

The Maiden Aunt

Carolyn Korsmeyer

My great-aunt died in her nineties, intestate and alone. Once a talkative woman, she had receded into dementia and silence years before. There was no funeral, no ritual of mourning. Her nephew was appointed executor of her estate and, a sweet but incurious man, he decided to sell sight unseen whatever property she still possessed. My mother was appalled. *What? Out of the question! You don't know what's there. Don't you want to find out?* Ever the accommodating older brother, he had her appointed co-executor and happily handed over the task of clearing out a warehouse that had sat untouched for decades.

Having recently purchased a house that was still scantily furnished, I envisioned furniture for the taking and joined the effort with enthusiasm—equal parts curiosity and greed. So one broiling summer day we met to excavate the things that Great-Aunt Edith had left behind: my mother, my father, my husband, and me.

There were actually two warehouses with storage units containing her property. We started with the smaller one, a huge, stuffy cube where the air itself seemed to have been stashed away for years. The heavy summer heat entered with us, and we were so dumbfounded by the amount of things to deal with that we quickly began to dispense with undistinguished chairs and boxes of worn-out household goods. Every movement raised dust that stuck to sweaty skin and made us cough, and we worked with increasing irritation. For the first hours it seemed that our job would be accomplished quickly, since there appeared to be nothing here worth saving. No family treasure, no secret history, no deposits of jewels; little worth taking at all. A disappointing trip.

But then, just as hunger and exhaustion were about to send us on our way, we found a trunk. A huge steamer trunk of the sort that ocean-going travelers used to pack. It opened like a wardrobe designed with drawers on one side and hangers on the other and contained everything a lady passenger of days gone by would need: high-heeled shoes for evening, low-heels for trudging; sensible skirts, sweaters, blouses, hats with feathers and netting; and elegant, heavily-beaded dresses.

And suddenly, she was there. Aunt Edith. There in the run-down heel of a shoe, the half-empty box of face powder; a hairbrush with strands of faded hair still tangled in the bristles—an unexpected intimacy both poignant and repellant. I considered trying on the dresses, but the clock was ticking. That trunk was dangerously tempting, for time was short and the other warehouse had to be emptied before the weekend. Decisively, brutally, we relinquished it. With its beautiful dresses and worn-out shoes, its leftover make up and tarnished comb sets, its ghostly whiff of stale perfume.

In fact, we had to throw away a good deal in the three days it took to empty the units, dispensing much to trash and selling even more to the discreetly vulturine antique dealers who dropped by with increasing frequency. Our decisions were hasty, often prompted more by irritation and fatigue than careful assessment. As a result, we ended up keeping single volumes rather than entire book sets, lidless tea pots, shadeless lamps, and ottomans missing their chairs.

But what we kept turned out to contain a bygone world from which a woman, familiar yet strange, began to emerge.

As a child, I never singled out anyone as model to follow as I grew up. I chose fantasies about my future self from fiction rather than family. But certainly there were those whom I

emphatically desired *not* to imitate, whose adult lives appeared to represent a future to avoid at all cost. On the top of that list was Great-Aunt Edith. To my young eyes she was locked in the dullest of lives—a spinster, a schoolteacher, a woman in brown; for brown she wore, and it was brown that suited her cumbersome style with its shapeless waists and heavy shoes. Looking back, I can see that I had already absorbed the stigma of the unmarried woman—the unwanted female dangling loose and lonely in a partnered world. But in addition to that strike against her, Aunt Edith was formidable, stern, someone to be reckoned with but not especially loved. According to lore, she had sufficiently intimidated my grandmother that, in a placating gesture, my mother was named after her. With a name my mother hated and never used, resorting to her middle name from childhood onwards. As soon as I learned to write, I had to send Great-Aunt Edith letters. Real letters with ink, stationary, and stamped envelopes. Not often, just at holidays and if I owed her a thank-you note. The task came with cautions that anticipated criticism: No mistakes! Best handwriting! She was, after all, an English teacher. The letters were dutiful, the affection strained.

