The Corners of Life

I'm standing on a corner on the upper West Side of Broadway, in New York City where personal history was made in the thirteen-story building you are looking at. My father and mother died with Jesus on their lips and an older sister and brother were found with alcohol in their blood and pills in their bellies. They had dusted Jesus at age thirteen when they topped attendance at the tabernacle of Pastor Nonsense and started down the backsliding road. 1 m staring up at the eighth-floor window where my remaining sister Rachel was nabbed at two in the morning by the police rescue quad after pedestrians had spotted her doing some of her funny stuff out On the window ledge. ' I was just getting some air. I was looking for signs of Jesus in the night sky," she explained to the officers.

An image came to me ,shortly after the ledge event. I aw myself out below the building with a huge net, a man on a perpetual vigil never breaking to eat or sleep, so I would be there in case she took the plunge.

"She is a saint. She is in Heaven. She is resting with the Lord," Rachel says in the psychiatric unit of a large hospital a block fr om the building where we grew up and she was living with my mother when she dIed. She doesn't remember the event of this year or their sequence. She doesn't remember the window ledge incident that got her committed here, or my mother's death shortly after her release, or the overdose f prescription drugs she took that put her in a four-day coma shortly thereafter.

Half a lifetime ago when] was twenty, l visited Rachel at Bellevue Hospital, farther downtown. She was a drinker then, a verbally slashing woman who got committed for a drunken sprint naked down the street before streaking was the national craze. I remember that she gave me one of her smirks and a Shakespeare soliloquy - that tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow thing - when I tried to get a conversation going.

The solarium, where we sit in pastel, stackable chairs, is cloudy with smoke. In a room off the solarium the plastic accordion-shaped divider open, a black woman solo dances ,moving druggily to the disco beat from the radio of a cassette-recorder. Shifting from dance to the life around her, she says, harsh-tongued, "It's going to be payback time for you going in my room. Don't be going in my room no more and stealing my things. My fine furs. My gold jewelry. My lacy, sexy underthings. But Rachel doesn't appear to hear her accuser's word . My fifty-year-old sister sits with her hands in her lap, her body gently rocking back and forth at the prompting of the Stelazine.

Rachel is doing so much for me. She is - she is just doing things.

"Come on, Honey. Can you do it? Can you do it with me?' The woman is moving lightly on her slippered feet I tell her that I don't dance, but she persists. so I go into the small room and do a shuffle with her.

"What's the matter with her that she don't dance?" she says to me afterward, glaring at Rachel. Leave us alone now, I'm thinking.

I give Rachel orange juice and a blueberry croissant. "Thank you," she says, and devours it and drains the carton of its contents with a straw. Mr. Parker is across the room, a little black man with a sweet smile and manner who always has something to say to me when I arrive, something just beyond my understanding. He's like some little forest animal. He's like some ancient kid smiling as the fire trucks go by.

Mr. Fogiarty is around too, in his peppermint-striped bathrobe and slippers that

show off his gnarled toes.

"I've asked your sister to marry me," he says, in a soft, frightened voice, and then asks me for a cigarette. I don't smoke, I have to tell him.

"I'm sorry if I bothered you. I'll go away now," he says.

"He was in Vietnam," Rachel confides, after Mr. Fogiarty has padded out of the room.

"Do you like him?" I ask.

"Oh. yes. He's a very nice man. "

Mr. Fogiarty has a grayed-out look. He has stood on too many lines, he has waited too long. He may have laid down Claymores and been in one of those helicopter gunships cluttering the sky. He could have offed the NVA in hand-to-hand. His very spirit could have been a blade slicing people open, but he's got an I-wouldn't-hurt-a-fly mentality now. He's been stationed in the corners of life, where every assertion gives him a sharp pain, as in the simple request for a cigarette.

"What are you thinking about?" I ask. Conversation doesn't flow from her. For a couple of weeks, after they had jump-started her out of the coma, verbosity ruled, and animation was in her face, as if, in the course of the four-day shutdown, she had been preparing to discard the old sealed and sullen ways. But a summer of fluorescent-lit corridors and rooms, of recycled air, of group therapy and doctors making their rounds - she's tired of it.

"I want to go home. I want to go back to the apartment. "

I tell her again what the deal is. Sooner or later, they'll let her go, but only on condition that she attend the aftercare program, which she wouldn't do following her previous stay. The·alternative is commitment to a long-term institution.

"The doctors are afraid that without aftercare you'll try to kill yourself. They think you're a high suicide risk."

"I'm a Christian. Doing such a thing would be going against my beliefs. It would be going against God," she says. I don't need to hear from her again how she doesn't remember any of the supposed attempts to take her life, or that she draws a blank about Mother's funeral.

"I miss her," she says.

"Who?" I say, forcing her to say the word.

