

AUNT CHLOE

A Journal of Artful Candor

ISSUE 2021

Toni Ann Johnson

THIS SIDE AND THAT

When I pass on, my second son will arrive more than twenty minutes late to my funeral. With wild, dyed hair in need of a cut, and his Burberry overcoat rumpled, Philip will drag open the door to the stone chapel, causing it to creak and scuff against the slate gray floor. He'll stand there stiff, wide-eyed, and bewildered as each head in every pew turns to stare at him while my niece May reads the obituary that I'll have written myself.

Sighs and rolling eyes will shame him on my behalf as they add this offense to others: the time he went silent and shunned me for months, the many times he raised his voice, and the time he left me to die in a sub-par nursing home, when he could have afforded better. But I'll receive his last act of aggression toward me without resistance or dismay because in the end I'll observe, and accept, and I'll let things be.

Philip's un-shined shoes will flap up the aisle followed by Madeline's thin heels clicking behind them. She too will be late because when I pass on she'll still be young enough to hope her father will do what he says: get her to the church on time. Stop breaking the hearts of those who try to love him.

Lawrence, my first son, will glance at his lovely wife of thirty years and grit his teeth when his brother's foot loudly bumps the pew across from Velma, Phil's second ex, who'll

frown at Phil and tell herself she's there only to support her daughter and stepdaughter. This will be untrue. She'll be there for herself. I'll understand. Velma once belonged and then she didn't, and exclusion was more than she could bear. I'll neglect to name her among those I've left behind because she won't be family when I go, but she will be there, because she'll refuse not to be, and eventually her tenacity will win and she'll belong.

It'll be October. Cool and sunny rays will shine through the Tiffany stained glass windows. I might be resting in one of those rays, watching everything, and hearing all.

Philip will slouch next to Madeline and behind his elder daughter Livia, who'll have risen before dawn to drive to the Bronx from Boston with her baby and spouse, letting nothing, not her prestigious job, nor her husband's, not infant car sickness, or soiled, smelly diapers keep her from arriving on time.

Philip's stomach will growl even though his morning tea with scotch and toast will have contributed to his lateness. He'll feel too warm in his suit. And he'll note with surprise all the people—so many—who'll be there to pay respects. He'll think ahead to when it's his time and wonder: who will show?

Family will be seated everywhere he looks, along with neighbors, friends, and members of my church, a community I'll have cultivated over six decades. He'll see, but not want to see, that though my way wasn't his way, it didn't amount to less than his. When it's over, he'll see my little life had meaning.

He'll marvel at how I'll have stuck with those he fled because he wished for things the white world had, like tennis clubs, and homes with grounds and swimming pools, Swiss Alps ski-trips, and women with slight buttocks. He believed those things were better.

When I pass on, Philip will tell himself his choice to leave one wife, and then another was right for him, though a voice in his head will ask *what if?* What if he'd stayed, put down roots, and watered them? What if he'd not destroyed two families? Would life have been worse had he nurtured the lives he made, or stuck with the community he came from?

The choir, dressed in blood red robes, will sing somber hymns I'll have chosen myself before my demented mind slipped too far to reach.

With a ponderous face, Philip will sit legs crossed, his fingers stroking the hair on his chin, and he'll think that if his choices were mistakes he can trace them back to me. He'll remember the many times I pushed him away, and days when my words were unkind. He'll believe I favored his brother, and sometimes I did. The music and voices that fill the church won't soften his ire, or quell his clanging thoughts of my transgressions.

The melodies will, however, seep inside my granddaughters, and slip through fissures in the armor they'll have cloaked around hearts wounded by the ways their parents failed them too. They'll tow resentments piled in childhood, but unlike their father they'll long to let theirs go. When I pass on, they'll still be tender enough inside to hope they *can* release them.

I'll have done all I could to make things right with Philip. I will have offered apologies, written notes, letters, crocheted afghans, prayed, and made late-night calls to say I love you, before my earthly mind forgets the name and face I gave him, and he puts me in a place where mothers of bitter sons wait to shed their shells and dance in the new dimension.

Before I lose my memory I will have learned that in mothering there is no making up for the love you don't give. What you do, or don't do with your offspring—the good and bad—makes the mold that shapes them.

Philip will lean back in his leather chair, smoke cigarettes, and talk endlessly about these molds. He'll analyze them, pathologize, and theorize about them, but the truth is, once set, they don't change. And yet he'll spend his professional life looking for ways to mend the minds and hearts that yield from the shoddy molds (his own included). When I pass on, I'll learn that in the living these defects can only be ameliorated, not fully healed or even prayed away.

If this isn't the truth for all families, it will indeed be for ours. And I'll watch from this realm, helplessly, as my brood ticks forward in time lugging its pain. At first, I'll whisper to Livia and Madeline in dreams, *don't be mad at your father* (their mothers aren't my fault), and they'll hear me and still not be able to let it all go.