So it is odd that she is the one who now catches my curiosity—that brown-clad, dowdy, prickly, unlovable maiden aunt. The gap between the family image of her and the evidence of her life that we gradually uncovered in that warehouse was so perplexing that she became an enigma worth pursuing. As I unpacked the items salvaged from storage, I found more and more of the scraps she left: postcards, letters, two passports filled with exotic stamps, a travel diary. And bits and pieces from the house that suddenly, comprehensively, almost indiscriminately, she had left behind.

The steamer trunk and the heavily stamped passports were the first clues. She must have possessed a curiosity about the world that could only be satisfied first hand, to be eager for

experience beyond her small-town borders—borders that over time had melted into the blank tangle of expanding urban streets where now the warehouse stood. Only belatedly did I realize how many of the childhood gifts she had sent me came from different parts of the globe—a turquoise ring, a set of coral jewelry, a silver pin with a blue scarab, embroidered scarves and blouses. I have lost them all—the coral ring carelessly left on the sink of a public restroom, the scarab misplaced during a shuffle of moving apartments, other things mislaid who knows where. At first I shrugged at their disappearance, but now that it is too late, I want them back.

The larger of the two storage units had been hired sometime in the nineteen-thirties and filled with more and more things over several decades, although precise dates were hard to determine. My greedy curiosity stirred again as I stepped into the jumble of a household that had been packed away many years before I was born. The ghost of the woman who had left it there appeared fleetingly in the corner of my eye and flickered away.

A huge room with cement walls was crammed with furniture and boxes and littered with miscellaneous un-boxed items strewn at random on top of dressers and tabletops. They were arranged in no apparent order, some of them caught in slides as though they had been knocked over by accident when yet one more thing was shoved into storage. It was hard to know where to begin, but the four of us waded into the clutter and began to search.

There was a good deal of furniture, and being of the mind that old things are generally better—better made, better designed—than new things, at first I wanted to take it all for my own house. This covetous ambition was quashed when I leaned against a set of giant glass-fronted bookcases and felt them tilt and creak. Besides, as my father pointed out, when filled with books they would weigh hundreds of pounds and if ever one fell, it would flatten anyone sitting nearby.

And, he continued, did I know how to locate load-bearing walls? Or how to secure tall furniture to the wall studs? Daunted, I settled for a much smaller shelf and two sets of bookends, then cast about for more docile pieces of furniture. I began to feel an uneasy need to keep things whether or not I could ever put them to use. These objects teased with vague promises, weaving threads that bound the present to the past. I was caught between clearing out and keeping everything.

We set up a trash pile outside the door and attempted to move the items that would be sold into an area by themselves, a task that was nearly impossible in the tight space. To make matters worse, over the decades some greasy, silt-like dust had infiltrated the unit. Within hours we were all covered in a frosting of fine dirt and sneezing in unpredictable explosions. We began to leave black fingerprints everywhere as though a scampering kitten had tracked through ink.

An entire household had been put into storage, but in a perplexingly disorderly and hasty manner. Towards the back of the unit furniture was arranged more or less methodically, but on top of sofas and cabinets loose items and open boxes had been stacked haphazardly. It appeared that as soon as her father died, Aunt Edith had closed the house and flung away its contents. Perhaps she had lived with him, caring for him in his later years, performing the expected role of an unmarried daughter. I asked my mother if that was so, and she, her voice muffled as she stooped to peer into a sideboard, replied rather absently: I don't remember. How could I? I was only a child. And the years opened before me as I realized how much time had passed in my great-aunt's life.

Whatever the motives she might have had, she had given little thought as to how long these things would remain in storage. The clothing stuffed in dressers mingled neatly folded blouses with single socks and yellowed undergarments. Crumpled chiffon, split sequins, beaded belts peeked out from tight wads of what seemed like soiled laundry. Drawers held items both

familiar and odd, like clothes brushes, shoe buffs, stiffly dried hot water bottles, and long hatpins that looked now like bejeweled murder weapons. A darning egg, its simple practicality made mysterious by the passage of time.

