

Erin Ergenbright
erinergerbright@yahoo.com

She Did What She Could

The building across the street was a tall, turreted, daiquiri-green disaster built by an aging architect with something to prove. For years mayor Ralph Scardino's grandmother lived there alone, and didn't bother us except to occasionally show up on our porch claiming a dead dog was stinking up her place and demanding we call the fire department. If you gave her enough time she would start weeping because a dog she loved had, in fact, died, beneath the wheels of her own car. After the accident she'd taken the bus everywhere.

The bus stop was on our side of the street, and mayor Scardino's grandmother liked to sit on our porch while she waited. When she died he transformed the house with beige paint and turned it into an extension of the county mental hospital, and like his grandmother, the patients on leave to go downtown for the day all waited on our porch. And I liked them there.

Every day, about ten minutes after my husband left for work, Mousie Rafferty rapped on the living room window and begged me for a cigarette. I'd quit two months before but still had Camels stashed all over the place. It was a testament to my will, I thought, but was still glad to have those cigarettes leaving the house, one by one, giving someone else a little pleasure. "Mrs. Joan! I need my smoke!" Mousie would say, a little frantic, tapping on the glass.

Mousie Rafferty had a face like an old balloon that had begun to deflate. He had the bluest eyes I'd ever seen, with specks of gold around the irises. When he wasn't smoking he was sitting with his head in his hands, muttering, "I was bad to my mother. I was bad to my father. I'm going to burn in the fiery lake." If anyone walked by, he'd wave and give a hearty greeting, but as soon as they walked away he'd drop his head and return to his muttering.

This was ten years before my husband died, six years before Anna was born, when Darren was two. I loved my son desperately but could barely stand to be around him. Because I'd worked in a day care center for nearly three years, I should have known why he screamed at meal times, slid out of his high chair and banged his head repeatedly on the linoleum, but because he was my own child his behavior was mostly a mystery, hinting at my failures as a mother. And I couldn't bear his wailing, or the desperation of the act. I used to get down on the floor and imitate him, thinking it would distract him or make him realize how foolish he looked, but he paid no attention. When he was acting out the world seemed to fall away, and there was nothing to do but wait. And the waiting was much more bearable when there was a group of crazy people on my porch.

On Thursdays, Mousie dressed up and took a different bus than the others. He got on the second bus that came by, instead of the third, and on those days he didn't speak to me at all. He always wore a black trench coat and a bright red scarf of boiled wool. He didn't smoke on Thursdays, and his lament about the fiery lake sounded like a song, something wonderful that made me want to follow him. After the bus had gone I would stand at the window, feeling that part of me was traveling away somewhere I wasn't supposed to be.

By then Frank was drinking more than usual, but I was learning to keep my mouth shut. Darren had been crying a lot, and while I was washing the breakfast dishes he would crawl around on the floor and pinch my ankles. “I love you,” I crooned at him. “I love you, you little shit, and if it weren’t for you I’d be back in California before you could spit your food all over yourself.” But I did love him. I suppose he was the reason I stayed as long as I did.

One day when Mousie rapped on the window to ask me for his cigarette, I hesitated. “Where do you go on Thursdays?” I asked.

He shook his head. “I need a smoke,” he said, putting two fingers to his lips and exhaling, his stream of breath hanging white in the air.

“Come around to the front door,” I said, and shut the window.

“Mrs. Joan?” he said, loudly, pounding the glass. “Mrs. Joan!”

I raised the window again. “It’s okay, Mousie,” I told him. “Go around.” He seemed doubtful, but when I opened the door he was sitting on the woven entry mat, facing me, one hand extended. “I need to ask you something,” I said.

“First give me a cigarette.”

“Do you go to see your mother?”

“Give me a cigarette,” he said, thrusting his hand out further. “Now.”

“I want to go with you,” I said.

He shook his head. “I have to smoke to think about it. Give it.”

