F.I.S.H.

by Maggi Laureys (August 2017)

A lot of people came and went through our kitchen when I was a kid. Mom rarely left it. My father, whose own headquarters were at the bar, called Mom “The General” and the kitchen was her command center. She cooked, sewed, did laundry and helped us with our homework all in the kitchen. Every major appliance—fridge, stove, washer, dryer—was lined against the same wall, along which she moved up and down for two decades, raising ten children and wearing a groove into the linoleum floor so deep that the wood beneath it showed. The phone was attached to the wall, as was standard in 1977, and stood at the end of the counter with an extra-long twelve-foot cord that stretched all the way down the line. Mom used that

twelve-foot cord to chat on the phone with friends while moving up and down her counter—washing dishes, cooking, and folding laundry (one to two loads a day, three a day during my brother's football and wrestling seasons). She folded laundry on the kitchen table and remained in the kitchen while handing the piles of clothes to we kids to disburse to the appropriate rooms throughout the house. Mom was seemingly tied to that kitchen counter by the telephone cord and she was, in fact, tied to it with work.

Once baby number ten was enrolled in kindergarten, and all ten kids (from kindergarten to twelfth grade) were tucked nicely away for the school day, Mom was finally able to branch out. She founded a church organization called FISH, which she ran entirely from that kitchen telephone. FISH was an acronym for Friends In Service to Humanity, and a play on the fish that the early persecuted Christians painted above their doors. The sign of the fish on one's house established fellowship for Christians without tipping off the Romans. It was through Mom's work with FISH that I was first exposed to our local social pariahs—the drunks, the drug addicts, the poor, the unwed mothers, the sick and the elderly, all of whom called FISH for one thing or another.

Mom recruited other housewives from the Parish and created a network so that, when calls came in from the needy, she put them in contact with one of her volunteers who would drive them to wherever they needed to go, which was usually to a doctor, hospital, market, laundromat, AA meeting, welfare office or job. The elderly could not drive, the poor could not afford cars nor insurance and in some cases, they needed a ride somewhere because a spouse or child used the only car in the family to get to work. Addicts and alcoholics, of course, lost licenses to DUIs and needed a ride to AA meetings.

Sometimes she would get a FISH client a job at one of her volunteers' places of employment or nearby to it, so that they could car pool together. Mom walked up and down her aisle—fridge, stove, sink, washer, dryer—arranging these rides over the phone, which she clamped tightly between chin and shoulder while she used her free hands to work.

Initially, the FISH clients seemed no more interesting than the garden-variety church poor—the families to whom we gave turkeys every year. As I got older and understood things better, I noticed that Mom's FISH clients had dramatic problems. There were the addicts who needed rides to lawyers, probation officers and criminal court. There were the mentally ill who needed rides to and from psych wards and psychiatrists. There was my seventeen year old sister's pretty, popular friend whom I idolized at thirteen and grew to know well after she got pregnant and moved in with us. I had always admired this girl for the way her hair feathered and fell as perfectly as my seventh grade friends' current object of worship: Farrah Fawcett. She did not want to abort the baby yet knew she could not raise it alone at seventeen so asked Mom for help. Mom went through her list of volunteers and put the appropriate people in touch. Couples came to our house and conferred with Mom. I knew a match was made the day that a couple stayed at the kitchen table hours longer than others. They met with the pregnant teen. When the teen's baby was born, this couple was at the hospital to adopt the infant.

I had seen this couple in person, but most of the other FISH clients were people I'd only known by voice on the phone. There was the lady who called all the time in tears. Her husband drank and she needed to find him rides for his AA

meetings. I knew my own father drank, but he never crashed our car or lost his job. I eavesdropped while doing my homework at the kitchen table and knew that Mom also organized food drives for such women—women whose no-good, drunken husbands were out of work and who needed more than the turkey that mom delivered to them and others like them at the holidays. I knew to be grateful that my family would never need a free turkey. That would never happen to us.

My mother's parents were Italian immigrants who had, in the vernacular of our working-class town, "made good." My grandfather was an off-the-boat Italian with only a fifth-grade education. My grandmother got a bit further—the eighth grade—and her Italian father had been in America long enough to build a solid construction business. His drive was likely the manic drive of a bipolar because, after building a good business and raising four healthy children, he one day went to the attic, put a rifle into his mouth, and blew his head off. He used his toe to pull the trigger.