As the four of worked our talk proceeded in muttering monologues: *What on earth is this? I wonder if this lamp still works. Watch out for this box, the bottom is split. Can you make out what this engraving says? Now why would you put just one andiron in a box?* Distraction was inevitable, and from time to time one or the other of us would pause in wonder as we scanned a magazine, examined a photograph, read the pages of a book, its spine creakily complaining to be opened after so many years. My historian husband was snared by an antique German dictionary and a magazine with the commanding title: *Look*. At the time he was researching nineteenth-century German newspapers, and *Lo*: this reference work just fell into his hands. Serendipity, destiny. My father sat on a box and leafed through an ancient Sears Catalog, complaining about how much prices had risen. In seventy years. Time was oddly compressed as we sorted through these things.

Kitchen items were scattered here and there—canisters, spatulas, a few pots and pans with dented edges. There were barrels packed with what we expected would be china and glassware, but they held dozens of jars of pickles. Pickles. It took keen peering into their cloudy mason jars to identify them, sinister and dark in their murky brine. I pried open the front of a painted tin bread box and yelped as something flew out and landed on the floor. Not a mouse, not a bat. A hunk of bread. On inspection, a petrified muffin. Who puts a muffin into storage?

There was a notable lack of sense exhibited in what had been sitting here for so many years: furniture, silverware, dishes, boxes of letters and photographs—all the things one would expect. But also worn-out clothes, tattered umbrellas, rusting tools, magazines, two sets of shoes

with the dried mud still on their rims, a shelf of tins with their tops bulging wickedly. A cookie jar full of crumbs. It seemed Aunt Edith had shoved things into storage with the vague idea she would take them out again soon enough that they could still be put to use. But she never did. She had emptied the house without cleaning the breadbox or unpacking the pickles before they turned to murk.

In the hot stuffiness of the storage units, the haphazard mixture of heirloom and rubbish began to irritate. Curiosity mingled with exasperation. *Can you imagine paying to keep all of this trash? What could she have been thinking? Could Aunt Edith simply have forgotten what she had done?* We were eager to be done and annoyed at the need to sort through refuse that should have been discarded decades before.

Still, it wasn't all junk, and aggravation was alleviated with the occasional intriguing discovery. There were some nice tables and chairs that we sent to our various dwellings and a huge desk that I commandeered for myself. A heavy cedar chest promised treasures, though it was locked and had to be carefully pried open to investigate. It exhaled a rich, old scent: fresh yet pungent, a tinge of warm sweetness in the wood and a lingering hint of forest. The chest was packed to the brim with clothing pressed to slivers and stacks of tied linen napkins and tablecloths. A quick rummage turned up the edges of what appeared to be silk kimonos and Japanese woodblock prints interleaved with flimsy protective papers. On the edge of a yellow satin garment I could see tiny scenes embroidered on the panels of a jacket: flowers, clouded mountains, a curly dragon peeking around a sleeve. One of those passports would bear the stamp of Japan. With our filthy hands we couldn't dig too deeply, but the discovery of items that might actually have some worth revived our energies. The chest was closed firmly and directed to be shipped to me.

There were stacks and stacks of books on shelves, in boxes, piled on the floor. Some were old, outdated school texts, others once-popular editions of the classics. Quite a few of the books were in German, many dating from the previous century. As we delved, the presence of an older figure began to overshadow my aunt—my great-grandfather, Aunt Edith's father. A Britannia-ware tea urn with etched cups and a tray was engraved with his name. It was black with tarnish. There was an elegant ebony cane with a silver cap, also engraved and the sort of item that would have been a suitable retirement gift. In the boxes of photographs there were more images of him than of anyone else. Had my mother not been able to recognize him, it would have been a mystery why the same bearded presence appeared in so many pictures. The etched copper photographic plate was still there too, handy should more portraits be needed. Numerous other faces were impossible to identify, and one handsome man, his strong, dark features at odds with those that bore the paler family resemblance, remains to this day an alluring mystery.

