

If I close my eyes but a little, I can see it, and feel myself there. I smell the delectable ethers of steamed vegetables, of ripe fruits, tofu prepared to imitate mouthfuls of heaven. The aromas are intoxicating, almost as is the company. My great-grandmother, Harriet Reniff, and I sit close together, our heads bent in excited chatter that is decidedly out of both of our more reserved characters. Across the round café table, a certain E. L. Doctorow looks on. He wears a bemused expression, perhaps, as he watches and listens; he once said that the writer must be a witness, and witness he does.

As I clasp my great-grandmother's broad but withered, leathery hand with its bony, gnarled knuckles in my own small hands, I am made very aware of how very old she is and how very long have been the six years since her passing. Mr. Doctorow will perhaps pardon our rudeness in ignoring him; it is a rare thing, to be reunited in life, as one nearly adult, with one who died so peacefully when I was scarcely more than a child. Her fingers were always so cold, as mine are—especially toward the end. Especially that last time I held her hand like this, as she sighed her last and her eyes opened a little glazed in death. It was not death as in television hospitals. There were no shouts of fear, no pleas to save her. I held her hand, and she mine; then it relaxed, she breathed no more, and the monitors uttered their monotone keening, the only death knell for an old woman with colon cancer.

But we are together again, for an hour or two at least; it is a joy to see her again, I tell her. My words evoke a rare smile; she was not a severe woman, but serious. She had little reason for much revelry for so long as I knew her—all of her siblings, her mother, her father, her husband, were long cold in the ground before my birth. She had her two children, and her grandchildren, and her great-grandchildren; still, she lived alone and the

joy of our presence required just that. I tell her I do not wish to speak of death; I do not wish to know what it is like or what the true religion may be if it exists. I wish only to speak of the past—of my childhood, of my mother's childhood, and of her (Harriet's) childhood. I wish to hear of how she felt when, at the age of six, women won suffrage. I want to know her memories, to engulf them with my amoeboid mind and to make them a part of myself.

What was I like as a little girl, Great Gramma? I've seen the family videos, yes; I've seen the pictures, and heard the stories; moreover, I have a good many memories. But none of those things tell me what I was *like* as a child. Was I insufferably driven by children's whim? Was I ever a cruel child? Was I a clever little girl? As bright a pupil as you could like? What did you think I would be? Where did you think I would go?

I cannot fathom what answers she may give; I may only account for one side, my side, of the conversation. And converse, I'm sure, I would.

Gramma, did you ever know that you taught me to love language? I remember you helping me learn to read; there is a picture of us on your sofa with a book, which makes me wonder who is reading to whom. You taught me those French words, too. I don't think you ever thought how much that handful of phrases could come to mean to me. I always wanted to know where you picked that up. Tell me your romances, Gramma, the great defining moments of your life. Be not ashamed, for in death you have nothing to hide, and we shall love you the more for it.

She will tell me of what bits of the world she saw, of the heartbreak of her husband's death (I cannot bring myself to call him my great-grandfather, for I never knew him—he died when my mother was small), and the joy of becoming a grandparent

and then a great-grandparent. And she will ask me what I mean to do with myself, now that I am so nearly grown. I tell her I mean to be a writer, and one day I shall join the Peace Corps, but beyond that I do not know. I will go where I am needed, to those places from which I feel a pull. Now, that place is New York City, to Pratt Institute where I will learn what couldn't be taught in so small a town as Dansville. (In speaking to her of this topic, my mind's eye suddenly recalls her shaky, childlike handwriting—her letters are in appearance like those of a person writing with her non-dominant hand. Perhaps she has been long doing so, but the shapes are forced and inexpert. I want to ask, but not to offend.) She approves, I suppose, of these plans. I tell her that she is my feminist role model now, and she is thrown. She was no feminist in the modern sense of the term, but I explain to her that she always seemed the strongest, most capable and honest woman I had ever known. In this capacity, she always had an aura of empowerment and equality; she was, and is, the type of woman I want to be.

Now I must turn and look across the table to Mr. Doctorow. I have quite lost sight of the time, but he seems only a little perturbed at my social transgression; I apologize profusely, and hope he will forgive my folly. I want to pick his brain, for him to teach me to write well, to show me the path, the journey I must take to find an individual, inimitable, and extraordinary voice that is wholly mine. I fear he will tell me what I already know—there is no path, only a refining of mastery in the English language, and extensive practice. It seems logical that his philosophy should be similar to that of Thad Ziolkowski in this way. The voice of E. L. Doctorow, certainly, is inimitable enough; he exhibits mastery of language in his experimental usage. In three novels, perhaps more, he abuses the sentences and neglects the comma more than any

most guilty third grade flunky. And yet, and yet—the structure is a clear reflection of the themes and mood; the ideas are subtle but concise. I must learn to do this. I must learn to master English so thoroughly that I have the *right* to experiment with form and structure.

Above all, though, I just want him to talk. I am fascinated by his writings, the way his mind seems to flow in the negative space and solidify his words. It seems that his brain does not trickle through the brilliant pages, nor does it simply lace them together as if it were binding. Rather, his mind seems the very heart of every piece—clever, tortured, and above all compassionate. I would have him speak nonsense for hours that I might understand the organ from whence his genius runs. Of Mr. Doctorow, this is all I wish. It is perhaps a waste of his time, but I should like to understand what I must tap into within myself to create my own persistent, alien, and unholy voice of humanity and doom and hope.

Having eaten nothing, I think, this could be the meal of a lifetime. Harriet Reniff, yes, must lay to rest again. Mr. Doctorow perhaps cannot, or will not, teach me—if he would, how happy I might be, but if he should only consent to talk to me, happy would I be, still. Simply, there are things I might know of the world from my great-grandmother, and there are things I might know of my craft from Mr. Doctorow. I have a hunger to learn where I can, and to understand what I do not know. This will be my legacy, if it exists only in my ashes as they are caught in the wind and whirled into the great beyond riding currents of air.