

Hidden Treasure

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The top drawer of my mother's bureau was a tangled mess of unmatched stockings in shades of ecru and taupe, solitary white kid gloves, swirls of colored silk scarves, and the occasional lone earring. In unsupervised moments, I loved to wander into my parents' bedroom, open that bureau drawer, and inhale the scent of old perfume and powder. The drawer held promises of womanhood to come, with its mysteries of scent and silk.

On nights that my parents went out, I would lie on their big bed and watch my girdle-clad mother, one leg shiny in its stocking, rummage in that drawer for the other stocking in suntan beige. After fastening a stocking that almost matched, she would fish out the faux pearls, untangling them from the inevitable scarf or chain that would be wrapped around the strand. Another search and up she would come with first one and then another pearl earring. Her outfit was complete. How beautiful she looked.

On rare nights, as I lay watching from the big bed, my mother would pull her navy blue gown from the closet, carefully encased in zippered plastic. As she stepped into its long satin skirt and zipped up the tight velvet bodice, my mother suddenly became magical, a fairy mother to a dazzled child. Then she would reach deep into that bureau drawer of tangled womanly mysteries and pull out a tiny gray box. My grandmother's lavalier. As she fastened the delicate chain around her neck, my mother always turned to me and said, "This was your Grandmother's. When you grow up, it will be yours."

My grandmother's lavalier. Its presence on my mother's breast, its hidden presence in a small gray velvet box in the far reaches of her bureau drawer, floated me into a fantasy world of handsome men and gauzy gowns, where I, a plump preteen in a Pittsburgh suburb, became a princess. And why not? This was, after all, the Cinderella era. Girls like me spent Saturday afternoons inhaling movies about winsome girls from humble circumstances capturing the hearts of handsome princes, and of fugitive princesses finding love on Roman streets. And, with a life-imitating-art masterpiece, Grace Kelly, the grown-up girl we all dreamed to become, married a real-life prince from an enchanted European kingdom.

So why should I not dream of becoming a princess? I had, after all, one of the essential elements of princesshood: the diamond lavalier. As princess identifies transmuted across front pages and movie screens, my hormones were awakening in a wash of possibility. I imagined the ancestral diamonds sparkling on my developing bosom, as gorgeous men, captured by their glitter, became enraptured by mine. Over and over, I replayed scenes of romantic encounters, unfoldings of impossible love, and tender joinings in eternal bonds. With much gazing and embracing, and even an occasional

kiss, these reveries played out chaste and intense longings, unsullied by sex, about which I knew practically nothing. Themes and variations changed the settings of the encounters, details of the adoring males, the style and fabric of my outfits, but one thing remained the same: the diamond lavalier. It encircled my neck as a passport to another world.

The world I inhabited from day to day was another story. The actual grandmother, from whom the diamonds purportedly ensued, bore no resemblance to anyone who could have ever worn a diamond lavalier, much less captured the gaze of a prince. Most of the year, my Grandma Rose resided in Florida with my mother's older sister, Aunt Sadie, and her family. Summers she stayed with us. Each June Grandma Rose set up a stern and silent residence in our guestroom, her flowered housedress pressed and starched, her wispy white hair encased in a nearly invisible net. I have no recollection of ever speaking with Grandma Rose, not because she didn't talk, but because she couldn't speak to me in a language that I could understand. My child's memory translated that other language into silence.

Grandma Rose set up daily sentry in the kitchen. She made soup from chickens with feet that actually went into the pot with the rest of the chicken. She chopped together roasted eggplant, hard cooked eggs, apples and olives in a shallow wooden bowl. Once each summer she made strudel, an all-day labor that involved rolling out seven sheets of paper-thin dough, each sprinkled or spread with its own sweet contribution to the whole. Grandma Rose ruled that strudel, meting out the delectable little squares piece by piece over the course of several weeks, just as my mother remembered from her own childhood. During Grandma Rose's stays, bacon mysteriously disappeared from our breakfast table.

After three months of quiet residence, Grandma Rose walked out of our lives, not to appear again until the following June.

In my imagination the lavalier glittered on the bosom of some other Grandmother, perpetually young, gliding through a gilded age in a far-away country. This was certainly not the grandmother that I knew.

When I was about thirteen, my grandmother died. I remember traveling to Florida for the Funeral. For the first time I could recall, my mother and her siblings were together. My Uncle Milton was the oldest. Large and imposing, he had a nasty comment for everyone, and especially for Aunt Sadie and Aunt Pauline. Aunt Sadie, as you know, was the older sister and second child. She was considered the beauty until she married Uncle Leo and had children. Aunt Pauline was the baby. My mother was the middle sister, stuck with the hand-me-down dresses and none of the attention the youngest child could command.

We rarely saw our relatives. Long before, my parents had left the circles of their childhood families for the better life they believed lay beyond the confines of the Bronx, and later, Miami Beach. We grew up believing that we had achieved the better life, and from what my cousins later told me, they believed that we were snobs.