I handed him the cigarette. He looked at it for a long while before lighting it, and then smoked for a few minutes with his eyes closed. He stubbed the cigarette out on the mat and threw the butt into the potted geraniums. "One more," he said.

"Mousie, no. Just one, that's the deal."

"One more," he said, "or it's no deal."

I got him another and watched him light it.

"Sit with me," he said, and I sank down and sat on the threshold in front of him. Each exhalation of smoke that wafted into the house made me both nervous and fairly desperate for a drag. I moved to stand up and his eyes flew open. "Sit, or you don't get to come with me," he said. "Be still. Let me look at you."

I knew Frank would be angry as hell if he came home at that moment, but I didn't think I had anything to fear from Mousie. It seemed he thought I was someone else, someone past, and that speaking to me gave him the chance to finish things left undone. "I'll sit here for two more minutes," I said.

"I was bad to my mother," he murmured, and reached out suddenly to touch my hair. His fingers smelled of nicotine and were scratchy against my ear.

"You need to take your hand away," I said, softly as I could. "Right now."

He nodded and threw his cigarette into the geraniums. "Where I go Thursday," he said, "I'll take you. Thursday we'll go."

That night I made chicken croquettes, Frank's favorite, and after he'd had a few beers I asked him about Mousie. They'd played ball together when they were young. "He used to be tough as shit," Frank said, nodding happily at the memory, the color high on

his cheeks. “He always smoked through the metal cage of his catcher’s mask. When the coach told him to put his cigarette out Mousie would snarl, ‘Fuck you, man.’ That was it. He was never kicked off the team, and never challenged more than once a game.”

Frank coughed and looked around for Darren, who was sleeping on the floor in front of the refrigerator with one of the cats. He lowered his voice and said, “Mousie was the first kid I knew who saw a body. He must’ve been seven or eight, because I remember my dad had just bought me a bb gun. Anyway, Mousie was on his morning paper route and when he got to Ollie Berryman’s house there was a police officer standing on the front porch, smoking. ‘Don’t think he’s gonna be needing that paper today, son,’ he said. Berryman would have drank himself to death if given the chance,” Frank said, “everybody knew that, but someone had come in late the night before and shot him in the chest. The poor guy was reading a book, for Chrissakes.”

“But maybe seeing something like that scarred him,” I said. “He was only eight.” Frank shook his head. “Don’t kid yourself, Joan. You didn’t grow up here. Dubuque’s a tough place.”

“But Mousie seems harmless, now.”

“Joan,” he said, sharply, then closed his eyes for a moment. He offered me the last sip of his beer.

“I’m just saying,” I said, taking the bottle.

“He was mean, Joan. Crazy,” Frank said, as if he hadn’t heard me. “Once he broke through the Peterson’s picket fence to kick the shit out of Billy Peterson, and he used a rock as big as a softball, to just keep beating on him. Over and over. Wham! Wham! Wham!” Frank said, using the empty bottle to illustrate. “But Billy was so dumb

he would eat anything we told him to,” Frank laughed. “We used to make him eat chicken bones and rotten sandwiches we pulled out of the dumpster at the police station.”

“Why would you do that to another person?” I asked.

“Don’t psychoanalyze me. Do you want to hear this or not?”

“Yes,” I said, and got up to get him another beer. I gently scooted Darren out of the way of the refrigerator door with my foot, and he woke up and grabbed my ankle, then closed his mouth on my big toe, hard. He didn’t have a full set of teeth yet, but it hurt.

Frank sat with his eyes closed, pulling his cheek, trying to remember all the stories. Darren climbed onto his lap and Frank put his hand on our son’s fine red hair and kissed his cheek. Darren blinked, mouth open, and I waited for the screaming to start, but he butted his head against his father’s chest. Frank looked at me. “See? He’s a pretty good kid,” he said, softly.

Frank kept drinking, kept talking. I was listening, but also comparing our childhoods. The dangers he lived through lurked around corners, waited in the schoolyard in the early dusk of winter. Mine were in my own house, the smell of smoke and liquor always in my nose. The pounding surf, the heat and sand, and, ultimately Frank, were my escapes.