"Mother." The word is soft from her mouth. Soft and deep, a magic word encompassing everything, protecting you from everything, a word you can sink into endlessly. Rachel is wrapped in the folds of this love, the only love there is, for everything beyond is cold, repellent, and hostile. She is a homesick fifty-year-old, the little girl at her first day of camp yearning for Mommy.

"Mark?"

"Yes?"

"Was I really at the funeral home the day before she was buried?"

"You were."

It's all somewhere out of the present reach of her memory, !hose three months or so prior to my mother's death. For her, she wasn't on a window ledge, she didn't find Mother dead of a stroke on the living room floor, she didn't slug down pills with a quart bottle of Pepsi the day of the burial.

"Would you like me to sing something?"

"Sure," I say.

So she sings the first verse of "In the Garden." It's one of the hymns the organist down at Cooke's Funeral Home on 72nd Street played for us, in a room where the air conditioning had died and Mother had been lying in her coffin over the long weekend. Mother always said that once God was in you, you couldn't turn your back on him forever, that the memory of Him would awaken in you. Rachel's faltering soprano sent me back to Sunday school and dreary discussions of things we read in the Old and New Testaments. I thought of the moist pretzels and candied apples I'd eat either coming or going. The sweet sleep you could fall into waiting for the Pastor's sermon mercifully to end.

It was fall now, and the city had cooled down after the scorching, frightening heat of summer that had come to seem like the Big Fry. When you've been raised a Pentecostal, you look for signs, whether a believer or not - earthquakes in Central America, famine in Africa, drought in the Midwest. You relate it to Biblical prophecies, particularly when you've had a mother who told you we were living in the last days and who read you to sleep on the Book of Revelation.

The walks began about a month before. Really, I just followed the lead of her psychiatrist, Dr. Gaynor, a sympathetic woman who would take Rachel out for brief periods of time. I'd walk with Rachel knowing it was a first, that we were doing something we'd never done and as if some miracle of reconciliation was at hand. The schizzy hostility, the jeering stance that had kept her dancing out of reach and defied my dream of closeness, seemed gone. A dream drew me back to her over the course of the fierce summer, and I would take three subways to my childhood neighborhood where she had lived in adoring but sometimes hostile dependence on my eighty-year old mother, who showed to me a Vassar College mug bought by Rachel thirty years before as hard evidence of her demented daughter's proven potential. You can get lost in the thing of family, want to throw the whole history out for somebody's understanding, as if you can lay it out straight in a court of final judgment: This is the way in which these siblings of mine mucked up their lives, but look at me - I'm cool.

One of the floor attendants, a black woman whose nametag said Doris, stopped us as we approached the door. "You can't be going out like that, girl. You'll have pneumonia. " She got this brown wool coat out of the closet and helped Rachel into it. The sleeves were too short and the fit was tight. All the drugs had swollen her body. I was glad for the coat. Not only was it chilly outside, but the dress she had on, a pink cotton thing, was stained.

On the street I would glance at people's eyes to see if they were looking at my sister funny. When I found no conclusive proof that they were, I got the idea that some of them were being tactful, as if they had figured out the abnormality of the situation and were turning away to spare me the embarrassment.

Every minute or so I would break the silence. "Is it okay if we go up here?" "Would you like to get a snack?" And to each question, she would say, "Whatever you want." Or if I asked, "Am I walking too fast?" or "Are you tired?" she would answer "No. " Her speech was simple, controlled. You came to her with words. She did not go to you. She could travel long, silent spaces with ease.

"Are you praying, Rachel?"

"Of course."

We were sitting in front of Low Library, a big bulky building on the campus of Columbia University at the top of a wide set of stone steps. Some yards away was

Alma Mater, staring out serenely at the campus from her throne, a sceptre in her hand and her bronze mass patina'd by age. The walkways of Columbia have these angled red bricks, and you could feel, in the soft glow of the lights of the solid buildings, a welling of an indefinable pain. The students seemed to mock you in their youth and promise, and you could, for a moment at least, feel that your perspective on aging was being challenged, that the years, rather than fill you with peace, could become an endless torment reminding you of all the things left undone. I wanted not to be forty but nineteen. I wanted to do better on my SATs and have a higher grade-point index. I wanted contact with old lovers. I wanted a giant penis. I wanted the booze I could no longer drink, because it had almost killed me. I wanted to live, to be from the plains of Kansas, to have Republican sympathies rather than urban politics. I wanted a circle of achieving friends and something other than a mindset influenced by the suicides of my other two siblings.

My sister had the look on her face of someone who wanted nothing, someone for whom the world had no meaning except to stare at the pigeons in the park. We had a history in these parts, and yet no one recognized us. We had no meaning for these students. They didn't even know us as the people from the shitcanned family. They were on loan to New York. We had been here forever,
I couldn't go anywhere in this area and not remember. Those were the same steps I had walked up with my first girlfriend twenty-six years before, when I was fourteen and a freshman in high school. The gym at the northern border of the campus had been torn down and rebuilt and was where I had worked up the nerve to kiss her. Where Chock Full 0' Nuts had been on 116th Street and Broadway, there was now something called Rickey's, with a Fifties jukebox and waitresses wearing cinch belts and petticoats under their skirts.