The construction business went to his eldest son, as Italian patriarchy dictated. To his daughter, my grandmother, he bequeathed a little milk and bread shop. He had also bequeathed her with bipolar. Grandpa worked hard, but bragged that it was Grandma who worked around the clock and who had ambition to expand the milk and bread shop into a deli and then further expand that with accounts at restaurants and hotels around the county. It was she who wanted to take the soaring risks and massive bank loans during the post WWII boom to convert the deli into a ShopRite Supermarket, and then another ShopRite, and then another and another and another. My grandparents grew quite rich but they, like my great-grandfather before them, gave their business to the eldest sons, not their daughter, my mother. They did however give her

our house, and gave my father a job at the ShopRite as a butcher. My siblings and I envied our uncles' and cousins' great inherited wealth, but mom would say that her parents had given enough and that our father would always have a job and other men should be so lucky. We understood her to mean that Daddy drank, and that her parents would never fire him from the family business—we were economically safe and would always have food, clothing and shelter.

I'm sure Mom would've liked that her children felt economically safe when we knew that so many other children were not, but she would not have wanted us to feel superior to her FISH clients. She did her best to keep these people's problems private. She was particularly cagey about a call if it involved a family with kids we knew personally from school. This rarely happened but, when it did, Mom was right: we noticed. We lurched and listened. *Was that quiet, older boy in the eighth grade's mother really a schizophrenic? Was that trampy girl in my little brother's class really so poor they needed donations for food?* And something was definitely up when a couple came with their teenage daughter whom my sisters Kathleen and Cecilia knew from high school. I knew her as the girl who looked and talked like a boy. I didn't know anything else about the girl; I was only in fifth grade at the time and high school kids were a world apart. But Kathleen and Cecilia knew this girl all right. They knew all about her. I recognized her only from my brother's football games when I saw her cheeks inflated to play the trombone for the marching band. The girl arrived to our house that afternoon still wearing her uniform from marching band practice. I knew that the marching band was for geeks because Cecilia, the younger and cooler of my two older sisters, told me so. I also knew that Cecilia was the cooler one because Kathleen's friends were, in fact, in the band.

I was at the kitchen table doing homework and I desperately wanted to stay to hear this girl talk more. Her masculine voice and all it implied seemed to be the crux of the matter between her and her parents. The parents sat across the table from her, frowning. Her mother had said, “You know I feel badly about this and Jim just doesn’t understand, but we have another child you know.” The father looked at his daughter and offered her a faint smile, then dropped his eyes to his lap and blushed. I put my own head down and pretended to be focused on my arithmetic ditto sheet rather than this girl, but Mom was not fooled. She sent me to the living room, which was directly beyond the kitchen and had an open doorway from which I could still hear. You couldn’t really shut things out in our house; there were too many people and too little space. My nine siblings, some accompanied by friends, were coming home from sports and activities and opening the kitchen door, the main entry to our house, and streaming in and out of the kitchen all afternoon. I picked up many tidbits from Mom’s conversations with other adults simply by passing through the kitchen. On the afternoon of the visit from the boyish girl and her parents, I had gathered what I could by eavesdropping from the living room chair closest to the kitchen.

The girl’s mother kept saying things like, “We don’t know what to do anymore,” while the father kept reassuring that, “No, come now, it’s not really that bad.” The mother would insist that they needed to think about the other daughter. There was another daughter to think about. Apparently, the boyish daughter—I’ll call her Sharon—was making life difficult for the pretty, cheerleading daughter and this could not be. The pretty sister could not invite friends over to the house because she was embarrassed of Sharon. She argued with Sharon often and just that week had said something that induced Sharon to smack her across the face. “She said something very cruel to Sharon,” the father explained to Mom, “Sharon’s not

violent otherwise.” The mother did not agree and insisted that Sharon had to go. The mother then said what I remember most distinctly, because it was precisely the sort of phrase that made my own mother shake her head in disgust whenever she heard it: “Sharon’s a bad influence.”

