The Angle

Volume 2004 | Issue 1

2003

Messages

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Messages

Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"When you were ten, your father took you to the opera. You had to wear a dress. You liked the scenery and looking down into the orchestra pit, but when the singing started your attention wandered."

Cover Page Footnote

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Messages

When you were ten, your father took you to the opera. You had to wear a dress. You liked the scenery, and looking down into the orchestra pit, but when the singing started your attention wandered.

You studied the man on your right. He was probably in his thirties; had nice brown hair and eyes. Your brother had been telling you about mental telepathy and you tried it. Can I put my hand in your lap? It took a minute for the message to get through, then the man looked at you. He looked from your face to your legs and back. You’re a kid, he answered. He wasn’t even amused. He looked at the stage.

At intermission, you asked your father questions about the opera so he would think you were interested. While he was talking, you watched the people milling around the lobby. You picked a youngish man and sent him a message. Can I sit on your lap? He didn’t get it; he walked right by. You tried another. This man heard. He looked down at you with surprise on his face. He looked at your legs. Call me in eight years, he said.

When you were ten and three months, your parents had a party. Your dad strung the back yard with Japanese lanterns and your mother made you wear a baby dress with Winnie the Pooh over one breast. There were lots of women with white and yellow hair. They called you “honey” and said you looked like your mom. Some of them pressed you up against their massive bosoms where you felt packed, corseted flesh and had to hold your breath against the Chanel No. 5. There were old men who shook your hand gently in their cramped veiny ones. There were young men who drank steadily and smiled right into your eyes when you held out the tray of hors d’oeuvres. One of them took a cracker off the tray and grinned at Pooh. You blushed and offered the tray to someone else. When you turned around again, the man was looking at your bottom.

When you were ten and three months and eight hours, the guests were standing in little clutches. From the lawn you could hear shouted laughter and once the crash of broken glass. The tray was empty so you put it in the kitchen where a man and woman were whispering together. You poured yourself a quarter inch of wine you didn’t like and went outside.

You walked along the edge of the lawn in the shadows. You saw people standing like cardboard cutouts in the fuzzy lantern light; you heard their voices but not the words. Halfway down the yard, you took off your shoes and set them in the grass next to your empty wine glass. You kept walking. The ground became squishy as you approached the creek. You could hear the water running over the rocks. It was very dark.

When you were ten and three months and eight hours and some minutes, there was someone behind you, cursing softly. Damn! It’s all wet down here!
Take off your shoes.

He didn’t look at you.  What’s on the other side of the creek?

A baseball field.

The man groped for you, caught your arm, pulled you into the cold water.  You stumbled behind him over the rocks and up the short embankment on the other side. His hand pinched your arm.  He walked steadily to the center of the field.  Lighted houses made a ring around the field in the distance.

What are we doing here?

You know.

I’m ten.

I’m forty-three.  Nice to meet you.

The man put his hand to your neck.

Let me go or I’ll scream.

You won’t scream.  His hand moved over the back of your dress.  He found the zipper and tugged it down.

Daddy.

The man pulled your dress down on one side, holding you pinned to his chest, then switched arms and you were naked, in your underpants, shivering. Your arms were wedged, elbows bent, between your chest and his.  His free hand stroked your back, caught in your panties.  Then you were lying in the prickly grass and he was holding you down with one hand, touching you with the other. He fumbled with himself for a moment, forced your legs apart, and climbed on top of you.  His skin was hot. You were cold, chilled down to the middle of all your bones.  You stared at the millions of stars, at the black silence, and you didn’t cry.

When you were ten and three months and nine hours, you found your shoes on the lawn and went in through the back of the house. You went into the powder room and locked the door.  The light hurt.  You stood in front of the mirror.  Your eyes were dark and glittering, prominent in your face.  You brushed pieces of grass out of your hair.  You washed.  You peed, and it burned.

Upstairs, your father was saying goodbye to some guests.  You went to him and stood close, hoping he would put his arm around you.  He did.

You look tired, honey.

A woman with blue-white hair and diamond earrings smiled at you.  Was this your first grown-up party?

Daddy, you said, but even though you were screaming, he didn’t seem to hear.