

War Baby

North Beach 1946

My earliest memories are from 1946 when I was two and a half. I have always had a vivid memory of the inside of houses. I can see the apartment we lived in, the arrangement of furniture, the fireplace, the little kitchen. Right now.... *I'm sitting on the couch twisted around to watch the window where my little orange cat, Taffy, is trying to catch a fly against the pane.* I know this is a special feat of hers, the grownups have said it many times. So I watch for a long time every day and she really does catch them, trapping and then eating them coolly. The view is from our third story building into an urban jumble at the top of a little dead-end street. Romolo Place, above Vanessi's in North Beach. Opposite me is the fireplace with those burn marks where the Christmas tree flames flared over the mantle and scared me terribly. My father put the whole tree in at once! To my right is the kitchen space and then the front door. To my left is the bedrooms. Outside our front door is the hallway leading to Percy's place ... and then the stairs up where the marvelous Diamonds live. And the stairs down to where the street kids play.

This is the first period in my life that my father is to live with us. Before now he has been a sailor for many years. But when I turned two, he realized he would miss my childhood if he remained a seaman and so came ashore for good. Before he quit the sea, I would tell my Mom that I had been a sailor once too. She'd ask me *when was that? I've known you since you were in my belly?* and I'd say, *"that was before I was a hundred and started over again at one."* His nickname was Mink, and he preferred it to his given name, Harold. *I'm told that whenever we crossed the Golden Gate Bridge, I would start chanting "Minkdaddy, Minkdaddy" & point at the ocean.*

This is my earliest memory: my dad is sitting on my bed. He's telling me about the Ocean. He saw a giant fish, a manta ray, leap up out of the water and slap like a cannon when it came down. He saw a big colored poison snake swimming towards his friends and shot it with a pistol. He saw whales. He saw China. Every night he would read me a story or I would beg him to tell one from his time at sea. Or from his childhood. He & his wild brothers in pre-Aviation Seattle. Stealing cherries; the time he almost drowned in the mill pond....a dark room, my father's mesmerizing voice, the dreamlike illuminated stories opening up in my own mind. Yarns, he called them.

My mother is pretty. I see that suddenly on the street in San Francisco. A black suit with white blouse, black hair with brilliant eyes. She's holding my hand to cross the street in Union Square. I see her apart from me as one of the grownups, and ...the prettiest one. I feel very proud, like I have a secret. We go into Macy's and get on an elevator. I've never seen an elevator. Maybe it's crowded. Maybe I'm daydreaming. The next thing I know there is no Mommy. Only me stepping out on the shopping area alone. A panic that almost makes me faint. I yell out **Mommy!** Looking wildly darting forward and then stopping cold. A clerk takes my hand, soothes me a little...but there's still NO MOMMY. At last the doors open and she pops out of the elevator. Did I do something wrong?

My mother is temperamental. I have to be wary of her. There is the time of the scissors. I'm alone on the sofa in the morning, my parents are still asleep. I'm cutting things with her scissors. Just cutting little pieces of cloth. It was interesting. Slices. Beautiful closing action of the scissors. snip snip. My mother bursts out of the bedroom angry. She sees that I've cut up something important and rages at me. Shakes me. Scared. *These are shoulder pads! For my new dress! Damn you!*. Scared of her.

Don't know what is wrong or right. Just alone on the sofa doing things. There's always something fiery between us. Her affection, her anger. It wakes me up.

My parents were the hub of much visiting. Friends and kinfolk. I didn't know then...they were leftists. They had union people, writers, Reds, dropping in all the time. People who paid attention to me. Made much of me. Tried for a little joshing friendship. Amongst their friends, parents felt they shouldn't be called Mom or Dad, but rather by their names. My cousin called her parents by their names. This I learned later of course, but it came to me at that tiny age in this way: my mother and some friends were getting ready to go out. I was bundled up but the jacket was twisted. My mother was near the door, I was facing her and trying to get her attention *Mommy!* I must have said it over and over while she was gabbing with the friends. Suddenly she turned on me and said, "*you know, my name is Miriam. Not Mommy.*" Then to her buddies; "*He still does that "mommy" stuff...*" I felt it as a betrayal. She made me look like a fool, a baby. Never mind that I was not quite three. That's how I felt, stung. Stifled. Something formed up in my mind. *Never call you mommy ever ever.* And I never did.

Those were different times. People were cavalier about kids. *Go out and play.* That we lived on the third floor of an alley tenement in the most bohemian neighborhood on the West Coast didn't stop parents from sending the little ones out to play. I quickly had a best friend, Sonny. He was a black kid who lived on the lane next to Romolo, in a little street-level apartment. We joined a half-dozen other scampish boys who poked around the vacant lot and the backyard refuse on the hill for hours. Finding stuff. Once a dead rat with maggots seething in it.

Sonny lived close to Columbus street and told me there was a boogeyman down there. I had no idea of boogeymen, but it quickly took shape in my mind with his descriptions. A bad old man who could take you away with magic. One day we dared each other to go to Columbus, the forbidden border of our play. We wanted to see the boogeyman. As we crept closer the air seemed to congeal. We could hardly walk. We would panic and dart back up the hill a little then work each other up to bravery again. Two little squirts in raggedy clothes just three years old. Finally got to the corner and peeked around down the street. Just people walking. Cars rushing by. We took a few timid steps down towards Broadway. Senses flaring on alert. Sonny was in front, he knew what the boogeyman was. I was just hoping we'd escape somehow but I did want to see that wraith if I could...then Sonny cried out *'there he is!'* and I looked up and saw an old man in a black hat and a long black overcoat and a cane and a black twisted cigar walking grimly toward us. Oh my god, that's the boogeyman, just the way Sonny had described him. We ran like mice up around the corner and up to the vacant lot and into the stairwell at my place. Yow! Very close. Almost got us. Whew. *Now do you believe me? Yeah. Yeah. That was the boogeyman.* An old Italian gentleman smoking a stogie.

