The hard hearts of the poor
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The hard hearts of the poor

A SHORT STORY BY JEANNE SCHINTO

My grandmother sat at the kitchen table, grudgingly kneading her arm, begrudging herself even that much attention to pain. Just below her knee, a small white square of gauze had been taped into place by one of her daughters, my dutiful, gray-haired Aunt Annette. Annette and two more of my grandmother's grown children still lived at home with her.

The old woman's leg was mottled like a piece of sausage, smooth and swollen and perfectly round; stockingless, hairless, lifeless. She looked at it with no expression, as if it were no longer a part of her body. The foot heightened this effect: Inert, it looked as if it had been squeezed, painfully, into the tiny shoe, almost a doll's shoe, but black as a nun's and in the same style as a nun's. Dainty, even ladylike — that was the shoe; the old woman herself was mannish, defiant, set like the face of a mean old cat, unruffleable, waiting in annoyance for both his supper and his death.

It was Annette to whom my grandmother had reluctantly started entrusting the housekeeping. And Annette fussed and tried to do a good job — a woman of 65 learning how to make a pot of percolated coffee. But the gardening was one thing my grandmother wouldn't relinquish. No, she would do the gardening herself, or there wouldn't be any garden. At 94 years, she was out in it daily, defying even the sun. And who could blame her? Still, that was why she fell.

Annette, unmarried, never married, though once in her 20s she'd been engaged to a butcher whom I've seen pictures of — Annette had helped support her mother, working as a bookkeeper for 45 years in a pharmacy she watched grow to be a chain with stores spread out all over New England. She had been retired just that year *Continued on page 46*

JEANNE SCHINTO IS A FREE-LANCE WRITER WHO LIVES IN LAWRENCE. HER ARTICLE ABOUT THE NORTHEAST DOCUMENT CONSERVATION CENTER APPEARED IN THE OCTOBER 19 *GLOBE MAGAZINE*.

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Hard hearts of the poor

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from her booth in a corner of the original store, and her prize, a gold-and-lucite clock, sat on the dining-room hutch. Annette must not have let herself think too often nor too long about the gift's smallness. It cost a lot of money; she knew exactly how much, because she had seen it in the newspaper, advertized by a fancy clock-and-jewelry store. And she wrote thank-you notes to the company president and several others below him. And she must have realized that from a life of such work there was nothing to expect but a clock or a watch (she'd been given the choice). But still she probably thought the idea of it was pretty silly — as if somebody had decided that she now had *more* need to tell time. Of course, she didn't: She had much less.

My grandmother's bruise must have throbbed like a heart, but she couldn't bend far enough to reach it with a soothing hand. The leg was stretched out in front of her, propped up on a padded chrome kitchen chair, having been eased straight and positioned by my Aunt Lucille. It was my Uncle Frank, my grandmother's only remaining son, who had found his mother after the fall, under a tangle of woody grapevines. He carried her down, down the steep steps of the terraced, quarter-acre plot, past plump tomatoes, green peppers shiny and artificial looking, and stalks of garlic and onions. Down, then back up the stairs into the house, where it was suggested that she might want to go to the hospital emergency room; but my grandmother shouted her resistance, and the idea was dropped. (Besides, I was due to arrive at any moment for lunch.)

I could not express my opinion and thoughts in this kitchen of my grandmother. There was arrogance and a foreign language to blame; especially the language. My grandmother had not bothered to learn English, and I had not learned Italian. And so I usually kept my teeth clamped behind my lips and pulled at the ends of my hair, saying to myself, and later to friends, what I really felt.

For the past several months, however, I had

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been receiving missives from my grandmother's household, written by my Aunt Lucille, letters of quiet alarm about a particular situation in the neighborhood that had summoned many local newspaper reporters with their pencils scribbling in notebooks open before them. I usually like to receive letters. The mailman is a friend. I like to see him walking slowly up the sidewalk, head down, sifting through envelopes. But these envelopes bearing the postmark of my grandmother's town were not a welcome sight. They filled me with dread, although I was amazed at their undeterred regularity and their thickness.