“If you think for yourselves then there should be no such thing as a bad influence,” Mom would say to us. If she had raised us right, she declared, we would think for ourselves and do what’s right—no matter what the other kids were up to, no matter what their ostensible influence may be. I went to a birthday party once where one classmate was conspicuously denied attendance. The birthday girl’s mother thought the classmate was a bad influence because she was once caught smoking cigarettes at school. “If she raised her right, then her daughter won’t smoke simply because of peer pressure.”

It’s a good thing my mother thought this way because, more often than not, I was the one who brought the cigarettes to school (I stole packs from my dad’s carton), and acted as a bad influence on the other girls. I understood how parents could think that another kid’s smoking, drinking or cussing could be a bad influence. But a girl being boyish? On what grounds could a boyish girl be a bad influence? I needed to know what this girl had done. I gleaned better information after Cecilia came home from a friend’s house and discovered the boyish girl’s presence in our kitchen.

“What on earth is Sharon Jones doing here?” Cecilia asked me.

“Why?” I asked. “What’s wrong with her?”

Cecilia seemed to know all about this Sharon Jones, how she stared at the other girls in the locker room and how she dressed like a boy and how nobody liked her and she should not be at our house and should just leave us alone. Cecilia didn't seem to know anything about the pretty sister, but Kathleen did and it was on this point that Kathleen and Cecilia began to argue.

"Her sister's a bitch," Kathleen said. "You have no idea how mean she is to us. She calls us band geeks and choir geeks."

Kathleen hated the sister more than she liked Sharon and it occurred to me that a similar sister rivalry was at play between her and Cecilia.

I felt for Kathleen, as one often feels for the underdog. But I also felt it was unfair to ask Cecilia to be brave in this situation. Cecilia hung out with popular girls yes, but she was only a freshman and by no means the queen bee of the crew. Her position in the clique was precarious, made safe in one way by having big brothers who were handsome and good at sports. And then, of course, there were so many Laureys in the school system and there is always safety in numbers. In so many other ways, alas, our family was also the problem. Our house was crowded and each one of us slept two, sometimes three to a bed. Worse, Mom hoarded. Friends teased about the mountains of magazines, broken toys and empty cookie tins. There was a joke that our house was like the Bermuda Triangle; once something entered the realm—be it an old shoe or a dried out pen—it never left. Even the kinder kids commented on how strange our autistic brother Brian was. Brian sat on the floor

all day, Indian-style, rocking to music and spinning tops. He never spoke and instead made loud braying noises. He often wet his pants and always ate with his hands. Brian wandered the house at will like an untutored Helen Keller while Mom went her merry way solving the community's problems via FISH.

Though never stated, I intuited Cecilia's position and empathized: our family couldn't afford to be any weirder than it already was.

Still, the girl was only sitting in the kitchen. As soon as they left it became clear that she would not be coming back. We already had the pregnant teen with us and there was simply no more room. Mom began making calls to place her. The volunteers, like everyone in my community, were working class and did not have spare room for another kid. They were sorry, but could not take the girl in. Mom ended up putting her in a spare room at my great uncle's house, Uncle Joe. I needed to know what was so wrong with this girl that she'd been banished from her own home and forced to live as a tenant with an old man she'd never met before. It had come down to one, salient question:

"Mom," I asked, "Why does that girl act like a boy?"

"It's not her fault," Mom replied. "Some girls are born with too many male hormones."

I persevered, but hormones were the most Mom could make of it. My elder siblings cracked up at this. "Is that what they call

it these days?” my teenage brother’s friend said laughingly, “Hormonal imbalance?” To this day, I’m not sure if my mother could come up with an explanation any more sophisticated than hormones and I’m glad of it. I’m glad she cared for the girl without understanding one damned thing about it.

My Uncle Joe lived in the school district and it was arranged for Sharon to catch the bus from his house. I knew nothing of her sexual identity struggle, but I sure felt sorry for her now. Uncle Joe’s house was a mess. He was my maternal grandmother’s illiterate brother, a man who’d gotten spinal meningitis as a child, fell into a coma and, since he’d forgotten everything after coming out of the coma, he was pulled from school and sent to work on the railroad at thirteen. Mom brought him to our house once a week to bathe him and do his laundry. Otherwise, Uncle Joe sat on the porch with his hand tucked into the waist of his pants while shouting at traffic or on the recliner in his house shouting at wrestlers on the TV. His filthy house provided work for some of the more desperate FISH clients whom Mom hired to clean, but it could never be a pleasant place for a teenage girl to live, boyish or not.

