

Maemal's Heart

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You can't get lost driving from Chicago to Carrollton, Illinois; there's no simpler destination. Pick any day, setting aside five and a half hours. Drive south for four and a half; turn right. Go on for another sixty minutes until you see a sign boasting the town's population of 2,800. As you cross over the railroad tracks of the city limits, so to speak, make a quick left turn—now, this would be before you ride past the grain elevators—and park in front of the Levee Tavern. Mention my name and the owner, my Uncle Joe, just might buy you a beer.

I find great comfort in directions, the reliability of arrivals and departures, calculating the miles travelled, tracing my index finger along the major and minor arteries of a Rand McNally Atlas. Suddenly, daily contradictions are diminished in size and threat, and I live the neat, uncomplicated existence of an algebraic equation: ' $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$.' True ecstasy, however, is knowing precisely where you want to go and how to get there, without the benefit of map or other cartographic recipe. I'm haunted by life's resemblance to a pop quiz I feel destined to fail. Not because I refuse to do my homework, but for the absence of clear-cut answers. And so, the drive to Carrollton gives me reassurance that life can be a steady, cheerful ride along a scenic path.

Arrival in that small city is another matter entirely, for there I become part of the larger country known as "family," and well-known borders begin to shift. I'm no longer a single thread in a living tapestry, some familial work-in-progress. Instead, I belong to a tribe, surrounded by people who have the same last name as me. We're propelled by an ancient hunger for renewal and bring to the circle our argots, superstitions, and family myths. We huddle closer, fueled by rituals of celebration or mourning. But there is no ritual to address the reason why I drove here today. I have only come to visit Maemal.

Specifically, you do this: south on Interstate 55 for four and a half hours. Make sure you pack sandwiches and have one as you pass through Bolingbrook, since there's usually some kind of road construction going on. Clip past Braidwood, Dwight, Odell,

Lexington, McLean, Atlanta, and Lincoln. Begin to fall asleep at the wheel when you hit Springfield.

Attempt to spy the dome of the capital from the road as you're driving through—it's exactly at this one sort of hilly stretch of I-55, kinda past the sign for the airport, maybe two or three miles. You'll have to stretch your neck and focus over the treetops. But it's there. I've seen it.

I arrive at Maemal's empty house. Exhausted, I lay on her bed and study the ceiling cap where a light fixture should be. I wiggle into a more comfortable position, my arms spread away from my body, legs apart, and I feel like that drawing by da Vinci: suspended, motionless. My backbone becomes rigid and in my mind's eye I trace each segment of my spine, but rather than vertebrae, I see the road signs for the different small towns I pass while on the interstate. Driving down I-55 is a lullaby that rocks me to sleep and into some recurring dream. Each trip I am six years old and car sick, or ten, sandwiched between two older brothers in the back seat of a '65 green Buick, my parents and sister seated in the front. Or, I am thirty and travelling alone.

I stand in the kitchen trying to conjure up an olfactory memory of Maemal's fried chicken or sweet vinegar coleslaw, something that would architecturally support my own memories like beams and scaffolding. The house will remain empty until her children decide what to do with it. Until then, it serves as a guesthouse for vagabond granddaughters and the like.

The shelves and closets are mostly bare, a few photographs and nick-nacks remain. The house is airy, not in the way that makes me think of spring, but of something vanished. While sitting at the kitchen table, I concentrate very hard, sorting through mental snapshots trying to decide what is real and what isn't. I get a blurred image of her sitting there, not at the head of the table where she should be, but off to the side somewhat, saving the place of honor for my father, her oldest son. I can recall only two other memories I possess for certain, the others have become family myth—part reality, part hearsay—growing larger than the original.

You'll drive past neat cornfields, growing in precise, ribbed rows and opening up like Japanese fans. Singular squares of farm land cut into the earth resemble old Polaroid snapshots and document years of family and work and prayers for good weather. Stare with suspicion how the expanse of the flatlands distorts the size of perfectly red barns, populated with still and silent Holstein cows. Look to your right at the Amtrak rails running parallel and feel trapped in the enduring landscape, a scene built around some omnificent child's H-O train set.

Once when I was about 16 or 17, I sat next to Maemal as she played the piano for me. Up until then I never knew she won a local music contest in high school. The melody was breezy and romping though I can't recall the name of the piece, and doubt that I would recognize it again. In an act of boldness or innocence, I can't tell even in retrospect, I asked if it was hard for her when Grandpa died, leaving her with seven kids to care for alone. She kept playing, not missing a beat or giving me a look while she answered, "I was very busy, so I never really thought about it."

I believe I knew even then that it was a lie. While I don't think she spent nights sobbing, it's difficult to imagine her unaffected, despite her correct posture and stern warmth. Perhaps she didn't want me to worry or be afraid. And I have no idea what made me even ask such a personal question. But I did and I got the answer I expected, though I don't believe it was the truth.