My letter-writing Aunt Lucille was so timid she wouldn't ride in taxis; she was afraid of escalators, too. She never went anywhere without Annette, especially since she had never learned to drive. She stayed in the house all her life, and was not even entrusted with chores — my grandmother had always done those; that is, she had until lately. Aunt Lucille made cream puffs, crotcheted poorly, and played cards with herself.

It was Lucille of my grandmother's three remaining children — my father had died of a heart attack 10 years ago, at age 47 — Lucille who was outwardly the most upset by her mother's diminishing good health and, separately, by the neighborhood "problem." In February Lucille had sent her first letter to me, Noel, her deceased brother's only child, and the only grandchild my grandmother ever had. I lived in the city then and worked, doing what, they had yet to figure out. I had been to college and then some, they knew, but still I didn't make a lot of money. I lived alone, and they didn't ask too many questions about that, either, afraid, I suspect, of what they might find out. And this was just as well. It was a comfort to know that my climbs up or down various ladders were not being charted in this household. Aunt Lucille had written me only Christmas-birthday letters until the one that said:

Dear Noel,

How are you we are all fine. The brick building next to us the man sold it. And the one who bought it wants to make a clinic for mental patients and the whole town and the whole street is very very mad and we are all trying to stop it. Theres a meeting on March 4 at the town hall. Everyone is signing petitions because we don't want. If we had a extra one I would mail it to you but I don't. It would explain better. Theres never a dull moment around here. . . .

That was followed by 21 more letters, each accompanied by a wad of newspaper clippings on the subject:

Dear Noel,

They won this round which is not important, the lawyer is going to set a court date but I don't know thats what counts. Better Ways is so sneaky at what they do. The stores have summer clothes out allready and they are very very expensive. . . .

Dear Noel,

They are determined to win and so are we. Are lawyer keeps saying we are so we all have to keep that in mind. Mr. Grassi our neighbor from up the street just walked in and they are discussing Better Ways. . . .

Dear Noel,

I hope you had a nice Easter. We did. Better Ways is winning the case. We don't know whats going to happen next. I hope they don't. Every-

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one worked hard spent a lot of money and time. It would be awful if we lost the case but it looks like we are. We changed the time again. I wish they would leave it one way or the other. . . .

Dear Noel,

How is your weather. Our heat still comes on. Its almost coming to a close and Better Ways is on the winning side. They are winning by being crooked liars and everyone knows it. . . .

Dear Noel,

Our lawyer is going to put up an unjunktion I know its spelled wrong. When I know more I'll let you know. Our weather is on the cool side. All the tenants next door were told to get out. I wish it all over. . . .

Dear Noel,

Don't believe what you read, it's a great big mess. The whole town is so shocked that we lost up until the last minute we all thought we were going to win. It took one man's vote to make us loose. We see the staff going in and out. Some of them sleep there they take turns. Here is getting hot. . . .

I saved all my Aunt Lucille's letters — I wonder if she saved my replies — and often read them over or just sat with them in my lap, staring at the wall. I flattened them out and kept them in a bulging file folder. In the folder I also kept jottings of my own thoughts. One line was repeated in a couple of places: *Their own fears will finally destroy them!* Sometimes I felt smug about having written that. Such melodrama! Other times it made me feel chilly. My own iciness.

We all learn to keep our mouths shut. For the benefit of old people set in their ways, avoid certain topics, and life will go much more smoothly.

But then how do you feel? Your stomach burns. And you wish you had decided to speak up after all. Over and over again, you wish that.

So I went there one summer day for lunch.

Uncle Frank greeted me at the kitchen door. He had an almost boyish face, a shock of yellow-white hair, a crooked smile, glasses very thick and rimless. He demonstrated everything with his hands. On this particular day, I could see his nails needed clip-

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ping, and I could feel their sharpness when he took both my hands and kissed me on the cheek.

