

INTRODUCTION

We've spent the last three hours—my daughter Clara and I—looking through the pigskin chest that holds about seventy-five years of family photographs. I need some for this book, but I don't want to go through the chest alone, or for too long at a time. I guess it might be like that in every family: if the pictures remind you of sad times, you feel sad all over again. If the pictures bring back something joyful, you feel an emptiness because that time is gone.

We're looking for stuff from the old days; we know it's in here somewhere. We seem to be groaning and sighing a lot. Then Clara rocks back on her heels. "Aaah," she says. "Oh God!" She hands it over. "Pay dirt," she says.

And there's my Aunt Helen, the cruelest person I ever knew, dressed up to beat the band. My mother, dressed up too, looks straight into the camera. Aunt Helen's got her arms around my little half sister Rose, who's about thirteen years old, already wearing mascara, one of the things that would get her into so much trouble down the line.

"OK! That's it!" Clara says. We close the chest, get up from the floor, move creakily over to the couch. "How can you keep doing this?" Clara asks, and then, "I know I shouldn't, but I could really use a glass of wine." I open up a bottle and we tell each other, as rapidly

as possible, the story of Uncle Bob, so drunk (but who wouldn't be with that *bat* for a wife?), uncurling his napkin through a candle flame on Thanksgiving and setting himself on fire. Or Uncle Bob sitting next to Clara's dad on another terrible holiday, when something like *Godzilla Meets the Undersea Monster* was playing on TV and as Godzilla crushed an aircraft carrier, Uncle Bob earnestly said to Tom, "I guess this reminds you of the old days?" Because Tom had served on a carrier. And Tom had to laugh.

We tell these stories fast because we know them so well. Then Clara sighs, and sighs again. "Poor Rose," she says. Clara's done her good deed, helping me with this, so she goes home.

I take the bottle and my glass and go out to the patio, which overlooks miles and miles of Topanga Canyon and the mountains beyond. It's so beautiful out here! I need it, because most days, working on this project, I feel like I've gone fifteen rounds with the champ, and the champ has generally won. I pour a second glass. I'm pretty much the only one around here who drinks anymore.

I've been writing a history of how drugs and drink have worked in our family for the last fifty—actually it turned out to be closer to a hundred—years. In varying degrees, it's history seen through a purple haze. It's full of secrets and chaos and distortions, and secretly remembered joys. I'm beginning to think it may be the unwritten history of America. Sometimes it's hard to be American—to live, and work, and love—and not be disappointed by the results, the discrepancy between what we wanted and what we got. It's so easy to slip into easy answers to the question of what has happened to us: the exhortations of Norman Vincent Peale, or AA, or "Just Say No!" And the equally easy rhetoric of "I'm just no good, that's all, so I'm going to get loaded and stay that way the rest of my life." I want this book

to fall like a plumbline down through four generations, tracing that history of drugs and drink, depression and divorce. I just want to take a look at it, see how it works. Refrain from judgment. But of course I can't refrain from judgment.

My family on both sides is very "old" in America. We've been here since before the Revolution. How lucky for those starving peasants—to make it out of England, Ireland, Scotland, over here to a land of unimaginable opportunity. The trouble was, they *were* starving peasants, so they really couldn't imagine the idea of opportunity or dream. It took about 14,000 drinks for them to calm down. I began to see pretty early that this was also going to be a story of climbing—or drifting—out of the underclass, into the working class, and into something upper-middle or beyond. From the beginning, as far as I can make out, "dreaming" in our family meant either the opium that my grandmothers used—for medicinal purposes—or buying that "lovely" home, starting the new business, getting married, publishing a book. Getting high, going up, in this society.

As a child, listening to family stories, I'd think: "If we're so old, why aren't we rich?" Later, my mother would echo this to me: "If you're so smart, why aren't you rich?" Now I know the obvious answer. I wrote the draft of this introduction in the British Library, and when I got tired I went out and looked at the illuminated manuscripts next door. What beauty, what focus, what intelligence, what hard work! But for every learned monk, there were thousands of other Joes out in the fields toiling and sickening and dying. My family on both sides belonged to the toiling and dying types who made it over to America.

And once in America, people divided once again: you could say they became the poor and the rich. The losers and winners. The

artists and scientists. If they were countries, they'd be Ireland and England. The former have a particular set of belief systems. They are prone to dreaming, wool-gathering, calling in sick. They lose the deeds to their houses and cry easily. They are often eloquent and intelligent, but they succumb to melancholia, drink, and drugs. The latter? When they hear about clinical depression, they say, "Oh, everybody gets discouraged sometimes." They do not see the abyss. Maybe in their world the ground is flat and safe. Maybe it's a golf course.

This is partly the story of a family finally getting enough of the abyss, getting terminally tired of psychic and emotional free fall, and trying with all its collective might to at least consider breaking through to the world of peaceful afternoons at home, whole months going by without a fight, with nobody nodding off in a restaurant or throwing up on the rug. That's been the struggle of our family for perhaps twenty of the last fifty years. The truth is, we still live more or less in both worlds. My family is full of disappointed lives, of "potential" not lived up to. Of folks who were dealt lousy hands (and played them badly, too). But they took the cards, cracked open a bottle of scotch, and made that material glitter as much as they could. And then, when it felt right to them, one by one they stopped drinking, or the drugs they used went out of style, or their lives pleased them so much that drugs and drink didn't seem to be a problem anymore. Out of the abyss and onto the safe green lawn.