Check your watch. If you left Chicago at 9:00 a.m., right about 1:30 you'll see a sign for Route 108, and off on the top of the hill, toward the left, there's the Country Kitchen Restaurant. Great cherry pie. Keep that in mind. Turn right onto 108. The two lane road passes over veiny little rivers such as Taylor Creek and the Little Joe, often dried up like death itself. Just past Carlinville—the big town east of Carrollton—about a half mile out, but still proceeding on 108, gas up and pee at the Mobil station on the left hand side of the road. Directly across the street is a Dairy Queen. Right about this time a Peanut Buster Parfait is not out of order.

The summer I turned nine, my cousin Bertram Lee and I spent our entire vacation exploring Maemal's sewing kit. I recall watching her for stretches at a time while she mended my Uncle's shirts or worked on her quilts, and when she was finished, we'd rifle through her supplies. Bertie always liked to play with the pinking shears and button-holer. I preferred piecing together scraps of fabric, matching the colors with different buttons. Our enthusiasm usually left the sewing kit in mighty disarray so that Maemal was forced to hide it or otherwise place it out of reach. The delight we took in this game was Juperterian, so while it did take us some time to unearth the sewing basket, ultimately we found it. Once, as Bertie balanced on a dictionary atop Maemal's rocking chair, reaching up into her closet to take down the basket, he began picking out her pin cushions: a tomato, strawberry, and the last one—heart-shaped and completely filled with pins. As a joke he dangled it in front of my face menacingly and said, "Look Annie, Maemal's heart!" Our humor has kept its darker shade and now the joke is, 'if you want to visit everyone in the family, you need to make only two stops: the Levee and the nursing home.'

In the front lobby of Mt. Gilead is a registry so that visitors may sign in. Like a wedding. Or a funeral. On Saturdays the local paper prints the week's

comings and goings. These visits are an issue that forms its own camps: some wait in the car, some drink at the tavern, some sign in but turn around and leave, or else rush by like amateur thieves, unable to force themselves to hesitate their steps, to stop even for a minute and say hello.

There was a time when Maemal knew my name with very little prompting. She would stare closely and smile, "You have your father's eyes." I used to take such recognition for granted—walking down a crowded street, the flow of traffic requiring adroit balance and pacing, and I'm stopped, interrupted by some familiar face, "Hey, what are *you* doing here?" As the rest of the pedestrians wash past, I have had one brief moment with an old friend. Something like that happens every day, anywhere. But it does not happen here anymore.

Yeah, well technically speaking, you can choose from two routes. It's just that I don't take this way anymore: I-55 south, Route 36 west, south on 67, and south again when it turns into 267. That will take you right past my Aunt and Uncle's old house. The basketball net still hangs on the garage, and maybe you can even see the paint chipped off it. But ever since they split up I don't like to go that way anymore.

It happened slowly, of course. It often does. Years would pass and I could still eke out some faint, albeit brief recognition, "Oh yes, Bob's youngest," her head nodding, piecing together the fragments of names and places, but the information didn't adhere for very long. There was the usual difficulty of getting past the amenities of "How are you, Maemal?" Stupid question. She was old and failing and who knows how aware of it she was. Did she even try to reclaim some of her former spirit?

I don't recall when my family began talking about her in the past tense, the tense usually saved for the dead. I suppose it provided a more pleasant alternative than the daily reports from the nursing home: "She doesn't eat much," "Nope, still quiet the whole time," "She barely knows when I'm there." Besides, were there other choices—perfect, or simple past? A simple past, indeed.

We strain to understand it all. Aunt Dingo's theory is that her heart was big enough for all the pain and the good times. Her head, though, just couldn't take it anymore. My sister believes they can't help but fail being in that home, saying, "There's nothing for them to do but get wheeled around and eat." When I tell Bertie I'm going to visit Maemal, he asks, "What for?" not in a way that's cruel, but neatly decisive, immune to the show of pointless duty. He tries to explain further: "Don't get me wrong, I love Maemal." Then recalling perhaps the last time he did visit her adds, "What's left of her anyway."

After the Peanut Buster Parfait in Carlinville, drive another 30 minutes and you'll see the following: a gravel driveway that leads to the local golf course, the Greene Country Fairgrounds, the town sign welcoming you to Carrollton, the previously mentioned railroad tracks and my uncle's bar. Remember, if you pass those grain elevators, you've gone right past the Levee. A Budweiser on tap costs you seventy-five cents.

In one photograph she stands petite, but solid, a true force to be reckoned with, easily twenty-plus years of school teaching behind her. No hint of award-winning piano contests or Sunday fried chicken here. Her dress is blue flowered print, buttoned down the front, fastened with a fabric belt, no-nonsense collar, short sleeves. Sometimes when I wander the second-hand clothing shops I'll see one like it. I hold it up for inspection, and carry it throughout the store—not dragging it behind me on its hanger or casually folding it in the crook of my arm. Instead, I drape it over both arms, like a fragile, colicky infant, careful not to disturb it. Each time I swear I'm going to buy the dress. Then always, at the last minute I say, "No, I don't think I'll take this one after all," and place it back in the soft, rumpled, boneless heap of other Maemal dresses.

