

Eloise

by Phillis Ideal

I loved visiting Eloise who lived next door. She had no children, so she filled this void by welcoming me to her house every afternoon. Interrupted by film breakage and rewinds, she showed me black and white film footage of her exotic 1930's trip to India with her mother and their tour entourage, all dressed in white. Tears welded up in her eyes when shadowy images of impoverished Indians appeared in the movie frame and she would say, "There are many unfortunate people in the world."

She taught me to play a Chopsticks duet, sitting side by side, at her grand piano. When my child's attention span waned, she called upon her player piano that magically played itself, pumping notes through perforated paper rolls. And she always invited me to stay for dinner, seated me across the table from her and on the left side of her husband, Clifford. Our food was prepared and served by the maid, Rosy. Neither Clifford nor Rosy was crazy about including me, but Eloise smiled broadly at me all through the meal. She seemed to know that there was no organized supper planned at my house and saved me almost every evening from fending for myself.

With hands on her hips, Rosy often said, "How can I plan meals when she just shows up?"

Eloise would always reply, " She takes up no room and eats very little. And I love having her here. She's always welcome. If you didn't prepare enough to include her, I'll give her part of my portion."

I often heard my mother and her friends gossiping about Eloise in terms I was too young to understand but remembered some of what was said:

"Poor Eloise, first dominated by her awful mother, Mrs. Slaughter, and now living with Clifford, a failed lawyer, doing nothing but living off of Eloise's inheritance."

“Waldo Hinkle had to ask him to leave the firm because he simply could not cut the mustard. He still goes down to have lunch with lawyers in the firm and pretends that he took early retirement.”

“Mrs. Slaughter lived with them and belittled Clifford mercilessly, saying that Clifford's wall-eyed retarded brother was the smart one in that family.”

“Eloise wanted children, and I have heard it was Clifford who couldn't have them.”

“No wonder Eloise is a nervous wreck and goes to Lubbock every month for electroshock.”

“She is a zombie when she comes back, but her shaking and nervousness return and her psychiatrist wants her to have monthly treatments.”

“She was always too sensitive. When we were all having fun at a dance, she was off on a picnic reading poetry with a loser like Elmore Cummings under a weeping willow tree.”

“Poor thing.”

Even at five years old, I could tell that Eloise was haunted by ghosts that shook her core, leaving her dangling and seeking stability in slowly repeating her compulsive routines. Interested in the whole makeup ritual, I watched as she sat at her blue satin dressing table, looking forlornly in the mirror, and securing each of her braids on top of her head in slow motion. Then, she dabbed her face, a powder puff at a time, pausing after each application to examine the results to see if she saw any improvement. I knew what came next and handed her the lipstick of her choice, “Cherries In the Snow” of which she had 15 tubes. I never asked why she had so many of the exact same color. She seemed relieved when I put all the lipstick tubes in a straight line.

As I approached junior high, my visits to Eloise were tapering off. I began thinking, *I need to get beyond this*; but when I felt betwixt and between, I would wander over to her house, and she was always delighted to see me. One early afternoon, I took a couple of two-piece bathing suits over for her to help me decide which one to keep. Clifford came home earlier than expected from his downtown

lunch, heard us talking; and to my surprise joined us in watching me model the suits. Traditionally, he went straight to his armchair that had taken the shape of his form as he spent most of his time reading magazines, his face hidden by *Field and Stream*. I knew never to disturb him.

He commented, "You look great in both suits. It's too hard to choose which is the best, and I'm going to buy both of them for you." He smiled at me and said, "You are growing up into an attractive young lady." I was used to his subtle hostility, and at best, ignoring me, so this change made me uncomfortable. I no longer represented the child they should have had together, but something else. What this was I didn't know.

My mother told me that after Eloise's monthly electroshock treatments in Lubbock, Clifford had a standing appointment to visit the Neiman Marcus showroom for a private showing of the latest fashions. He spent thousands on his purchases and was given royal treatment. The beautiful models swished around in one gorgeous ensemble after another, and he clicked off the dresses he wanted for Eloise; she sat mutely next to him in a near comatose state. After these visits, she was "not there" for a week. About the time that the recent Neiman Marcus shipment arrived at their house, she seemed more herself. She hid the boxes of new clothing in the back of the closet and put an older box of purchases in front of it.

She had me model the dresses that Clifford had forgotten about and insisted that I should take them. I was never to tell Clifford but to keep it as our secret. I vehemently protested, but Eloise insisted.

"Clifford thinks that a new wardrobe will open up a new world for me, but these clothes are too fancy for me. You are a young girl with wonderful chances ahead of you and look beautiful in all the dresses. Please take them. I want you to have them."

I did take the dresses, but neither she nor I ended up wearing any of them. I was desperately trying to look like my classmates who didn't wear \$500 dresses of satin with shell pearls and delicate embroidery, even to dances. The popular kids wore felt skirts with

poodle dog appliqués, angora sweaters and bobby socks with saddle oxfords.

During junior high, I barely saw either Clifford or Eloise and only in passing. I was frightened that I should be associated with anyone who showed flaws; and the more self-conscious I was, the more judgmental I became. My scarcity of contact reflected my rejection, which she must have felt. But Eloise never failed to remember my birthday or Christmas. We would hear a knock on the side door, and she would hand over an envelope. Her hand was trembling, and her voice was quivering. She never came in, but excused my mother's invitation, saying, "I have to get back home, but just wanted her to have this."

Over the years, I had seen how she gave substantial money to individuals in need and to charities; but to her friends, she labored writing each person a poem and included it along with cash. These poems had to be pureed through the screen of her compulsions, most likely include rhyme, and satisfy her litany of private standards. In the end, they had been reduced to the status of Hallmark card generalities in her shaky handwriting, and her writing efforts were questioned and ridiculed by the recipients, but the money was quickly spent.

Now looking back at this part of my childhood, I still can still feel her warmth and realize I never minded her craziness. She was one of the kindest people I have ever known, and I grieve to think I ever pushed her away.