There would have been no reason for Aunt Edith to keep the family house with its ample space after the death of her father. In fact, when I knew her she always lived in a hotel. As I addressed those dutiful letters, I had thought it peculiar to live in a hotel, as if always in transit. But I never visited her, so I don't know if a residence hotel would have afforded a lone woman one room, two rooms, or a private bath. She wasn't poor, although the salary of a schoolteacher could not have been lavish. But she seemed to need a place to live that did not require that she exercise domestic talents.

She left less evidence of where she had lived than of where she had gone. More signs of travel were provided by a selection of battered suitcases and trunks of various sizes. We had relinquished the huge steamer trunk (and I already wanted it back), but there were several

smaller ones, and they all were plastered with delicious labels indicating their destinations: elegant sounding hotels; the various conveyances needed to get from place to place—trains across Europe, ships traversing oceans and heading both east and west. There were boxes of postcards from foreign cities that perhaps she had visited, buying souvenir stock images rather than bothering with a camera. I couldn't bear to sacrifice all those exotic traces, so I lugged a wicker trunk and a suitcase home. But dormant mildew spores awoke and flourished in my basement, necessitating a household hazmat remediation that sent them all to the curb. But the chest and the desk I kept, along with their perplexing contents.

And then, unexpectedly, disconcertingly, I discovered myself in her.

In the parking lot after our work drew to a close and just as we were leaving to go our separate ways, my mother opened the back of their car. With an ironic look, she handed over a trunk full of my own stuff that I had left at my parents' house after I moved away. *This is yours, take it. It's been in my basement long enough.* My own small hoard landed in my lap, prompting chagrin after three days of lofty complaining about how much junk Aunt Edith had left in storage. Later at home as I rummaged through my own stacks of letters, souvenirs, old school work, and a crisply disintegrating corsage, I found a letter my great-aunt had written to me when I was a student in Scotland, having (I thought) escaped the humdrum past in a way that no one else in my stay-at-home family ever had.

Have I ever told you that upon my graduation, I was urged by one of the professors to accept a scholarship at Edinburgh, which he had at his disposal? Had I thrown a bomb into the family circle, I could not have caused greater consternation. The final decision was, of course, "Thumbs down!" Thank heaven, some things have changed in the last two generations.

I had forgotten that I ever received that letter, and only when I read it again did I begin to recognize that the path I had taken mirrored something that she herself had desired in vain. Only then, as well, did I realize the sadness of her unmourned death. A prickle of remorse passed through me as I read once more her difficult pointed handwriting and heard her voice, personal and intimate, addressed to me, her only great-niece. I knew—woefully, belatedly—that I had meant more to her than she to me.

Discovering that your own life matches the pattern of a family member two generations before you is not reassuring. Rather, it raises doubts about the choices you thought were freely chosen from endless options. The possibility arises that you are moving along a path set out long before your birth. How strange it would be to find that I was following in the footsteps of this distant, difficult woman.

How could I not want to know more? But she was dead, her entire generation gone. All that was left were the things she had packed away.

In an earlier life the desk had been a piano, a square, lumbering instrument with heavy, bowed legs, a dropped keyboard, and an iron frame. Like many of its kind, this one had been converted into a desk when sleeker uprights became popular—a whole generation of instruments repurposed. In the warehouse it had looked smaller than the mammoth thing that was trundled to my house, hoisted up the steps, and tilted this way and that before it could be slid across the threshold. Two sweating movers heaved it through the front door and silently dared me to ask them to take it upstairs. Fortunately, the front hall was a large, square room, for there it stayed. A segment of parquet flooring bent under a heavy, bowed leg and a chair was moved aside to a place where no one would care to sit.