I think of this girl often now because of the way my sisters’ respective attitudes changed in their adult years. Cecilia went to art school in New York and as an innately tough person she developed the open-minded ethos of the single, city chick and made many gay friends. Kathleen moved to Oregon and became a born again Christian. As an innately gentle soul, Kathleen forbid any ugly disparagement of gay people but nevertheless accepted the profession of her Evangelical Church that homosexuality is a sin because the Bible says so. Her take on it was that we may hate the sin but still must love the sinner. I noted the changes in my sisters as they became

adults and how the paradigms of acceptable behavior changed with age and geography. Everything changes—government, society, culture, political ideologies and media tropes on tolerance. Only the compassion that animates such things is constant, because it's only the compassion that matters—that makes any of those other things useful to humanity to begin with. My mother built her charity on this principal. Aside from voting Republican every year, she was not political and her charity was not ideologically driven, nor even defined by Catholic stricture, devotedly Catholic as she was. FISH was animated by her's and her volunteers' compassion. And FISH clients felt this, never treating FISH's services with entitlement or ingratitude. Compassion creates a circle, such that it was the client's constant as well. Volunteer housewives from our Catholic parish made no distinction between Catholic or non-Catholic clients. They did not judge addicts and alcoholics to be any less worthy of help or culpable for their plight than the sick or elderly. They did not deem help for poor black people to be any more noble than help for poor white people. Indeed, FISH had few black clients since in 1977 our county was largely working class and low income whites.

Mom made it clear that such white people were low income, or poor. She forbade the terms trailer trash and white trash at a time when most people were just learning that it wasn't ok to say the word *nigger.* The whole country had just finished watching *Roots* and was engaged in a mass self-flagellation about slavery. The guilt was followed by a glut of sitcoms telling us how to see blacks in a way that could make us feel good about ourselves again. We could watch Archie Bunker say racist things to the Jeffersons and know that we weren't racist because we understood that the canned laughter was at Archie's expense. Likewise, *Goodtimes* introduced us to ghetto cool and told us it was right to repeat after JJ, "Dy-no-

mite!” We knew our cues.

But there was nothing on TV telling us that it was not ok to despise poor, ignorant white people. I didn’t even see any poor whites on TV. I did, however, see them in my town, Netcong. There were those small, slatternly hubs of town where two-family houses sagged, where there were no swing sets, gardens or garages on the lawn. Where disassembled cars invariably sat rusting with spare car parts on the driveway and where broken toys were strewn about the yard. A schoolmate whom I shall call Ginny Shaw lived in one of those houses.

The Shaws had been in Netcong for about a decade and had about a half a dozen kids in our school system. That was enough to qualify them as Netcong townies, alathough not enough to truly belong. Netcong was a close knit Italian-Irish community (mostly Italian), where everyone knew each other and many were related. People went back generations, as my family did for three generations on my mother’s side. If there were transients, they came and went from those sagging two-family rental houses, those houses whose tenants we all knew, were not one of us. Most of the families from those houses could not even claim to be Catholic, which compensated for a lot in Netcong. The Catholic children of one dirt poor, big family with an alcoholic father were actually rather popular in school. Alas, poor Ginny did not even have that. “Baptists,” a friend’s mother once said of the Shaws, “Poor white trash are always Baptist.”

I knew she was an ignorant woman because my best friend Jenny’s family was Baptist and the Perry’s were a popular family in town. Mr. Perry made a decent living in middle management at AT&T, and the seven Perry children were all

well-liked, as large families were in Netcong—that is, if they owned, not rented, and went back at least two generations, as Jenny's family had. My other good friend, Debbie Fiorella, had the highest kind of pedigree in Netcong, because she was a full-blooded Italian (I was half Irish). Debbie's grandfather went to Netcong Elementary along with my grandmother, and her great-grandparents had hailed from the province of Caserta, in Southern Italy, just as the majority of Netcong's Italian's did. Debbie was related to a half-dozen different Italian families in town. The only relatives the Shaws had were packed into the same house. Or half a house. In the other half, there resided an old woman with a lot of cats along with her daughter and a fatherless baby on welfare.

