

ANNA SOLOMON

These Wildernesses

In our part of town, when I was very young, long before I'd told any lies, my father made himself into a strange sort of hero. He did this not through acts of great bravery or brilliance but by going on long drives after dinner and looking for people who, he decided, needed help. So it was that when old Mr. Seed went out into the woods behind his house, broke the lock on the lab where some university scientists were breeding an endangered species of frog, released every frog into the night and then wandered, apologizing, out his driveway, my father was the one who brought him home. When Sarah Putnam's husband left her to go sail around the world with his young mistress, my father shoveled her walk and brought wood to patch her fence and even tried to do the patching himself, though he was terrible with a hammer. And when Biddy Marsh would show up on the road wearing nothing but a diaper, looking as vengeful as a three-year-old can, my father would scoop her onto his lap, drive her up the Marsh's lane, and deposit her in the arms of her stoned mother. There was no one else to notice she'd been gone—Biddy's older brothers were off vandalizing empty summer houses, and Biddy's father was usually downtown drinking at the House of Howard—but when my father returned, he never spoke ill of the Marshes. They were unlucky, he said, that was all.

My father worked days as an accountant, a regular job on Main Street where his desk was metal and his office had no window. He got flustered when my mother and brother and I walked in on him there. He was embarrassed, I believe, by the numbness of the numbers, and by the fact that he didn't really mind them, that they absorbed him so fully he often lost track of time, which was the only reason we ever showed up at his office: to remind him of our lunch dates at the downstairs sub shop. He would look up, find us watching him, then cover his papers with one hand and his bald spot with the other. His right eye blinked for a few seconds, steady as a metronome, before he relaxed enough to stand up, offer a sheepish smile, and usher us out.

Our father's tic, like his nighttime forays, had nothing to do with wisdom or courage. It was not a sign—though secretly he might have wished

otherwise—of unique vision. Nor was it a result of injury. Our father's flat feet had kept him out of Vietnam; he was the sort of man who had never even been in a fistfight. His blinking was simply the result of a bout with Bell's palsy in his early twenties.

He'd been lucky, he liked to tell us, that the palsy hadn't crippled him. Just like his immigrant parents had been lucky with their business and he with his, like he'd been lucky to have found our home when the country was in recession and the blizzard of '78 had just blown through and nobody wanted an uninsulated farmhouse down a half-mile dirt driveway, let alone a sinking septic tank.

I've often wondered if he really wanted it himself. If he wanted to want it but couldn't. So much of my father seemed to long for the kind of neighborhood he'd grown up in, a packed ghetto in Brooklyn where people's lives were not separate things but one frenzied collision of desires and betrayals all bared so there was no shame. My father described it like this anyway. He did not believe in the reticence of our Protestant neighbors, in the stoicism of their stone walls, in the New England oak leaves which refused, all winter, to drop. He believed that human beings could in fact help each other. He believed it was his job to loosen and heal and forgive.

So perhaps it should not have been a surprise, given my father's public displays of beneficence, that when Biddy Marsh was about eight and her three older brothers had done enough damage that the summer people had started boarding up their cottages, forcing the Marsh boys to start breaking into local houses instead, that they chose our house first. And perhaps it should not have been a surprise, when they woke us with their unlucky loud feet and their unlucky larynxes, which had not been granted the ability to whisper, that my father would not want to call the police, as my mother suggested, but chose, instead, to try to reason with the Marshes, and that the oldest son, terrified by my father's sudden appearance on the stairs, would pull out a gun and shoot our deaf old golden retriever, Nell, who was too busy begging for food at my father's side to notice the intruders.

By the time the Marsh boys ran out, my mother and brother and I were at the upstairs landing. We could see Nell's body, which had slid down the stairs, leaving a trail of blood. We saw my father kneeling over her, his hands splayed in front of him like he was waiting for them to do something. I stared at the air he held and wished it would transform, into a rock, or gun—anything to give him direction.

"Max!" my mother shouted. "Max, you fucker! You fucker!" She leapt down the stairs and started slapping my father's head, too gentle to hurt

him but hard enough that I was scared. My mother was not a woman who shouted or slapped. I did not know then that she had grown to hate my father's heroism long before this night, that she had let it go on only because she knew it was his way of apologizing—for his luck, for being a Jew in a place where Jews didn't belong, for whatever million other things I still don't understand. She knew apologies pretend to be tender but possess a desperate force. "You fucker you fucker you fucker," she spat, then she looked up at us, standing there, and cried, "Look at your children! Look at your children, Max!"

But he couldn't. For what seemed like minutes, except for his right eye, my father didn't move. My mother pointed a shaking finger at us, and he did not follow it. He had already gone away from us—I knew this as a child does, simply, certainly—and I remember seeing myself then, for the first time really thinking about how I looked, a nine-year-old girl in a long, ripped No Nukes T-shirt standing next to my seven-year-old brother in his Batman pajamas. I felt every inch of my skin—goose bumps on my shins, warm pricks against my chest—as if my nerves were being played like strings. I felt my body as a thing that might make my father look up, but I had no idea what to do with it and so I stood there shifting from leg to leg, resisting the urge to lift my shirt and wipe the tears off my face, because I didn't want to be crying, and because I wasn't wearing any underpants.

Finally, my father gathered Nell into his arms, stood, and walked out through the door the Marsh boys had left open. The next morning we saw a tamped-down rubble of dirt under the big maple. The carpet on the stairs had been ripped up. Our father had left for work. Our mother stood at the kitchen counter, two school lunches neatly packed beside her, circling pet ads in the classifieds.