The desk was strapped closed with tough woven tape. When it was cut away the whole thing suddenly bulged with released pressure. The top of the desk was still the original hinged piano lid. The central area designed for writing had been annexed to serve as a storage container, and it was filled to the brim with small boxes and uneven stacks of paper. When the lid was lifted, it released an avalanche of paper, small boxes, and a battalion of pens that rolled across the floor and startled the cats from their afternoon nap.

At the warehouse, I had imagined myself writing at this desk, inspired by its generations of memory and the ghosts of those who had sat there before me. But before it could be mine, I'd have to empty it of the refuse that Aunt Edith had not discarded when she locked the warehouse for the last time. It held a maze of cubby holes and narrow drawers that extended inconveniently deep into the back of the former piano, and they were crammed with papers.

As I started to shovel everything into the trash, what at first had appeared to be simple debris sorted into photographs, letters, padded albums, postcard sets, marked calendars, clippings, concert programs, telegrams held together with rusting paperclips. It was the photos that first halted easy disposal into the garbage. Stuffing the faces of my long dead relatives into a plastic bag was at that moment unseemly; their indignant presence forbade it.

One or two of the faces were recognizable—my great aunt and her brother, their father, bearded and dignified—but many were anonymous and would now stay unknown forever. Most of the pictures were formal portraits on card stock printed in faded sepia. Neatly dressed people stared past the lens in that frozen way occasioned by a long exposure. There were numerous babies swathed in long, white gowns. Or possibly the same baby posed over and over. Most of the images were impossible to identify, but every now and then I found a glaring little girl who just might have grown into my aunt. In later photos, I was surprised to see that she had once been

pretty, barely resembling the old woman I remembered with faded braids wrapped around her head, camphor-scented coat, ample purse, large teeth. But here was a young woman with upswept hair and a high lace collar, wearing round, wire-rimmed glasses atop a delicate nose set between wide cheekbones. The glasses seemed to have been needed from an early age. Just like me. In a still later snapshot of a woman with her arms full of daisies I can discern familiar cheekbones, then a smile, and slowly a younger version of my great-aunt comes into focus. Along with the bulky hips, the shapeless clothing, a slightly awkward stance. Or are those unflattering impressions imposed by my childhood memory?

I propped two of the pictures on the hall table so that Aunt Edith could oversee my efforts.

There was a peculiar imbalance to the desk's design, probably the result of a piano becoming a desk. The frame of the piece was thick and heavy, as one would expect a piano to be. But the elements that had been added to transform it into desk were peculiarly dainty. On the sides were inset two long drawers that ran from front to back with inconvenient depth; their remote ends were virtually unreachable. In front at lap level there were two wide, shallow drawers, equally deep. The dropped writing surface had once held a keyboard, and at its back it was outfitted with four little drawers so delicate that their tiny knobs had to be grasped with fingernails. I tried one or two, but they were stuck and one miniscule knob came off in my fingers. There were a series of narrow cubby holes and a small central opening rimmed with a decorative arch. The glue that had held it in place gave way under my touch, and the little arch dropped into my hand. I looked forward to filling the drawers and cubbies with my own writing materials, even though they were bound to be inefficient. The small spaces were ideal for accumulating eraser dust and knots of bent staples and for trapping bills that would go unpaid.

The worst of the jumble was only in the most accessible areas. As with the warehouse, the farthest reaches were more orderly, and again I wondered what might have prompted Aunt Edith to throw so much junk on top of items that had evidently been saved with greater care. At the very back of the drawers I found bundles of letters tied with faded ribbons. They were gray with fine dust and addressed in an unfamiliar hand. The ink was pale and difficult to read. Perhaps they were love letters, for aren't love letters always tied with ribbons? They couldn't be hers, then. Or at least, that was my first thought, as I couldn't imagine Aunt Edith in love. But why? There was that childhood memory again blocking access to the younger woman she had once been. And perhaps to the woman she really was. The ribbons were knotted tightly, rigid with age and defying nosiness. *These are not for you.* I put them aside.