When he started slurring I led him into the bedroom, undressed him, and got him into bed. I put Darren down for the night and stretched out on the floor beside his crib, listening to his shallow breathing and wondering what to do with him next Thursday. I didn’t have any close friends at the time, no one I trusted enough to leave Darren with. I could bring him, but if anything went wrong, if anyone saw us, Frank would shorten the

already tight leash on me. No doubt he couldn't get past the things he knew about Mousie, and the pain he'd witness Mousie cause. But he should have believed that people do grow and change, after all, the kids that beat on each other daily in junior high were now pillars of the community. Frank himself was the police chief, and I know some of his childhood activities were illegal, and Ralph Scardino, though he still drank and gambled but would undergo torture for the sake of his wife and children, was the mayor.

But Mousie's crimes were somehow in a different category. According to Frank, once Alex Barnheart had taunted Mousie, saying, 'Your mother blows you every day,' which had all the kids holding their stomachs and screaming with delight, and Mousie knocked him flat on the asphalt playground, stuck his index fingers at the corners of Alex's mouth and pulled, hard. Stitches were required, and Mousie was suspended for three days.

A few weeks later he disappeared. No one in the Rafferty family knew or would say where he'd gone and Ralph Scardino took his place as the terror of the school.

On Thursday I bundled Darren in his parka and hat and dressed myself in drab clothes and dark glasses. We boarded the bus with Mousie, who sat one seat behind us and leaned forward to whisper, "I have a secret surprise for you." Darren whimpered and Mousie didn't speak again until we got to the cemetery. Walking down the narrow aisle of the bus I felt his breath on the back of my neck, and thought for a moment I'd made a mistake, that maybe Frank was right in his fear, but once we passed under the wrought iron arch it was as if Mousie left the life he normally lived and swerved into a new one, a life as bright and open as a field of wheat. He skipped as high as he could and chattered

like a child. He grabbed my hand and asked what Darren liked to eat, and wanted to know the names and sleeping habits of our two cats. “And what about Mr. Joan?” he asked.

“You better not ever say that to his face,” I told him.

“I sure wouldn’t,” he said, “ever,” then pointed to a cluster of trees ahead.

“Quiet,” he mouthed, motioning for me to follow.

Though Mousie visited every week, yellowed tangles of weeds obscured his mother’s grave marker. He kicked them aside gently, then pulled an empty beer bottle from the bulging pocket of his trench coat. The small cross with rounded edges seemed a little out of place amid the older, elaborately scrolled stones surrounding, and Mousie patted it tenderly. From his other pocket he produced a small bouquet of blue flowers wrapped in butcher paper, then knelt and bowed his head. Darren and I left him there and wandered around the crooked headstones.

The Goodmans had lost three children between 1928 and 1930. A shiny pinwheel spun in a brown bottle near one of the small graves, and I had to shout to make Darren stop reaching and shrieking for the glittering toy. We walked on, and I read the inscriptions to him: Alice Miller, 1903–1918, was “*Too Good for This Life;*” Tobias Gunderson, 1899–1943, was “*A Pillar of Faith and Family*”; and poor Millicent Lee Rooney, 1919-1948, was “*My Love, My Heart.*” She’d died the year I was born.

The oldest families owned large sections of ground separated from the rest of the cemetery by short brick walls, and one was marked off with a linked iron fence. The tallest monument was built for Richard T. Pieplow, “*A Fine Man, Much Loved.*” Beside

it, a moss-mottled stone leaned backward. I stepped inside the low, linked fence and saw that WIFE OF RICHARD T. PIEFLOW was engraved in large, bold letters, and below, in much smaller type: *Sarah Freedmont Pieplow*. Near the ground, eroded so badly I had to run my hand over the letters to be sure I was understanding correctly, were the words: *She Did What She Could*.

I laughed, then covered my mouth, horrified. My fingers smelled like the metal pole on the city bus. I thought of my mother the day I left her, sitting on our living room couch with a big glass of gin in one hand and a cigarette in the other.