One day the vacant lot wasn't vacant. There were several cars there and a little booth with a man in it and signs all around. We were upset. He told us we couldn't play there anymore, he was selling cars. We hated him. That was in fact our only place to play. Next day I went down and hid behind a wall and started throwing rocks at him and the cars. He came running over and yelled at me. Said I'd be arrested and be thrown in jail! Wow. I wasn't really afraid of him, I just ran away. Still so mad I could hardly think. GO AWAY. GO. A. WAY.

Sometimes we went to the restaurant, New Joe's, right down from Romolo. We would sit at the counter and watch the man cook. Big flames would leap from his pans. Like the tree in our fireplace. Scary. But my dad loved it. Talked to the cook. Had a big hamburger. Watched them whip up a 'zabaione'. They let me smell it. Mmmmm. Still remember, right now...mmmm *zabaione*.

They put me in a nursery school. I hated it. I cried a lot when my mother left. Then a boy named Mike just attacked me. I didn't do anything to him, he slugged me several times. I was crying a lot. The teacher was comforting Mike. Finally my mother came and took me out of there. There was some shame attached, that I had cried and couldn't be left there. But my mother felt the idea of comforting the aggressor was screwy so I never had to go back.

There were other kids in the building. Percy for instance. He lived downstairs. I remember him coming up the back stairway and calling for me. I remember answering the door and he would be standing there kind of ruffled, wearing glasses. A pee smell came off him, his pants were a little wet in the crotch. Percy was like his name. Percy. He liked to play with his brain. We would tell facts we knew or he'd have a game board. Percy had a lot of made-up friends and stories. I guess I never felt like friends with Percy, but it was polite to play with him somehow. He was my neighbor. He came calling. But it felt like he was in his own world sitting next to me. And he always smelled of pee.

Upstairs lived the Diamond kids. Everything about them had the glimmer of that word for me. Their father was a doctor. They had nice clothes. They had dazzling toys. The daughter was older than me and I thought she was beautiful and special. I listened closely to everything she said. The boy was too little to play with. Once I was invited upstairs by the Diamond girl. She said they wanted to show me something special. I remember knocking on the door and feeling how important this was. I was an invited guest...

I had to act right, be polite, somehow manage to speak English while under the spell of Miss Diamond. She graciously asked me inside, and told me where to sit. They had gotten a movie projector for a present...*did I know what a cartoon was? No. Had I ever seen a movie? No.* I really didn't know what she was talking about. There was a screen in the room. The father turned the lights off and then a machine went on and a beautiful colored light blazed on the screen. Figures like book illustrations started dancing around on the screen in vivid color. I was absolutely stunned. I thought they had opened a window into another world. I couldn't make sense of it. There were words coming too, music. The figures were moving with such intensity and levity that I almost ran away. It was beyond a dream. I had no conception to match it. I couldn't follow it as a story, I was too distracted by the sheer visual beauty and the awe that they seemed to be living creatures in three dimensions. Where would they go after? Where had they been? When it was over, I was ashamed of my ignorance. I kind of slunk away while the Diamonds chattered knowingly about "cartoons".

One night we went to someone's house and I was put to bed in their bedroom. I was a little sick and not happy to be shut up in the strange room. I was staring at the ceiling and at the lamp in its center for a long time, feeling miserable. Then I noticed the lamp had doubled. There were two lamps! It scared me, something was very wrong. Then the two lamps migrated back together. Ahh. that's better...but then they went apart again!. Something was wrong. The world was not one, it was two. It felt like I was dividing. I couldn't stop the effect and called for help. My mother explained it was my eyes, not to worry, it happens to everyone. But it seemed deeper than that to me. I doubted my eyes. I doubted the Box with One Center that was supposed to be my world.

Sonny's mom & my mom had occasional arrangements. I would be with Sonny for an afternoon. One such day when she came to pick me up, both Sonny & I had said we needed to go pee. The two moms escorted us to the bathroom and we unzipped and commenced peeing. I noticed for the first time that Sonny's penis looked different and said so. He was uncircumcised. A ripple of embarrassment passed through Sonny's mom and mine. Oops. But there it was, we were different; not about color, but that was an undercurrent... for the moms. To her lasting credit my mother stepped up to this one, I recall her tone of voice more than what she said. It was something like:

“Well some people have this thing done to them as babies and some don’t..it doesn’t mean anything at all.” And the other woman joined in with agreement and matching tone. The tone was: *we accept that you have noticed and frankly stated that your friend has a physical difference. And we calmly assure you that it is just and only that.* It was: No blame for speaking, no blame for the difference.

In my mother’s retelling of this time in our life, she recalls the rat with the maggots as the turning point. I apparently told her excitedly to come see. She realized that her little boy was playing in garbage and dead rats. Our course was set to leave the City. We would move to my Grandma’s farm in Cotati and help her run it after the recent death of my grandfather. What I recall of this move is the day of moving. The family that came to help us had a little girl, Dorothy, my same age. I remember us noodling around to get out of the way of the adults, wandering down the stairs and looking at the rain. We said to each other that we were three years old. That felt big to us. We felt it gave us license to play in the rain. So out we went to stamp in puddles all morning while the parents loaded up a pick-up truck and then swept us both up like soggy pups, and we caravanned up to the country.