Looking back, I give Ginny a helluva lot of credit for achieving a presence in our school and making it into my little crew with Jenny and Debbie and other Netcong townies. She was a scrappy kid even before she had achieved a degree of fame by developing an enormous bust—the largest in all of Netcong Elementary and, some said, larger than any at the high school, too. Boys began to notice her by age eleven and the girls followed suit. We invited her to spin the bottle parties where the boys felt her up (something they would not deign to do to girls like Debbie and me, because our mothers knew their mothers). Ginny was invited to all the makeout parties and to all our after-school hangouts to sneak cigarettes with us, but she was not a girl anyone invited home for dinner. Anyone that is, but me. I'd like to say it was because I was more highly evolved and more compassionate than the other kids, but that would be untrue. It was because everybody was welcome at our house. Mom had an open door policy and each of we ten kids had our respective groups of friends over every day, filling the house with twenty to thirty people at a time. Ginny would not even have needed an invitation to come to the Laureys house and mix in with the dozen of kids playing frisbee or kickball

on our front lawn.

A classmate named Chrissy once told me that she wasn't supposed to play with Ginny. Chrissy was from one of the rooted Italian families and lived on a nice street where her family owned, not rented (never rented!) Most significantly, Chrissy's mother was a secretary at our school and knew what was what with the school children's reputations. I assumed Ginny reputation was bad because of her large bust, the makeout sessions and the scandal of her sixteen year old brother having gotten a fifteen year old girl pregnant. But it wasn't just Ginny. Not just the brother. It was Ginny Shaw's entire family. When we were in the seventh grade, Chrissy's brother Andy liked to call Ginny a slut and he seemingly came to this conclusion for no other reason than that Ginny had enormous breasts. And that she was poor. I had noted that whenever Andy finished taunting Ginny about her breasts he finished her off with the phrase, *white trash.*

"You're just poor white trash," he said, "Everybody knows that."

I knew it, of course. I just didn't know why whiteness was part of the equation. We were all white and none of us knew any black people, rich or poor. What I had failed to appreciate was that the term white trash implied that blacks were expected to be poor while whites had no excuse and thusly their poverty made them trash. Ginny would've been more respected in our town if she were poor and black than if she were white like us, without being one of us. Her family was so out of the loop that they weren't even on St. Michael's list for free turkeys because the priests did not know who they were. It was just as well, as I visited Ginny's house once and

saw that nobody there was of a mind to play Thanksgiving anyway.

Ginny had invited me to sleep over one summer evening when I was about ten and she eleven. I loved sleepovers and prided myself on the honor of always being invited for them at the Fiorella's house. Debbie's mother provided junk food and let us play Nintendo in the den. There was only one TV at Ginny's house and I saw instantly that we weren't getting anywhere near it. Her two teenage brothers, grandfather, and a middle-aged man who appeared to be an uncle of some sort were camped in front of it watching a car chase on *Starsky and Hutch*. The only woman other than Ginny's mother was one of the men's girlfriend, an overweight woman in a tube top, which I remember because I was wearing a tube top that day as well. I always had trouble with tube tops because my chest was too flat too keep them up. This woman had no such problem; cigarette ash fell six inches deep in her ponderous cleavage. I decided that she belonged to the eldest brother because that's who she was screaming at. He had just handed her back her cigarette after taking a drag, whereupon she wailed, "You got it all wet with your lips, goddamn it! I hate it when people nigger-lip my cigarette." That started it. Next I knew the n-word was coming up like a drunkard's hiccup. "And you can't keep no job neither. Just like a poor nigger." He was as "lazy as a no-good nigger." She "should know," he said, because she "was a fat nigger-lover." The Shaw family did not use this word but, in those days, it was not common to reprimand the people who did use it. I don't think any of the Shaws had the rhetoric or cultural wherewithal to even know how to counter racism.