“Pretty gets you nowhere, Joan. Remember that,” she told me, but she wasn’t really talking to me, whom she’d never considered pretty, but to herself. She was beautiful, even with flaking fuchsia lipstick and bags under her eyes, too sloshed to notice her skirt had ridden up and exposed her veiny thighs. She just held on and on, fighting against kindness, against weakness.

Darren began fussing, and I picked him up and went to look for Mousie. He wasn’t where we left him. I thought he might have gone to the bus stop without us, but I sat down on the damp grass in front of his mother’s grave and bounced Darren on my lap, waiting. He struggled like a cat in my arms, bit my chin, then crawled over to the bottle of blue flowers and tried to put them in his mouth. “For God’s sake,” I said, grabbing his hands. “Please stop, please, honey, sweetie pie,” I pleaded, cradling my screaming child. The cemetery stones stood silent and a crow flew over, calling sadly to his brothers.

Mousie’s mother had died only five years earlier, though Frank said she hardly got out of bed after Mousie disappeared. Laundry no longer flapped on the line in their overgrown front yard, the other Rafferty kids ran wild, and a boy from the market

delivered groceries to their house. And when Mousie returned ten years later, she seemed not to know him. He looked the same, though he had a thin pink scar on his forehead, and had lost weight, but now hardly spoke, and would smile meekly even when somebody taunted, “Hey Rafferty, your mother’s a whore.”

She did not believe he was actually Mousie. He was repentant, changed, and she would not accept it. She liked him the way he had been—a terror, a menace—and perhaps had been in awe that she could produce such unbridled meanness. Once everybody learned he’d been in a juvenile prison in Anamosa they forgot about who he had been, decided he was crazy, and lost interest, but his mother wandered about, lost, hoping to catch a glimpse of the Mousie she’d known. One winter morning some kids who were ice fishing found her two days dead in the Mississippi.

“It’s sad, isn’t it?” I said to Darren. His crying had turned into an irritated whimper, and his nose was red so I knew I had to get him back inside. I kissed the top of his head, trying to warm it with my breath, and wondered at the idea of motherhood. Was it truly possible to be a good mother, to do your child good instead of harm? Intentions meant nothing, even then I knew this, and it seemed mothers were destined to be appreciated only in retrospect. “But you’re my baby boy,” I whispered, loving him at that moment like I’d never loved anything. Then somebody touched the top of my head, and when I twisted around Mousie was standing above me, grinning. “I *said* I have something for you,” he said. “Stay here and don’t move.” He ran down the hill, and I held Darren tightly to keep him warm and quiet while we waited. Mousie bent down for a moment, then stood up and crossed both arms back and forth across his chest like an air traffic controller to make sure we were watching. Then he raised one hand, pointing upwards.

Suddenly there was a crack in the bleak white sky, an explosion of green and red, and the smell of sulfur. Darren squealed, watching the skitters of color turning to silver as they dissolved and fell toward the ground. To me it was like a giant wave breaking, impossibly white against the blue, and I didn't blink until the last wisps of smoke had left the sky. I felt that my very heart had been split down the middle, and for a few minutes I thought I would get back on the train with Darren and keep going, traveling through the golden midwestern fields, over the plains and the mountains and back to my former home, finally, where I swore I'd never return. Anywhere else would be more, would be better, and I should have acted on the impulse of that moment instead of simply waiting for a tragedy to save me.

Mousie shuffled down the hill toward us, grinning, his head down, hands in his pockets, and I remembered that just after he'd returned to Dubuque he was twice arrested for setting off fireworks in public places—the library and Little Jay's Grocery—and each time Frank came home, eager to share another story about that crazy Rafferty kid.

"Those were wonderful," I said, and Mousie reddened and smiled, showing his small, awkward teeth. "I'd be scared to set them off. I had a cousin who lost an eye with firecrackers."