The heart of my story is what happened to my half sister, Rose, who left home when she was sixteen, hung out with the rest of us for five uneasy years, then disappeared into the world of hard drugs for another twenty. For us to find each other again, to be sisters again, has been one of the sweetest things in my life. Rose's story alone

guarantees that this history can't be chronological. In Californian terms, she lived in a parallel universe.

Life lived by a few dozen people isn't like a novel. You can't stick a love affair or a betrayal or a deportation into Chapter Six and be done with it. I'm happy about these photographs, the ones from the pigskin chest, and I ask the reader to look at this book as a family album. Here are these little girls, so happy! Here's a man, he's in disgrace, because there's only one picture of him left in the whole world. There's a side of the family where for two generations there are no pictures of men at all. Here are some parties: the people *look* happy, but take another look, and then another. Here are some wedding pictures; some marriages didn't work out, but these others—they have to work out; there's so much riding on them, so much love. And these moments last through time.

So, some of these chapters aren't precisely chronological. The ones on acid and on divorce overlap, because the years my second husband and I were dropping acid and getting divorced overlapped by about six months. The chapter on “hanging it up”—becoming a respectable citizen—and “the embarrassing Californianness of it all” overlap because in our particular case becoming respectable paradoxically meant going to some pretty silly seminars. And the main part of Rose's story comes before the story of how we met again after twenty years—partly to keep things as chronological as possible, and partly to say to readers who have lost people they cherish to the hard-drug world: don't worry! You may still get them back again—sit down for long hours on a balcony beside a lagoon and talk about the things you missed, piece the past together again.

I said I've tried not to be judgmental, not to intrude on events, just to write them down. But sometimes I can't help it, sometimes I have to call time out and talk about what's happening. Sometimes the

photograph, the telling of a story, isn't enough. What's behind the story? I may bend your ear for a while, but I won't take long, because I hope these characters speak for themselves.

I've changed some names. Rose has criminal friends out there: I don't need some irate speed-dealer coming after her *or* me. Rose's name is changed to protect her privacy. There aren't any grown-up pictures of Rose here. Friends of my mother's get their names changed; they're kind and good, they need their privacy protected, too. (And my own name has changed—from Carolyn Penelope Laws, or "Penny," to Carolyn See, with another last name, Sturak, tacked on for a while.)

Finally, I see that I've organized this book around husbands and children and marriages and weddings—girlie things. If I were a guy, I might structure the last fifty years around war and science—Hitler getting his doctors to invent methadone in World War II, scientists in Switzerland bending over an experiment and seeing a suddenly psychedelic world, or giant cargo planes flying out of Vietnam chock-full of heroin headed for—well, headed for us. But I'm not a guy. Besides, our family's attitude toward war was aptly summed up by my dad: in World War II, dizzy with relief that he was too old to be drafted, he announced, "I go, after the women and children go!"

So my method is skewed by many things, including the fact that through at least two of these chapters I was in something of a purple haze myself.

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Every writer has a voice in his or her head, chattering along, writing the bad review of what's getting written. Since reviewing books is one of my jobs, that voice can get rowdy. The first thing it says is "*Who cares!*" I answer stoutly, "They'd better care, because I bet three quarters of the nation's families have a drunk uncle or a drugged-out

kid, or parents who drink a few too many martinis around the pool. They've got cousins and uncles who can't hold a job and watch daytime TV."

And I hear voices that say with fastidious distaste, "But this is so California-*trendy*! Luckily we don't behave like that here in Ohio, Montana, Maryland, New York." My mother's folks came from upstate New York and my dad's from Texas. My parents journeyed here to shed their pasts. A lot of Americans do that. I know it's embarrassing to be from California, but here's the other side: this state is the repository of America's dreams; it is to America what America is to the rest of the world. If some of those dreams are tacky or inappropriate, that's part of what I'm writing about.

And talk about being a product of the times! If this is 1967, we must be doing acid, right? I have to admit it: our whole family tried as hard as it could to be "different" and ended up being exactly like everybody else. We ate tuna casseroles in the fifties and painted everything chartreuse and dark green. I named my elder daughter Lisa and thought I was the only mother in America to think of it. We were unwitting slaves to every fashion. When I gave up acid and smoking joints to become a responsible mother, the rest of the world was changing too, only lots of them went over to cocaine. It seems to me we're the same as everybody else—discouraging, but there it is.

And why don't I just come out against demon rum once and for all? Why don't I endorse AA with all my heart and pitch out this glass of white wine and switch to Snapple? Because I can't and I won't. To write something for or against drugs and drink just adds to the mountains of material for or against them. The American manifestation of this is so much bigger than any set of opinions about it. Drugs and drink in this country go to our philosophy, our conscience, our finance, our government, our pleasure principle.

Personally, I believe that the government, consciously or not, uses every kind of anodyne to keep the middle and lower classes tranquilized, depressed, and dysfunctional. But I can't prove it, and I may be wrong. I can only show how drugs and drink have played out—like a pachinko game—in my own family. And hope the compact mirror I'm holding up to America isn't too flawed.

Finally, as a reviewer, I'd have to wonder about the narrator here. Who is this woman, who in spite of sporadic efforts to be profound, seems to care most—in her youth—about the next drink, and—all through her life—about the next party? It's true I've never much appreciated the literature of depression so fashionable through this century. I think if your life has been depressing, you don't need more of it. You need celebration and happiness, as much as you can get. With a margarita or not, it doesn't matter.

The sun's going down now, over the Canyon. The stars are out and I go back in. There's no point in being afraid of my aunt Helen—or any of the rest of them. She's dead now. She made history the only way she knew, and maybe she's pleased to be in a book. I feel better. I've had two glasses. I try to limit myself to that. Unless there's a party.