And so it was that I stood there listening to the most appallingly racist language I'd ever heard outside of the

movies. Yet I did not associate racists with bad guys as I did in the movies. No, the primary subconscious association I had made was with white trash. I only knew two other kids at school who used the n-word and they were both from dirt poor, alcoholic, ignorant families, one with an absentee father. I'd noticed that upstanding people—even those who might secretly regard blacks as inferior—were careful not to use that word. It would brand them as white trash and that was the lowest caste of all—so low, it eluded even the liberal's scale for tolerance. Americans may forgive a black person exhibiting certain bigotries, say, homophobia or Nation of Islam's notorious anti-Semitism because there's a mandate on compassion for uneducated black people. There's an understanding that blacks have had it hard and to cut them some slack. But there's no way to pat yourself on the back for having compassion when dealing with po' white trash. People like the Shaws had no claim. On anything.

Ginny's mother sat at the kitchen table drinking and playing cards with the littlest brother, Charlie. I knew Charlie from school and while I ordinarily avoided third graders as too uncool for my fifth grade self, I suddenly gravitated to him. I invited him to come upstairs and play Monopoly with us, which infuriated Ginny. She wanted to remain in the living room and fight with the men for TV time. I'd already seen the girlfriend in the tube top throw a cigarette butt at the screen and declare *Starsky and Hutch* "the most stupidest show" she'd ever seen. Evidently, the poor thing wanted to watch something smarter, like *Laverne and Shirley.* The uncle told her to shut her ugly, whore mouth or to go home and watch her own fucking TV. Then he took a swig from a whisky bottle.

I'd seen men drink before, but not like this. Dad did his drinking out of site, at the bar, after a full day's work in

the butcher’s room. Then he came home, alone, watched the news, read a book and went to bed. Adults didn’t gather to drink at my house unless there was a party, usually a First Communion or Confirmation party. The Italians on Mom’s side gathered at the buffet table and the Irish on Dad’s at the bar. It was festive and followed a certain protocol. The Shaw adults were drunk en masse on an ordinary Friday night. I was also perplexed by the way Ginny’s teenage brothers drank openly in front of the TV. Teenagers might have come to my house to drink and smoke pot with my big brothers, but they snuck it and getting it over on our innocent mother was part of the game. There was no game at the Shaw’s house, because there were no rules.

There wasn’t even any food. That floored me because I knew certain basics—bread, pasta, rice—were cheap. Mom always had generic, economy sized batches of such stuff in stock. She used stale bread to stretch her casseroles so that however bland, there was enough to offer any kid who visited. She doubled a gallon of whole milk by mixing it with powdered milk and water. I assumed all people, even poor people, had such staples in the house. Yet when I asked for something to eat, Ginny had to turn and ask her mother for a couple of dollars to go to the Quick Check. Her mother told her to fetch a pack of cigarettes while she was at it and began to root through her bag for change which, of course, was missing. Another screaming match erupted, this one so loud that old grandpa had to rise from his seat to be heard. He cussed as badly as his grandsons.

“Forget it,” I told Ginny, “We can eat at my house. Why don’t we go to my house?”

Things began turn when I realized that we could do just that. I got it into my head that I didn't have to stay there the whole night and the following morning. *I could escape!* Ginny seemed to think that if she could just feed me, I would stay. She made her mother look harder for some money. Mrs. Shaw went upstairs and then, on the way down, fell plop on her ass. She slid down the stairs drunkenly laughing.

The whole family laughed, which Ginny took to be a bit of comedic respite. "See," she seemed to want to say, "We're having fun now. You can relax Margaret." Instead, I insisted on telephoning my mother.

"You can't pretend to have a tummy ache," Mom said. "And you can't walk out on the poor girl. It'll hurt her feelings. And what will her poor family think?"

I was surprised. If I'd called from any other friend's house telling Mom it was time to go home she would've sent an older sibling to pick me up no questions asked. She regarded her kids' play dates as a transportation nuisance and no more. As long as I could get a ride home, there was no reason to stay.

"Her family won't understand," Mom explained. "They'll think you don't like them."

I considered telling Mom how there was no food and how everyone was drunk and racist, but I knew that wouldn't register as legitimate hardship. Then I offered what was, to me, the greatest horror: the mother was drunk.

“It’s not just the men,” I said, “It’s her mother too. Ginny ‘s *mother* is drunk. She just fell down the stairs. Her mother!”

