

ROBERT MOULTHROP

www.robertmoulthrop.com

I've been working on this series of stories at various times over a number of years. I call them my Alameda Stories, since they take place in the real city of Alameda, CA. I had family there as a kid, so the place is perfect for taking strands of people and weaving it all into something else.



AUNT CAT'S PICTURE

YOU ASKED ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED, so I tried to remember. Mama never talked about it, not to me at least. What's here is what I pieced together, through overheard words, voices raised and lowered, looks—the shards stuck in a brain corner, wanting to merge, waiting for a stray sunbeam to strike the remnants from, say, pieces of broken glass, and suddenly, there's a pattern. "Oh," you say.

Mama's sister Aunt Cat lived in the old house on Ninth Street with her husband, Uncle Louis. They'd sometimes come over to our house on Pacific Avenue for an evening of cards. My father didn't care much for Hearts, but he liked Cat. So did I. She had a great laugh, read Shakespeare and someone named W. H. Auden, and never tired of teasing my father about being a banker over in San Francisco. She was the only one who could tease my father. Mama—well, she and my father, I guess they liked each other well enough. But teasing was not an option, with either of them.

Mama and Cat were born and raised in California, across the Bay from San Francisco. They had grown up on the Bay island town of Alameda, got married in Alameda, and stayed in Alameda. Aunt Cat and Uncle Louis moved into the family home, Grandma's house on Ninth Street, after she died, while Mama and Daddy lived in the house on Pacific Avenue he bought right after they were married.

Over on Ninth Street, there were fruit trees in the back yard. When I was little I liked climbing up and picking apricots in the summer or apples in the fall and eating the ripe fruit right there, hard branch on my bottom, scratches on my arms from the climb, sunlight filtered through the green leaves.

That's the way it is in my memory at least. Blue skies, scudding clouds, and that sharp nip in the air after the morning fog had blown away. And Aunt Cat out in the yard, hanging laundry, bending and stretching, while I look down her front from above. It was later I found out there was a name for what I was seeing.

Memory can be tricky, but then there are pictures. Like this one. Aunt Cat, looking in the mirror at our house, in Mama's and Daddy's bedroom. Pictures are real: Frozen time. And if you were there, then every memory is still inside you,

every feeling of longing, lust, mixed in with later feelings of sadness because it's all gone. Memories where you know the future and can't stop it, those are the worst.

Mama had just bought the camera she wanted. She'd said to my father. "Roy, I've saved up for this out of my grocery money you haven't noticed anything different in breakfast lunch or dinner so there I did it and I'm going to take some pictures and

[They] seemed to be full of a promise I was only beginning to realize existed. I was 14 years old, and looking at and thinking about women's breasts was pretty much a full-time job.

see whether there's something there I think there is and want to find out."

It was the 1950s, just a few years after the end of the war. I was home sick from school that day, when Aunt Cat came over. She brought three blouses in a paper bag, and I remember her purse was full of hair brushes and safety pins and her toothbrush and some Ipana toothpaste.

My bedroom was right next to Mama and

Daddy's, so I could watch by standing a little beside the door and looking into the mirror in Mama's bedroom. Mama said, "Why did you bring your toothbrush?" And Cat said, "Because I want to smile my best." Mama said, "Uh huh," and then began holding up blouses against Cat's front, and Cat would push her hair this way and that, and then they'd laugh and try something different.

"This will be the best birthday present for Louis," said Cat. "He can take this picture with him when he's on the road." Louis travelled around California showing movies about nature made by one of the oil companies to garden clubs and such.

"All those women," Cat would say to Mama. I'm pretty sure that's the real reason Mama bought the camera: she wanted to help Cat with Uncle Louis.

I watched them try this way and that way, Cat finally putting on a blouse and Mama opening a window shade, and moving around. Finally she said, "Perfect. I like you in the mirror. It's very artistic." Cat said, "Wait, I want to brush my teeth." I looked in the mirror and watched her foam the toothpaste and begin to brush her perfect smile. Mama raised her camera.

Cat looked in the mirror and said, "Don't you dare." But Mama just smiled and pointed the camera. "No, no," said Cat, and she hitched up her blouse in the front. "I don't want to show so much bosom."

"That's not bosom," Mama said. "That's cleavage. Just a hint there. Don't you dare pull up that blouse." And before Cat could move, toothbrush in her hand and toothpaste in her mouth, Mama raised the camera, and snapped the first of a dozen pictures. I looked at Aunt Cat in the mirror at the same time. I didn't care about the toothpaste. I cared about that place, what Mama called "the cleavage," which seemed to be full of a promise I was only beginning to realize existed. I was 14 years old, and looking at and thinking about women's breasts was pretty much a full-time job.

Then Mama and Aunt Cat moved away from the mirror, Cat changed her blouse (which I couldn't see because Mama suddenly noticed I was standing there and shut the door with a firm click), and they went outside to take more pictures in the damp side yard where the drooping purple fuchsias waited for the hummingbirds.