A small cardboard box had fallen to the floor along with a slide of papers. I opened it and found a collection of pen nibs. Easy to get rid of those; no one uses that kind of dipping pen anymore. Well, maybe I would save one with decorative etching as a kind of souvenir. But of what? Resolutely, I resisted the urge to save and tossed them into the trash, along with several rusting paperclips and two cloudy marbles. The only other thing in the box was a small leather case embossed with unreadable gold lettering. I pried it open and a necklace fell into my hands. A treasure at last! I put it around my neck and looked in the hall mirror.

It was a long chain of garnet beads ending in a tarnished crucifix. Not a necklace. A rosary. What a strange thing to find in the possessions of my adamantly Protestant family. Can you throw away a rosary? Respect—or superstition—said no. I took it off hastily and set it aside.

At the bottom of another box I found a letter from Japan, an outsized missive posted with a cluster of tiny, colorful stamps that took up most of a corner of the envelope. It had traveled thousands of miles, and one would think that distance alone would mandate a degree of

importance for the letter it carried. And yet it was just a short scribble written in unceremonious, incomplete sentences, the casual slapdash style of a scrap one might leave on the kitchen counter: Out for groceries. Back for dinner. Already fed the cat.

Tokyo

January 3

My Dear,

I am sending these for your next party, (how I miss those occasions, just a few of us in our own little society) and hope you will like them.

If you place them over a white cloth, be sure to use coasters for your water glasses, for am afraid the colors will run. Am also sending in this mail some Jasmine tea and two tea caddies. Will you please divide the tea with Miss Burt and also give her a caddy. I hope she is feeling better than she was before I left.

Am also attaching a “noshi” which is always attached to a present here. The long strip is fish skin.

May the New Year bring you heaps of good things.

Lovingly—

Nelle

Enclosed with the note was a set of fine transparent gauze circles painted with pink cherry blossoms. The delicate stack was still threaded together and obviously never used. Of the noshi there was little more than a dirty smudge at the side of the letter. Perhaps the traces of gray powder at the bottom of the envelope had once been a fish. Feeling slightly contaminated, I shook it over the sink and tried to brush away the fine sticky dust that had drifted out of the envelope.

Who was Nelle? Apparently a woman who had gone to Japan and missed her friends. The voice that spoke from the letter seemed so ordinary, picking up a conversation that must have concluded weeks earlier. Sending exotic gifts but desiring to be home at a tea party in old,

familiar settings. Had stern, no-nonsense Aunt Edith appreciated the tributes, or had she scoffed at their flimsy, feminine uselessness? The gauzy placements were rather pretty, but they were impractically delicate and fussy. I slid them back into their envelope and wondered if Miss Burt had ever gotten her share of the tea.

More items were piling up around me than were landing in the trash. I summoned resolution and started to fill the garbage bag with crumpled magazines, newspaper clippings, and out of date calendars. The wise thing to do was to scan quickly and discard. A date book with no appointments listed: easy to toss. Likewise a set of Christmas cards with unreadable names in faded ink. Into the bag. The padded greeting cards were harder to dispose of: fancy Valentines and Easter greetings with sentimental copperplate verses inscribed between flimsies. I tossed two whose velvet fabric border had split but set aside the others for closer examination.

A thin envelope drifted to the floor. It took a moment to recognize a Western Union telegram, its declamatory yellow now faded to a pale cream, the glassine window in its envelope split. What would it be like to receive a telegram, an urgent missive calling one away from the stove or the garden, causing the pulse to race, commanding a suspended moment of anxiety before being torn open. Not anymore. Now it would be a phone call, its ringing ominous in retrospect. Or a polite knock at the door and uniformed strangers on the stoop. Whatever news this telegram had announced was long past interest, but I sat back and opened it anyway.

