

Capitalizing on the Cute

When I was about three, our neighborhood had two local stores, both on the bottom floor of the owners' houses—Wadleighs and Bradleys. My mother and I used to walk down the road to the corner, where the two stores faced each other from opposite sides of the street. Often, we shopped at Bradleys, but at certain times we made a beeline for Wadleighs. Old Mrs. Wadleigh reminded me of Mrs. Santa Claus looking up from her papers, her spectacles dipped low on her nose when we'd enter the old building with its worn, unpolished wood floor.

My mother and I would prepare for those trips long in advance. Tugging at my jumper, adjusting the collar on my blouse, she would mumble. "You have to look your cutest today." I learned that meant we were visiting Mrs. Santa.

"Will she give me a candy?"

My mother would continue her fidget, mumbling under her breath even more.

Each month, my father received a small stipend from the university where he was a teaching assistant at the time. I would watch my mother, fingering the bills like a packrat as she tucked a few in this envelope, a wad in another, until all the envelopes had been "fed," as she'd say. Then, she'd pull out the meat stored in the freezer and tuck the envelopes under it, shoving them all way to the back as little flakes of ice fell on them. That was her ritual. Then I would start mine.

"Why are you doing that?"

"To keep the money safe in case anyone breaks in."

"Who would break in?"

"I don't know. Anyone."

"But don't they put their money there, too?"

“Stop!”

“Okay.” I’d hang my head for a minute, but then ask, “Why do you put the dollars in the envelopes?”

“So I know what to spend it on and don’t spend money we don’t have.”

“Oh.”

When we’d shop, out would come the envelopes accompanied by a cascade of ice flakes from the seldom-defrosted freezer. Sometimes as she pulled more and more dollars from the envelopes, I’d hear her sigh. I remember once asking, “What’s the matter, mommy?”

“I overspent again. Let’s go get you dressed to see Mrs. Santa.”

Suitably dressed, we’d walk once again up the hill, and again she would hand me the silver dollar gifted to me by my grandfather when I was born. “Okay, now go in and up to the counter and ask Mrs. Santa if she’ll hold this until the end of the month and give us eggs, milk, and bread today.”

When I’d return, my arms and mouth would be full. Mrs. Santa always gave me a hard candy to suck. Sometime later, I’d return to see Mrs. Santa and trade dollars my mom hadn’t yet squirreled away into the envelopes for the shiny silver coin, and she and I would once again walk down the hill. My uncle ran a grocery store in town. As I grew, I asked why we never went there to trade our shiny coin for food, always going to Mrs. Santa instead. “Your uncle runs a big store. They don’t help people the same way Mrs. Santa does. She’s seen you since you were a baby, and she knows us.” It never made much sense, since my uncle knew us, too. But, with the wisdom of a child, I accepted her decision and looked forward to the next of what became many visits to Mrs. Santa.

I must be fair to her, though. Whatever else happened in those early years, she did her best for us. At a time when nursing was becoming unfashionable, women without means often fed their children straight cow's milk or milk with honey, or even beer. My mother insisted on buying us baby formula, which was expensive. And, in the 1950s when people rubbed liquor on their children's gums or gave them a narcotic to calm their crying, she walked the floor, rubbed our gums with ice, and used natural remedies she'd learned over the years. What she didn't have in money, she seemed to try to compensate for with time, which often seemed to take a toll on her.

Years later, as she suffered through her fruitless lung cancer treatments, she shared with me one day why she so often ran short of the money she squirreled into her not-so-hidden envelopes. "No, Paula, it wasn't because of formula or anything related to you children," she confided. "Your father and I kept getting invited to parties where husbands swapped wives for the night, and I wouldn't go. I did it to keep our marriage. I couldn't have taken care of you children by myself." Sitting next to her bed as she lay resting, I remembered one of my parents' most common arguments. She would spit, "That's it. I'm leaving you!" He would retort, "And how will you support the kids?" Then there would be silence.

After her reveal, I remembered my mother sharing with me that I'd been born nine months after their marriage, almost to the day. "Your father didn't want me to be alone." I wondered if that was the reason, or if it was to cement his hold over this woman whose spirit seemed to shrink each year. While my children and I lived in Arizona, shortly before we returned to where they lived in Maryland, how much she'd changed struck me when she called one day. "Paula, he's taken the car and left on another one of his business trips, and there's no food in the house."

“Mom, I’m thousands of miles away. Call the local Safeway and place an order. They’ll deliver.”

“No. If he doesn’t care enough to leave food, he can come back to find my dead body. I just wanted you to know.” I’d once caught the end of their ongoing argument about her leaving him after we’d all grown up and left home. “Well, if you’re so unhappy, why don’t you leave? The kids are all grown up!” “No, I raised them, kept your house, and put up with your shit! You owe me!” Looking back, I wonder if it wasn’t just the years of smoking—a habit she picked up from him when they were courting—that brought on her cancer. Perhaps instead it was that she’d lost the desire to live, that dying was in some way her last retort in their years long argument.

Capitalizing on the cute appeared to be a common theme, though. In our neighborhood, whenever someone died, got sick, had a family tragedy, or had a new child, my mother would volunteer to go door to door to collect funds for the suffering family. She would volunteer herself but would always send me, even when I was young. “It’s good for you. Besides, I have to stay here and take care of your sisters.”

So, stomach roiling, I would trudge to doors on either side of the busy street connecting our sleepy mill town with the college town nearby. My tentative knock and explanation for the visit to their door brought mixed responses. “Hi, I’m from down the street. Mr. xxxx died, and my mom is helping put together money to xxxxx. Can you donate?” Some people volunteered funds, while others shrugged as they handed over cash. Almost no one ever said no.

“Good job,” my mother would always say. “Cuteness always wins out.”

But, although I was always cute enough to go door to door when needed, I didn’t stay cute. And therein lay part of the problem with the maelstrom. By my teens, my father started suggesting I consider a job in radio. “Your voice is pleasant.”

“I think I’d prefer television,” I responded.

“No, you don’t have the looks for television. No one would want to watch you. Go for radio, instead.” Combined with my science partner’s comment and my father’s ongoing comments that I was fat and ugly and no man would ever want me, I sank farther into the maelstrom. Ironically, years later, I tried a short stint working at the local university’s radio station reading the news. Nervous, I stuttered, hesitated, mispronounced and misread words. Radio was not for me.