You'll find the Dairy Bar at the northeast corner of the town square. It's a building the size of an area rug, like 9 X 11, but you can get anything you want there, it's amazing. There is a problem though with the way the plastic letters are arranged on the window, spelling out the menu. Certain words are formed too closely together, so if you're driving by the first time you'll think you can actually get "Baseball card pizza" and "taco sundaes," as well as "strawberry slush Kleenex."

Even today, saying her name is an invocation of sorts. We always called her "Maemal in Carrollton," as if there was more than one Maemal and had to distinguish between them all: Maemal in Carrollton, Maemal in West Palm Beach, Maemal in Prague.

One legendary story dates back forty-plus years. My Aunt Dingo was getting married, and my Uncle Ted was quite sick at the time—tuberculosis. He knew he was ill and his fear and confusion led him to contract another malady, one my father calls "Irishman's Disease." Along with being afraid, Ted was embarrassed about his ill health and did not plan to attend his sister's wedding. Maemal would hear of no such thing and assured Aunt Dingo, "He'll be there." Dingo expressed some doubt, mistaking Maemal's tone for a simple act of hope rather than determination. Maemal repeated calmly, "Yes, he will. I'll make sure of it." On the Friday before the wedding, Maemal visited the local taverns looking for her son, and when she found him, climbed up on the neighboring

barstool without so much as a glance and ordered a beer. Maemal quietly asked Ted if he would please come to his sister's wedding. Uncle Ted sat quietly, unable to say 'yes' or 'no.' After some time, he said, "I'll go if you do one thing—have another beer with me." With that Maemal caught the bartender's eye, raised up two fingers, then flicked them down quickly: "Two here. *Now!* "

You'll want to make the complete pilgrimage: the house where Joe and Bernice first lived and Raney Park; the family pew at St. John's Church and Maemal's old house on Sycamore. The weeping willow in her back yard was perfect for playing Tarzan, and Suzie Bumbutt lived across the street. Visit the cemetery and walk slowly around the half-dozen stones belonging to you. Not many by most standards, but you realize anyway, 'there are so few of us left.' This is holy ground.

I'm trying to round up the past, corralling the stray memories of my cowgirl years, a period of time when I was an outlaw from my own family. I could always visit Maemal though, and she would never ask the hard questions; just open me up a cold Pepsi, though I really wanted a beer. It's as though I want some proof of a life, of a past. But whose? I keep thinking that if I make the trip often enough other missing parts will come back to me. Until then, we look into each other's eyes unable to piece together shared recollections.

Pushed toward me in a wheelchair is my sweet shrinking grandmother, secured in by straps and a highchair-like table top. She is no longer held buoyant by the collective family adhesive, but off on a journey by herself. Some thieving entity has come in and stolen her away bit by bit, silently extracting her inner mortar so that frail brick upon brick teeters for an indeterminate amount of time. I look into my grandmother's formerly sweet face—her eyes red-rimmed, half closed; she no longer wears her glasses. Do the nurses think, "What's the point?" Inching nearer I search for some sign of joy or even pain, and discover instead that the otherwise clear border between life and death shows a nasty crevice. I take her hand and lean over to whisper, "I love you very much Maemal," and I'm surprised that she holds my hand so tight in return, happy for some response. She calls me "Johnny"—another one of her sons, an uncle I never knew, but I feel electric nonetheless. When I begin walking toward the door, one of the other residents, a woman I don't recognize says, "I knew you were one of them. I knew you was a Quinn. You got that look." Yes, I nod, I am one of them.

You can usually make the ride back home in less time, or what feels like less time anyway. For some reason, the roads don't look like inverse images of themselves, as you're sure they will. Just north of Pontiac, two-thirds of the way home, you'll pass

under wires that reach across the highway, strung on Eiffel Tower-like telephone poles, and joke that you've driven too far, that you lost your way and accidentally ended up in Paris or some other foreign city.

While my dreams play in color, my memories are held securely in black and white. Color snapshots yellow and fade, looking jaundiced, or worse, the red tones rage clownish, out of control. But in black and white they are kept intact. I leave behind a sense of who I am, attached to me like a shadow, long and slim in late afternoon, stretching oblong, like an exclamation point, a bold truth.

I cherish those few things I own that were once hers: a deck of playing cards, a quilt, one haircomb. The memories I have of her though, seem like the richest gift of all, a commodity that can be replenished to some degree. My hand still feels warm from her grasp. I slowly close it, trying to keep tight this moment: an intangible prized possession like Maemal's heart itself, placed high on a shelf, safe but accessible only with great effort. ♦