ANNE KILLED YESTERDAY AUTOMOBILE ACCIDENT
SAM

For an instant it was as if the news were fresh. The waves of shock it must have brought echoed briefly. I searched my memory for an Anne or a Sam in the family tree, but none appeared. I folded the telegram back along its creases and, after some hesitation over the

wastebasket, replaced it in one of the long drawers. It seemed wrong to toss away such news so casually. Even old tragedies demand a pause of remembrance.

It was a mistake. Like other difficult eliminations, if it's to be done, it's better done quickly. I was too slow, and that telegram still resides somewhere in the back reaches of the desk. It should not be so hard to throw away notices that have lost their urgency or to get rid of odd items that were kept more or less by accident. But sometimes things seem worth saving simply because they haven't been discarded before. Their age issues a plea to the tender-hearted and the indecisive. I was both, trapped amid what a less sentimental person would regard as debris. But the more I excavated the desk, the more I seemed to hear tiny voices from the past demanding to be heard, to be read once more, to be remembered if only in fragments.

I took myself in hand. Surely some of the remnants from these newspapers could be thrown out. Print materials are impersonal, after all. It wouldn't be like tossing a handwritten note, the ghost of the writer a resentful witness as the letter descends into the trash. I vowed decisiveness and went back to the task. A newspaper was opened to a page that listed odd social details: who was visiting from Toledo, who was recovering from illness, the grapevine of a small town. And on the same page, startlingly, the announcement of another death: my great-grandfather, Aunt Edith's father. The beginning, perhaps, of her packing for the warehouse. Had his death been an irrecoverable sorrow? A liberation from the confines of a dreary house? Or from the obligations of a dutiful daughter? She had saved four copies of the death notice and seven letters expressing sympathy and high regard for the deceased. Two were in German.

And then more newspaper clippings, yellow with age and sharply creased.

We're Suffering From Moral Shellshock, Says Mrs. Asquith

By Marguerite Mooers Marshall.

New York, Feb 3.—Of the new world after the war, of the men and women in it, of flappers and unconventionality and the way to treat one's lovers, of her own dauntless philosophy of life, Margot Asquith, the wittiest woman in England, author of the century's most brilliant, fascinating and daring autobiography, wife of the former premier and great Liberal, Herbert Henry Asquith, talked with her own swift, incisive earnestness and intelligence when I met her at the Hotel Ambassador for the first formal exclusive interview she has given since her arrival in this country.

The name Mrs. Asquith rang the faintest of bells. Someone important enough to command an interview. Someone whose opinions were once worth noting. I marveled at the punctuation. Would any newspaper these days permit a sentence of that length to survive a copy-editor's chop? I scanned the clipping's edge for the year of publication, but the date had been cut off. I continued to peruse the views of the wittiest woman in England, who imperiously declared her disapproval of marrying in a hurry. To a question about the behavior of the modern young woman, she declared:

“It seems to me she has lost a certain modesty, which does attract,” answered Mrs. Asquith. “The man's role, in nature, is to pursue, isn't it? The female must be a little reserved, must draw aside, if he is to be attracted.”

“Never, never take any man too seriously!” she repeated, with gay emphasis. “Never be alarmed if he threatens to commit suicide after

you have refused him. On the other hand, be faithful in your friendships.”

The supercilious voice went on and on dispensing advice in an arch tone that brooked no disagreement. How remote her world appeared now, its remnants crumbling among the scraps in my hands. In spite of myself, I read the whole article.

Why had Aunt Edith kept this clipping? Was it even she who had scissored it from the newspaper? Perhaps it had been her father, setting aside a piece of advice for his daughter. Aunt Edith certainly had not married in a hurry. She had not married at all. As a child I had simply assumed that no one wanted her. Certainly in my own family she had the sorry role of maiden aunt—one of those extra females unrooted in a family of their own. Had this been a choice or a simple of lack of opportunity? Had there been an early lover who was lost to the carnage of battle or, less heroically, to a more appealing woman? That handsome, unnamed man in the photo perhaps. Or—a thought that never would have occurred to me as a child—had she refused marriage for other reasons? A voice echoed in my head: my mother at the warehouse alluding to her brother’s surmise that Aunt Edith had been more interested in women than in men.