Of all the members of the family, Uncle Frank dealt the most with the people on the other side of the Better Ways issue. In fact, he was the only one to have dealings with them at all. He had his words with the local politicians, too. His picture was in the newspaper, and his voice on the radio. At 70, he actually was changed by it. For the better. He was enjoying this crisp, fresh enemy, actually an old enemy in disguise. He was getting an idea, rather late in life, of how he was seen by others and how he sounded to them. He must have approved of the shadow he cast. He had always been a well-known figure in the town, in certain circles, anyway: the Boys' Club, the Knights of Columbus, the Sons of Italy. Fresh out of the service, he'd worked as a police-car mechanic, and he, like anyone else who spends any time around a police department, had gotten to know a lot of people and a lot of the less publicized things going on in the darker parts of town. Uncle Frank had never married but, like his sister Annette, was once engaged — to a widow with cats. It was not too long ago, and it had to have been a highly uncharacteristic period in his life. He knew all along, probably, that the flirtation couldn't possibly lead to anything more. His mother did not approve of the widow any more than she'd approved of Aunt Annette's butcher friend. And as for Aunt Lucille, as far as I ever knew, she never had a romantic adventure.

Uncle Frank stood very straight, like a boy in school, his chin held up, when we entered the kitchen, as if he were about to present me to the others for the first time. At least it seemed that way to me, a stranger, always, in this house. They must occasionally have been taken as man and wife, Uncle Frank and one or the other of his two sisters, I was thinking.

I kissed my grandmother's prickly chin, asked about the leg, but the old woman's arthritic hand waved the question away. I kissed my two aunts, too, both of them giggling, awkward, embarrassed, each replacing her arms across her chest, so tightly it might have been a day chilly enough for shivering; instead it was dripping hot.

I was made to sit at the kitchen table, and before me was placed a ham-and-cheese sandwich on a hard roll with mayonnaise, lettuce, and slices of tomato oozing juice; a pickle and potato chips; a glass of milk and a dish of cookies. All the while, my grandmother had shouted instructions in Italian to Aunt Annette about how to fix the food properly. Eventually I would have to eat, but for now I didn't touch it, though my grandmother and my aunts all began immediately to watch the contents of the dishes for any sign of change.

Uncle Frank paced, getting things for his own lunch out of the ancient refrigerator. He ate quickly, tearing at his sandwich with his fingers and his teeth, all the while talking to me, the food pushed to one side, into his cheek. My aunts, my grandmother, like nuns who are not allowed to eat in front of any but their own kind, abstained.

My grandmother understood only a few of the words being spoken, but she understood Uncle Frank's gestures well enough, and his tone of voice. He referred to newspaper stories of the last several months. She did not read the newspaper herself; it was read to her in translation by her children. And even if she had learned English, her eyes were failing. The skin of her face was trying to close them. The skin, wrinkled and cracked, was partially folded over them, making

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them into slits. The lids were useless — nonexistent, really — and lashless. Still the dark, watery eyes could look deeply into someone else's, even though the old woman didn't choose to stare very often at people. I don't think she believed that there was anything more for anybody to teach her, least of all me. I looked like my mother, after all, and she had a reputation among her in-laws of being flighty and dreamy and all in all not to be trusted. And my mother cried for "no apparent reason." I had inherited the lot, it seemed.

My grandmother twiddled her thumbs slowly. I thought I could hear the dryness of the sound her fingers made, like paper being rubbed against paper. She was wearing a housedress with buttons down the front, v-necked, so I could see the tops of her wrinkled breasts. A large mole decorated the crevice, like a jewel that had dropped in, gotten lodged there. She wore rubies in her ears, which had been pierced so long ago that the earlobes were elongated and the holes of the piercings made huge by the weight of those earrings. She listened as we spoke, Uncle Frank and I.

"When the projects across the street were built, did you complain?" I asked, referring to the brick high-rises that marred the landscape across the street. It used to be woods where my grandfather played bocci ball and drank a bit with his friends on Sundays, I'm told. My voice sounded clipped and too precise to my ears: I would try to soften the edges of my words the next time I spoke.

To answer my question, Uncle Frank said, "Naw," throwing down an imaginary something. Occasionally he had to finish chewing before he got on with what he was saying.

"Why not?" I cocked my head to show him how hard I was listening.

"Why not what?" Even in all his discussions with strangers over the last three-quarters of a year, he had not come up against anyone who needed explanations as much as I did. This is what his voice seemed to say, but I persisted:

"Why didn't you complain?"

"Because Italian people, then, they did not complain."

"Why not?"

"Why not? You see this house?"

"What?"

