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What the Dead Know by Act Three

“Just open your eyes, dear, that’s all.”
—Myrtle Webb in Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*

“Mama, am I pretty?”

I’m Emily Webb, stringing invisible green beans in Grover’s Corners at the turn of the century. My voice? Trying to achieve the Downeast New England accent learned from a cassette played in my pink Casio tape deck. I’m not great. “Mama” makes me sound not South Maine but South South. My beans are worse than my accent. In my seventeen years I’ve never handled fresh green beans and so my pantomime looks more sorcery than kitchen chore. It’s not that my family doesn’t cook vegetables. We just prefer cut and frozen, stopped in time until we are hungry, Bird’s Eye.

What the dead know by Act Three is that the living lack perspective. They miss the gift of each moment as it happens. When I tell you that I have lost my blue hair ribbon, you know where it is. “Just open your eyes, dear, that’s all. I laid it out for you, special. On the dresser, there. If it were a snake it would bite you.” What is mundane for alive Emily overwhelms dead Emily. I can’t bear the love, the lack. I lift the pretend ribbon, tie it to the end of my braid.

My mind carries a map of my children’s objects. The ten-dollar bill that slipped out of Nolan’s birthday card is on the third shelf of the hutch under a blue pencil sharpener. The green balloon is on top of the refrigerator with the old Halloween candy after too much fighting. Two pairs of sneakers sat out

in the rain last night beside the sandbox. One shoe has been carried a few feet away from the others. Some night animal.

My own mother lacked this map, or lost it through mothering seven children and their wreckage. If anything, she came to us for lost objects. Pens, certain serving spoons, potentially lucky mailings from Publisher's Clearinghouse.

We weren't big on hair ribbons, but ballet recital season gave us Sucrets tins full of bobby pins. My hair fell to my waist, heavy. Buns gave me terrible headaches, but they were worth the version of myself that my mother called beautiful. There is something to that. A mother's hands in your hair and then her mouth saying those words.

One morning, no performance in sight, my mother dries my hair in the dining room. I am in second grade. Jealous of my older siblings who seem to have more purpose in life than me, I have started inventing elaborate homework assignments for myself. First, a book report on *Ribsy* where I simply retype several chapters. This morning, a telling-time assignment where I am required, I say, to draw an analog clock for every single hour and minute combination. I trace an upside-down jar of Skippy for the circle, use a short ruler to make the hands perfect. I have dozens of looseleaf pages going, pencil shavings sprinkled here and there when the tip gets dull. I tell my mother that these clocks are due today, and I am just too busy for the hair dryer. Although she is a nurse, my mother has her own theory of infectious disease which seems mostly tied to wet hair in winter, neglected. She dries my hair. She is tender and she is not tender. She is beginning to question this homework assignment, calls it ridiculous, but seems to admire my uncharacteristic diligence. She moves the hair dryer in figure eights, a magic wand. She doesn't want to burn me. I sit at the dining room table and make clock after clock in the hot wind. The memory ends here. No way do I finish them all. Perhaps I confess that this work was make-believe. It's the kind of lie I doubt she would understand.

You, Myrtle, are played by a kind but forgettable woman. I can't conjure her face. But she sits beside me, wearing an apron, when I ask about my beauty. You are good with the green beans. You snap the end, zip the string off, toss what's ready in the basket. Your goal, you've told Mrs. Gibbs, is "to put up forty quarts if it kills me." But I'm the one who dies first. Childbirth. If the baby makes it, the play doesn't say, but I leave a four-year-old son in the world of the living. When, from the grave, I get to choose a memory to return to, I pick my own childhood, not his. I pick my twelfth birthday and declare everybody beautiful.

In college, when I'm still doing plays but not yet writing poetry, I get my first real haircut. My mother has trimmed my hair about once a year since I was eleven, but I have never had the salon treatment. I don't want anything

fussy. I was raised to only care about clothes and makeup when getting on a stage. I tell the hairdresser to cut it to my shoulders. No layers. No face-framing, whatever that is. There is no reason to pay thirty dollars for a straight chop, but I do. It's a mistake. When I see my mother over break, she tells me, "You look utterly nondescript." I savor my hurt and I know she is wrong. I have huge eyes and bad acne. I have a conspicuously plain haircut and my hair is bright orange. My forehead is high, my gums show when I smile, and all of my pants are too long. I am descript as hell.

I don't have any daughters to disappoint. All of my lovelys and beautifuls are given to my boys, not that they want them. "Stop," they whine, "We're not." I suppose all of us are doomed to get it wrong, to keep filling the basket with the invisible. As George Gibbs tells me over strawberry phosphates at the soda shop, "I guess new people aren't any better than old ones."

You have a rule. No books at the table. You say you'd rather have your children healthy than bright. The implication, I suppose, is that your children will forget to eat, to stay alive, if they are caught up in some story. But the breakfast itself is a fabrication, nothing more than a tale we tell ourselves in the morning. I say goodbye to it, to food and coffee. To clocks ticking and to the sunflowers you grow in our garden. I say goodbye to sleeping and I say goodbye to waking up.

But not before you answer my question. When you do, you are as honest as the living can be. "You're pretty enough for all normal purposes."