Claremont Avenue begins on 116th Street and runs parallel to Broadway and is respectable until 122nd Street or so, where it slides into the more dangerous, crack-wracked Hispanic section. Rising as a pillar of Rockefellerism and a line of demarcation is the single-spired Riverside Church, and along the narrow stone entranceway and past the reception desk and down a flight of stairs I lead Rachel; a trip down memory lane that finds all the elements still in place. This is where I played high school basketball, I tell her. That's the locker room where we suited up in our kelly green uniforms with white trim. But she doesn't seem to hear. Words about my past bounce off her. They have no stickability. Interest seems to be lacking in everything except her vision of things, which features Mommy and Daddy and Sundays at church and a loving family that never was.

I hear the boom of the balls bouncing off the hardwood floor before we enter the gym. I remember being a skinny white boy and my dread of being chosen for the skins team at scrimmages, because with my shirt off I'd be busier trying to conceal my prominent rib cage than staying with my man. But these weren't skinny white boys running up and down the court. At either end, you had two physical specimen black kids. Are they in sullen, slo-mo preparation for a game of one-on-one, or are they prepping for a race war with tough Mott Street Italians who fling Converse-sneakered Blacks off tenement rooftops? For them the game is a dance, is life, is a demonstration of their superior physical endowments.

"Can we go?" she says, pulling me from my nostalgia. At that moment I feel rebuked. I feel like I have been caught taking a liberty with her and that I have involved

her in something improper.

"How beautiful," she says, of the lighted Jersey shore, as we hit Riverside Park. After the church diversion, we are now on the route she would take on her daily walks.

"What kind of tree is that?" she asks, pointing to one with a chipping bark.

"A plane tree," I say.

"Thank you. "

For a minute I feel competent, pulled up and above those who are lost by my small knowledge. l would like to know all the trees. I would like to know every flower and be a master of science and have an Ivy League law degree. I would like to scoop up power bucks on Wall Street and have a wine cellar and a Swiss bank account. I would like to live in a fortress and ignore the idea that a sense of safety comes from within. Well-maintained buildings line Riverside Drive. I imagine Columbia University faculty occupying comfortable tastefully furnished apartments. I am a boy in short pants. My professor father has .just driven up in the wood-paneled station wagon. We will disappear up north at dusk the apartment buildings vanishing and giving way to grass and trees as we speed through Westchester and into Putnam County. We drive and drive, to a place where the small advances of civilization live in harmony with nature and do not threaten it. Near our clapboard house with the screened-in porch, a rail line will run along the mountain side. and I will find a painful pleasure in placing a blade of grass on the gleaming rail. There will be no immigrant parents, no inept rather and overworked mother, no destructive siblings. There will be only me, in the bosom of successful America.

"Do you know the stars? What star are we looking at?" she asks, having spotted one in the smoggy firmament.

"I don't know," I say, and my sense of security built on knowledge crumbles. A tide off thought carries me along on the ramifications of not knowing for my life. And yet, at forty, there are signs of sweet surrender. It may be all right not to know, it may be you don' t have to be the fact machine you fell compelled to be at age thirty.

We leave the park, and on the way back to the hospital, top for ice cream at a corner on Broad way, the building where my family lived rising above us. The new owners have had the exterior sandblasted; the building has a cleaner look than when we were there.

"What kind of cone?" the bad-tempered counterman demands.

I look at Rachel but she just stares back at me. "A sugar cone," I say. He rinses his scoop in gray water and quickly presents her with a vanilla con . She demolishes it, and I hand her a napkin to sop up the excess around her mouth.

'When can I go home? Do you think r can leave soon?" she asks.

"That' for your doctor to decide."

"But you could talk to her, couldn't you?"

'I do. I do talk to her." I tell her everything I know, but talking to a shrink is not conversing with your everyday person. They take in everything - voice, pauses, body language. They are reading you, some text beyond the spoken word.

Soon we are back in the smoky solarium, where she is hit with an attack of the past. “Oh, Daddy. Oh. Mommy. Oh, Daddy was so strong and brave. And noble, too. So in love with God. How he could talk of Him. You know Daddy loved you very much, don't you, Mark? Do you know who it was he wanted to see when he was dying? He asked to see you, Mark. That was his deepest wish, to see you before he passed on."

She was in Bellevue when he passed on. They hadn't talked in years.
The black woman approaches. "Dance with me again. You need to be with shaking flesh. You need to be with people who cook. "

I picture her as a Harlem warrior, with razors in her hair and a ring of thorns in her pubic hair. A woman it will give you pain to know. She pinches me hard on the cheek and smiles with wicked pleasure. "Even on drugs I can do that. Especially on drugs," and cracks her gum. "I be here to put you in the present, and keep you there. " Where the blessed folks live, I think, as she leads me toward the music in the other room.