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"You see this house where you're sitting in it right now?"

"Yes," I sighed, tapping my pencil on the table edge. (In a notebook I always carried, I was half doodling, half taking notes, habits both.)

"My father wanted to buy this house in 1921, right? He was a barber, a very good one."

"I know. My grandfather."

"You never met him."

"I know —"

"Wait, let me finish. He had been in this country already 20 years, spoke perfect English, rode his bike to work, a model citizen, didn't bother a soul. He had some money. He wanted to buy the house for cash. They made him wait 16 months. Sixteen months! Sixteen months before they would take his money. Before they decided it was good enough. OK?"

My pencil was a pitiful stub. Aunt Lucille offered me another pencil and a variety of pens. She laid them all out on the table so that I could choose. But I still couldn't find the moment to let go of the present stub.

"The projects didn't go up until 1950 or so, right?" I continued. "Your father — my grandfather — died when?"

"I was 14."

"So it was a long time ago, and he wasn't even around to see the projects built. So hadn't things changed sufficiently by then?"

"Sufficiently for what?"

"So that an Italian might complain if something he saw as undesirable to have built so close to his property was being suggested by the town?"

"Naw."

"Well, then, I guess the question now is, if you didn't complain back then about the projects going up, why are you complaining so loudly about the halfway house, something which potentially will have much less of an impact on your daily lives — "

"That's what you think!"

I also thought: Poverty was something with which they were familiar; of course the projects didn't worry them. They did not have any friends over there, but the eyesore, the noise, they had learned to live with; they didn't see it or hear it anymore. But I saw and heard it, and it made me angry.

Uncle Frank picked up a newspaper clipping off the table, with shaking hands. It was from a tabloid, and he'd already tried showing it to me earlier. The item was datelined Stockholm, and the headline said: "Mentally Ill Man in Out-Patient Clinic Goes Berserk, Stabs Four Nurses."

I looked at my uncle, and then at my grandmother, trying to see into their faces. I could tell my grandmother knew what the clipping said. It must have been thoroughly discussed around this kitchen table. Right now she and I were the only ones seated at it, an Italian-marble Formica. Uncle Frank was pacing around the small, square kitchen. Aunt Annette still fiddled with food. And Lucille sat forlornly on the step-stool over by the window.

"Let me describe these Better Ways people to you, the guys who own the thing, this one guy, a stockbroker, who says mental illness runs in his family. You bet it does!" said Uncle Frank, who understood now, from my face, the need for something other than facts. He still was trying to persuade me to be on his side, and I admired his faith that it was possible.

While he collected his thoughts, I looked around the room, a kitchen so clean as to have been scraped by my grandmother, who had almost done damage in her zeal to have it clean, above reproach. The clothes on the line outside the window behind Lucille whipped up and caught my eye, making me look in Lucille's direction, causing her to squirm self-consciously. Could any person be that skittish? I wanted to go over and shake her. She and Annette, but much more so she, looked worried, like girls not being asked to dance all night long, like women waiting outside a hospital room to hear what a doctor might finally tell them. They looked worried and said nothing. And Frank looked as if he were having second thoughts about whether it was worth the effort, worthwhile wasting any more words on me. Then my grandmother spoke, saying something to her son, who translated for my benefit, with a look of triumph on his face, as if his mother had found a long-sought solution, and he was so proud to be the purveyor of information to the doubter:

"She says the people over in the projects are all right. Poor people, they don't bother anybody. Black or white, they're all right."

I began to eat my lunch. I sensed that the discussion was over. The three children fussed with their mother, a very small woman with a very large presence and a first name as unnecessarily beautiful as her garden: Annunciata. Or perhaps her presence only seemed large to me, and to my aunts and uncle. Finally it was decided *by her* that she would ride in the car to the hospital.

Later, much later, after many more things had come to pass, a concession arrived in the mail. I knew, as usual, that she spoke for them all:

Dear Noel,

Did you have a good time on your vacation? How is the weather? Here is cold. Nothing new on Better Ways so far there has been no trouble with them living over there. They seem to be very nice. They are all young. When will you be coming up again?

Love,
Aunt Lucille

The letter did nothing to soften my feelings against myself. •

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