Even now when I remember, I smile, because of the pronoun: They. My mother was rarely a touchy person; surprising me when she did. Every now and then in the evening while I was doing homework, she'd get up from her chair and come over and give me a hug. And I'd hug her back; I loved Mama. I was short for my age, and when she hugged me my head fit just right on her chest, her bosom, which was nice. Hers wasn't as big as Aunt Cat's, which, when I hugged her, was warm and almost bouncy. But both women seemed to me to have that one thing: a bosom. That was a word I knew.

I had asked Mama when I was little: "What's that?"

"Don't point," said Mama. "It's my bosom, and don't ever say that word or talk about it outside the house." I was seven, and enthralled with new knowledge. I went to sleep that night, and many nights thereafter saying the word over and over to myself: Bosombosombosombosom.

Older, standing over by the fence at lunchtime, I could hear the cool guys at junior high call them tits and knockers and headlights and bazongas while they combed their hair and looked over at the girls who pretended not to notice.

I had inklings, but no real knowledge of what lay beneath a girl's layers of coat-sweater-blouse-brassiere. When I saw Aunt Cat's cleavage, that dusky center in the middle of her chest where one breast separated from the other, I was suddenly conscious that there were two, and for some reason my mouth got moist. All I wanted to do was bury my face in that space between, in the dark that seemed so full of promise.

Mama had the pictures developed over at Faye's Photos on High Street. Faye was the friend who had encouraged Mama to buy the camera. Mama and Faye had gone to high school together, and Faye had done something with photography during the war. My father didn't mind Faye; he assumed she was sensible since she ran her own business, though he thought it was strange that she didn't have a husband.

The Saturday afternoon when Mama came home with the pictures, she laid them out on the dining room table: Cat smiling, Cat frowning, Cat with tooth-paste, Cat wearing a dark blouse, a white blouse, turned this way, turned the other.

Picture after picture of my aunt, and, most important to me, picture after picture of her cleavage.

"So," said Mama. "What do you think?"

"I think they're cool," I said. I was trying out my new grown up attitude I'd learned from Ellen Katzenbogen the day before at lunch. She was new at school and didn't know I wasn't cool, so just came over with her tray and sat across from me. Ellen's father was in the Navy and they had lived all over until just this year.

Mama looked at me. "Don't use words like that until you're older," she said.

"Why?" I asked.

"They don't suit you is all," Mama said. "You're too short for words like that."

"Anyway," I said. "I like the pictures. They look like her, but better..."

"Better?" said Mama.

"Um, softer," I said.

Mama gave me a sharp look then scooped the pictures into a pile, tapped them together and snapped them onto the table.

"Get washed, and we'll have lunch, and then Cat is coming over to choose her picture while your father's over to the Lodge."

"Can I have a peanut butter and jelly sandwich?" I asked.

My favorite.

Aunt Cat came over that afternoon, but she didn't choose a picture. Mama took one look at her sister's face and sent me out to the porch. But she forgot to close the door, so I was able to listen through the screen.

"They say it's cancer," said Cat. "There was a lump, two lumps, one in each, um, breast. They were only hurting a little. But now I have to go, and they're going to take them." She stopped and I could tell she was trying not to cry.

"What does Louis say?" Mama asked.

"I just told him it's a woman thing," said Cat. "And he told me it was okay and maybe I could get it done while he was up north, he has to go to Redding and Red Bluff for two weeks the end of the month, so that's what I'm doing."

I heard all this, but I was still stuck on the words "take them." I was thinking about "bosom" and "cleavage" and how there was one thing made of two things and if they took them how could there be cleavage or a bosom, and how after she would still be my Aunt Cat but different, and what would it feel like when I hugged her and if there were no breasts...

I couldn't go on thinking about it. So I went over to the side yard and sat by the fuchsias to wait for the hummingbirds.

Cat died during the operation. She was the third dead person I ever knew. The first two were Louis's mother and father, Ev and Myrt, who had died in a car crash.

I was left on my own to sort out how I felt about Cat's dying; Mama was beside herself with grief at the loss of her sister and anger at Louis for being away on what she said was "his so-called business trip." I mostly missed Aunt Cat's smile and her laugh.

Louis was left alone, except for his sister Clara; he hated her. "Serves him right," said Mama

on more than one occasion.

He had hurried back from Red Bluff when he got the news, but by then Mama had hardened her heart. He had left, and wasn't there for Cat, and nothing he could say or do would change the way Mama felt. She never spoke to him at the funeral, and for a very long time she never even mentioned his name. She never, ever told him about the pictures. About why Aunt Cat wanted them, and how they'd come out. Mama put away the camera, too, and finally sold it back to Faye.

After Mama died I found the pictures in a shoebox on the back of the top shelf in her closet. I liked the pictures, and kept this particular one, even though the glass was cracked: I kept it for the smile she was brightening with toothpaste for Louis, for the remembrance of her bright laugh, the turn of her head, and the promise of her cleavage, all of which, but especially the last, I still look for in a woman, and sometimes find.