I reconnected with those cousins about ten years ago, in a tearful reunion full of the presumed triumph of blood over water. From that reunion flowed a plan: We would bring Grandma Rose's children together in a reunion of their own. The occasion would be the bar mitzvah of my cousin Jane's son Jake.

Several months later, we all converged in a hotel lobby in Miami, three sisters, all over eighty years old, each attended by a hovering daughter. Uncle Milton, Grandfather of the Bar Mitzvah boy and true to eight decades of history, couldn't care less about being with his sisters.

In the lobby, Aunt Sadie sat herself heavily in a chair and looked at my mother, trim and lovely in a lace-trimmed blouse, the lavalier sparkling discreetly at her throat. I hadn't seen her wear the lavalier in thirty years.

"You manipulated Mama into giving you her lavalier," said Aunt Sadie. "It was meant for me."

"I did not," said my mother. "You had Mama's gold watch. Mama wanted me to have the lavalier. What would you have done with the lavalier? You were too fat to wear it." Well, things went downhill from there. By the end of the weekend Mom and Aunt Sadie weren't speaking to each other, and Aunt Pauline was caught helplessly in the middle. Meanwhile, Uncle Milton was utterly oblivious; presiding like royalty over sumptuous buffets of sculpted chopped liver and Viennese pastry.

When finally the weekend was over, we daughters, sagging now, gratefully ushered our mothers onto airplanes and back home, where their acerbic tongues could be safely confined to chastising their daughters for not being dutiful enough.

A few days later, Mom told me that she showed Aunt Sadie how wrong she was. "How did you do that?" I asked. "I took the lavalier to the post office and mailed it to her," said Mom. "That'll show her I'm not selfish." I gasped, "That was supposed to be my lavalier. You always told me it would be mine. How could you do that?" Mom had no answer. What I had failed to realize was that the lavalier wasn't mine. It was Mom's. If she wanted to tell her sister off by throwing their mother's diamonds in her face, then they were hers to throw.

I thought that was the end of the story, but it wasn't. Through these experiences, two of my cousins and I became friends: Aunt Sadie's daughter, Trudy, and Uncle Milton's daughter, Jane, the mother of the bar mitzvah boy. Now in our fifties, we became girlfriends for the first time, meeting every year or so somewhere between Jane's Miami and my Boston. On one of those weekends Trudy said quietly to me, "Carolyn, some day I'm going to give you back the lavalier. I have sons, and you have a daughter. You should have it. But I can't give it to you while our mothers are still alive."

Trudy's mother died a year or two later, at age 86, but my mother, as well as Aunt Pauline and Uncle Milton are still alive, all over 90, sharp-tongued as ever. Something

happened, however, that made Trudy decide that she couldn't wait for my mother to die to give me the lavalier.

It was the death of her son. Trudy had two sons, the older a hardworking, serious boy, the younger a free-spirited, dreadlock coifed, jazz saxophonist. Coming home late at night from a gig, Sean was killed when the driver, the band's leader, fell asleep at the wheel. Trudy and I grew closer after Sean's death. Each April, on the anniversary of Sean's death, I travel to Trudy's home in Tennessee and accompany Trudy and her husband to a silent Buddhist retreat deep in the North Carolina mountains. There, for hours that turn into days, we sit on cushions and meditate on our breath. Over the course of three days, a deep calm enters our bodies and our minds. We leave refreshed, centered, and reminded that all we have and all we are is impermanent. Our job is to breathe it in, and to breathe it out.

After one of these weekends, Trudy said that she had something for me. It was the lavalier. One diamond was missing, but Trudy didn't feel that she needed to replace it. Nor do I. Trudy asked me for one favor, not to tell my mother. Even with her mother in her grave, Trudy didn't want to deprive her of her victory. I, however, had my own mother to be loyal to, and I couldn't make that promise. Trudy understood.

When I told my mother that Trudy had returned the lavalier, my mother wasn't impressed. After all, she said, Trudy didn't have a daughter to give it to. Mom was not going to give her dead sister an inch, even unto the next generation.

I love my cousin for giving me the lavalier. It forms a bond between us that extends from our grandmother through us to our children's children. I think of the missing diamond as Sean's place in that extension, and a reminder that even what we most love is never ours forever.

Even though my jewelry now tends toward the chunky and ethnic, every once in a while I have occasion to wear something just a little lower cut, which shows off the lovely delicacy of the lavalier. I like to imagine that the lavalier's sparkle captures some of mine. I don't think that my daughter is a lavalier type. But I have a beautiful granddaughter, who loves to meow like a pussycat, and who serves pretend tea from small plastic teacups. Sometimes I can imagine her as a glowing 16 year old, with the lavalier around her neck, capturing the glance of a prince.