My imagination stumbled. It was hard for me to believe that the colorless woman I recalled had any passionate life at all, let alone one that would have been regarded as illicit. I could feel the ghost of an older atmosphere descend, carrying the mores of previous generations and quashing tattle about a woman lover within earshot of a child. What had I missed? What had I failed to ask? For a moment I considered calling my mother and pursuing the question, but I was halted by an unexpected protectiveness towards this woman whose life was gradually being unearthed. If there had been family gossip, let it lie in the past.

I pawed through the mess on the floor and located that letter from Japan, reading it again to see what I might have overlooked. *My Dear*, it opened. And then: *Lovingly*. Fond as the terms were, they hardly seemed evidence of anything beyond friendship. The mixture of the exotic origins of Nelle's gift and the quotidian tea parties she missed gave no hint of a scandalous liaison. Reading the note again, I thought how dull Nelle sounded. If Aunt Edith had a secret life, it wasn't to be found here.

I turned again to more disposable litter. Folded alongside the interview with Mrs. Asquith there was a second clipping. This one also declaimed more deterioration of morals in society, taking a lesson from an unlikely part of nature.

MORALS OF WRENS LAX, SAYS EXPERT

Family Ties Never Bind When Birds Decide to Remate.

One S. Prentiss Baldwin had addressed the Cleveland Museum of Natural History on "The Travels and Family Affairs of Some of Our Birds." When husband wrens stray, he asserted, wives resentfully pursue them to their illicit nests. When this unhappy event unfolds, eggs are left to chill and die with no one to sit upon them faithfully. Mr. Baldwin disapproved of divorce.

It was tempting to see a theme in these snippets of newsprint: moral lessons for a young woman. Guidance from social authority. But there was nothing to prove that they had been saved together, or who had clipped them, or who had decided to save them. If anyone had at all. This collection could just as well be an accidental compilation of things that no one had bothered to throw away.

Surely this clipping, a stuffy old piece of archaic opinion, could go in the trash. But then I noticed an advertisement on the reverse that gave me pause: a strident declaration extolling a skin preparation:

PIMPLY? WELL, DON'T BE.
PEOPLE NOTICE IT. DRIVE THEM
OFF WITH DR. EDWARDS'
OLIVE TABLETS.

Were the tablets made from olives, or were they olive-colored? What a discovery if one could clear up bad skin just by eating olives. I wondered if the advertisement had made any money for Dr. Edwards, especially as one had to read twice to be sure that it was pimples, not people, who were to be driven off. If Mrs. Asquith had seen this page of the paper, she might have commented on the decline of grammar as well as of morals.

I was about to crumple the clipping and throw it away when my eye was caught by a story above the pimple remedy. It was a continuation of one begun on an earlier page.

DEATH HIDES ON RUSSIAN STEPPES
(Continued From First Page)

burial. Freezing refugees remove all garments from the dead, so the frozen bodies are nude when the scavengers collect them.

Families drift apart and wander aimlessly on to their inevitable fate. Human instincts are lost and they become little better than beasts. The city and town populations are so hardened to suffering that they are little moved by the misery which lies all about them. Death seems more merciful in the country for the refugees. They sink into the white covering of the endless plain, and wolves strip their bones.

Wolves strip their bones.

The clipping dangled from my fingers over the wastebasket for a long moment before I folded it again and tucked it back into Aunt Edith's desk.

It would never be only mine.

The desk still stands in my front hall. It is now covered with photographs of my own family, with souvenirs, catalogs, magazines, and accumulations of mail. It is a depot for cell phones, loose change, and car keys to be grabbed on the way out the door. Every so often these things are lifted away so that it can be dusted and polished to its old, dark shine. Its antiquated dignity now blends with the room's other furniture, and it looks comfortable next to a potted plant and a mirror.

But don't open the drawers. The past is still there, ready to spill out and snare the unwary.