
slit her throat with Grandpop's razor in the white tile bathroom
of my grandparents' old house on Castleton Avenue.
A man, a neighbor, broke open the door, and so Nana found her.
Blood, screams and whispers, then a priest who refused
to say Mass at her funeral or bury her in a consecrated grave.
And maybe my mother wanted to die too, but she was a wife
who had children to raise, and a house in New Jersey to keep.

Dad didn't tell my brothers and me the truth about Shirley's death
until we almost grown. My mother never talked
about her sister even to me, her only daughter.

Not until I searched through those old photos did I see how close,
how alike
they'd been back then—smiles unguarded, brown eyes kind.
After Mom died, I met Aunt Shirley.