After my burial, Philip will hug Livia and her baby goodbye. And after Madeline leaves for the subway, he'll carry his wrinkled coat, draped over the arm of his tailored suit into the post-service luncheon where he'll linger longer than he'll plan to.

He'll ignore Velma across the room chatting with Lawrence and his family. He'll sit on a plastic folding chair and eat a second, then a third cucumber finger sandwich off a white paper plate. He'll make inconsequential conversation with those he deems unsophisticated because he'll have taken the day off and he'll have nowhere better to go. And because though he won't admit it, he'll miss me.

Long forgotten images will crack across his closed mind like lightening. He'll see me in my blue hat smiling in the front row at his high school graduation. He'll recall the lemony scent of my 4711 cologne, and the smell of our kitchen when I made mint jelly from scratch. He'll feel me rubbing his tired, ten-year-old feet with witch hazel after he's walked home from school in the rain. He'll remember how I held his little hand in the hot Bermuda sun when we skipped down the cobblestones past the tall steps of St. Peter's Church on the way to my mother's house.

He'll think I must be there somewhere among the simple people, sending these memories; and perhaps I will be, but the past will blaze in his thoughts because longtime friends and family from our neighborhood—sweet smelling ladies wearing hat pins, and carrying peppermints in their pockets—will regard him warmly and remind him of me; a me who's never done him wrong.

Philip will live alone at the time, in his tiny Greenwich Village flat, where his daughters will visit infrequently, and he'll serve them Jack Daniels coffee on a cluttered table stacked with matchbooks and mail. He'll boast of his numerous romantic conquests, and at the same time he'll be seeing a thin white woman from his other world Upstate. She'll be married, and soon she'll crush and discard him like a cigarette stub.

Not once will he visit my grave. He'll forget my birthday and speak ill of me. I won't hold it against him. He'll mistreat women continually. Sometimes he'll realize, and more often he won't, that though I'll be long gone, he'll never stop trying to get back at me for all that I didn't give him.

Toward his own end, his girls will come to accept their father's flaws, though not condone them. When his mind goes, its decline will stir up past hurts. Neither daughter will abandon him. Nor will they take him in when he needs constant care. By then he'll have a new sweetheart, pale and thin, like those before her. This one will be unmarried and live in the city, and she'll be kind. To Madeline and Livia's astonishment she'll keep him, bedridden and babbling, in her high-rise uptown until the day he's carried away.

One Monday morning in March, his sweetie will leave for work and he'll go into cardiac arrest with only an unlicensed home nurse from the Bronx by way of Jamaica to witness his

soul's departure. She'll holler curses and prayers in patois and call 911, and the paramedics will restart his heart.

Though he'll have left his body to breathe via machine he won't be ready to come when I call him. He'll think he still has things to do.

His girls will arrive by Tuesday morning. They'll sit with his brain dead flesh and bones until Thursday evening when the tubes are removed. That afternoon Velma will take the bus from Upstate, New York into Manhattan. Wearing gold earrings, bright lipstick, and heels, she'll be reading her local paper in the ICU waiting room as Livia and Madeline say goodbye. After the body expels its last breath, Velma will join the girls, the girlfriend, and the home nurse from the Bronx as they all walk east and then have dinner in a skyscraper above Columbus Circle. Velma will chat non-stop, enjoy the view, and the high-end meal, and not notice Livia and Madeline's silence. Despite having known their father's end was coming, its reality will stun them both.

Fond memories of his presence at their graduations and weddings, and the many times he took them on adventures will light their minds in the days ahead, though not be bright enough to outshine the dark ones. They'll think of him with love, while still wishing he could have been better to them, and to their mothers.

When he finally gets where I am, he'll have had no homegoing at all, just a small gathering the girls arrange at a restaurant on Waverly Place. He'll have frequented its bar for years, sitting late into the night with his Dewar's on ice, writing an entire book on yellow legal pads. A few friends will attend, though only two from Monroe, his white, Upstate, New York chosen home away from home. Some of the small town connections will have passed on before him. Others will turn out to have not been true friends. I won't mention this when I see him.

Velma will insist on being in attendance after first insisting that she be included in his obituary.

This I will comment on when Philip gets here and we'll share a good giggle.

A colleague will call the psychoanalytic theory he developed: fascinating, audacious, and a work of genius. A few family members from the Bronx and elsewhere will tell amusing stories of him rumbling with the boys from Mount Vernon, hitting on pretty girls with boyfriends, and sneaking out his window onto the roof to stare at the stars. And while it won't be for me to understand, Philip will watch with glee and be profoundly pleased with his send off, miniscule though it may be.

When he arrives here, I'll be the second to embrace him, and to smile into his eyes after his father, and he'll be amazed to find that he's no longer angry with me. You can't be when you get here, because the scars made in life don't travel with you. Nothing hurts. And there's only love. As far as what happened, and what's still happening on the other side, all you can do is observe, accept, and let things be. Together we'll wait for the rest of our beloveds, and we'll look forward to nothing but goodness to share with them when they arrive.