"I'm not scared," he said. "Mother, my mother loved fireworks. Fourth of July was our best day. She said the sky was celebrating."

"Celebrating what?"

"Us," Mousie said, lacing his fingers, and then bringing his arms out wide. "People. People like us. The sky sees everything. Mother said God in the sky sees everything. Right? God in the sky sees us?"

“I don’t know,” I said, though I thought about every time I’d ever looked up at the sky and felt something both so familiar and distant, so loving and vast and mysterious, and wanted to be part of it. “I don’t know, Mousie.”

Mousie wiped his hands on his coat, then looked at his fingers. “*I* know,” he said. “I know, Mrs. Joan, don’t you?”

We didn’t speak on the bus ride back, but Mousie sat beside me with his hand resting on my leg. Darren, miraculously calm, leaned his head against my shoulder and murmured. I didn’t make Mousie move his hand because I was happier than I’d been in a long time and it seemed as if we understood each other, that we both needed something that the other could give.

When we got home I let him come in to warm himself. I made some coffee and Mousie sat at the kitchen table for a good thirty minutes holding Darren on his lap. Darren stared into Mousie’s blue, blue eyes, smiling a baby’s faraway smile, and didn’t so much as whimper until I lifted him back into my arms.

There wasn’t anything to fear from Mousie Rafferty, I still believe this is true, but sure as we had spaghetti on Wednesdays, Frank heard about our little trip to the cemetery. I told him growth results from encounters with the world, though certainly the world turned out to be larger than I imagined, and Frank, always blamed me for taking such a chance with our only son. It was the only time he hit me. His open palm didn’t leave a mark, and he cried afterwards. I never cried in front of him again while he was alive.

And when Mousie asked, a few days later, if he could come inside for another cup of coffee, Frank found about it somehow, and called Ralph Scardino to have the bus stop

moved off our side of the street, moved out of view, even if one were to stand on the front porch, looking. A few weeks later Mousie was moved to the downtown branch of the facility and then I got pregnant again, which took up most of my time. I thought about Mousie, though, and when I could, went to the cemetery on Thursdays, hoping to see him. I brought his mother flowers and spent a little time with Sarah Freedmont Pieplow, the “Wife of Richard T. Pieplow.”

I didn't see Mousie again until four years later, in an open casket, at his funeral. He had entered a rehabilitation program and was working as a janitor at the high school, and Lila, our neighbor's sixteen-year-old daughter, told me he seemed happy. He'd adopted a three-legged dog from the pound and named her Canadian Flag. He took the dog everywhere, rode his bike with her draped around his shoulders, and talked to her instead of talking to himself. I told Emily to tell him 'hi' from Mrs. Joan, but I don't think she did.

I tried to focus on my own troubles.

Then I got pregnant. And the day after I told Frank about it he came home from work, drunk, in the middle of the afternoon. Early that morning, Mousie had let himself into the Johnson's house, washed their dishes from the night before, and then sat down to relax at the kitchen table. He wasn't doing anything but eating doughnuts and talking to their six-year-old daughter, but Randy Johnson heard his voice, thought he was a burglar, and shot him twice in the chest. Right there at the table with his daughter watching.

The funeral was not solemn, not reverent, and as one by one members of the old families shared their anecdotes about Mousie I tried to shrug Frank's arm from around my shoulders, but he kept it there, firmly. Their stories were not about the Mousie I

knew, not the stories I'd tell my future child about Mousie. When it was my turn to speak I whispered, "No, I won't, I don't want to," but Frank pinched my thigh, hard, and I stood up slowly, smoothed my skirt, and looked at everyone around me. The air seemed thin and sharp, the faces changed into pink and white spots floating in the green of the cemetery grass, and I could not open my mouth. I didn't want to share what I remembered. Frank grabbed my wrist and hissed, "Joan, come *on*," but I looked away from his face, looked up to steady myself, and vowed I would never forget Mousie's fireworks, way up above the trees and the town, splitting the expanse of sky into something wonderful, something I had barely begun to consider.