Mom paused. She got that. A mother being drunk was different than a father. Yet, rather than it rising as reason to come pick me up, it became a reason to pity poor Ginny and to keep me there overnight for the originally-planned sleepover. Mom remained perfectly calm and said there was no reason I couldn’t stay and play nicely with my friend; in fact, she explained, it was all the more reason to stay.

“That poor little girl might need a friend,” Mom said.

A deal was struck: Mom would pick me up, but only if my sister Vincenia agreed to take my place. Vincenia was one year older than me yet far less social. Also far less introspective and observant. Vincenia would not have noticed the things that I had, and if she did, she would not have made the connections to class and despair that I had been making about the Shaw family. In short, Vincenia would’ve been happy to just hang out with a girl from school for a sleepover and see it as nothing more than that. Mom asked her to replace me and she shrugged and said, “Sure.” I’d never known Mom to care so much about how I treated a school friend, particularly since I had not done anything explicitly cruel to this one. I decided it was about the family. Ginny’s family and my own.

I’d noticed from time to time that Mom needed townspeople to know that she was not rich. Her parents, yes, but not she. Mom

owned precisely six pairs of polyester slacks from Woolworth's that, together with smock and apron, comprised her daily attire. She was five foot tall, two hundred pounds and so disinterested in fashion that when the waistband of her slacks snapped, she cinched it with a safety pin. I suppose the safety pin made sense as a complement to the rubber bands perennially piled up her wrists—"Just in case," she'd say. Mom's one and only luxury was a dab of lipstick once a week before Mass.

When my grandparents came to Mass, they sat in the pew that bore their plaque and Grandma dressed as befit the parish's main benefactor: fur, jewelry and an eighteen carat gold front tooth so tacky that today it would be called 'gangsta.' Occasionally, people would assume that our house, the Laureys house, must reflect our grandparent's wealth. Debbie Fiorella said her mother asked what our house looked like inside and was disappointed to hear it was messy. I told mom what she'd said and Mom laughed. Nobody could accuse us of being fancy and this pleased her. I, in turn, was pleased that the friend could report on the opulence of my grandparent's house, which was directly next door.

I was reminded of Ginny's peculiar reputation once again when, one day, I took her with me on an errand to Grandma's house. Grandma liked to meet our friends and ask about their town lineage. "Who's your grandmother?" she might ask, "Is she the Polumbo girl who married Joey the barber?"

Grandma would interrogate the kid to see if any of her relations worked for ShopRite. She liked that. If someone in her family were sick, graduating or celebrating a sacrament, Grandma made a note to have the store send a fruit basket. She

was almost as intent as Mom to elude a reputation for snootiness. Unlike Mom, however, she knew nothing of the Shaw family.

“Where are your people from?” she asked Ginny. “What church were you with before St. Michael’s?”

Ginny didn’t grasp the question and could only give the names of some towns where she’d previously lived. Grandma let it go once she discovered the people were transients without a church and we were free to explore the house. I wanted to show off all the satin and chintz in my grandparents’ house, especially the red velvet kneeler with church candles and a crucifix. “Go ahead,” I told her, “You can kneel and dip your finger in the holy water to bless yourself. Father LaGotta brings Grandma holy water every week. It’s blessed just for her.” Ginnie was mesmerized by all the red velvet, satin drapes and Persian carpets. She fondled the crystal drops on the standing chandeliers and ran her fingers over the silver soup tureen. I enjoyed showing off my grandmother’s house and, since all the kids wanted to see it, I had given plenty of these tours in the past. But this time, with Ginny, was the first time the housekeeper—ordinarily quite ingratiating—trailed me around in a huff. She told Ginny to keep her paws off the crystal, adding, “I just cleaned that. You’ll smudge it.” I knew this wasn’t true. I knew that this housekeeper, whom I’ll call Mrs. Regina, simply didn’t like Ginny. She pulled me aside to tell me so.

“You shouldn’t be playing with that girl. Does your mother know she’s here? She could steal something you know. That girl’s trash. That whole family of hers is pure white trash.”

All I knew was that Mrs. Regina wasn't exactly rich and had no business getting snooty about Ginny Shaw. The Regina's lived in a tidy, but tiny, house near the school. Mrs. Regina was, in a word, tidy. When Mrs. Regina did Grandma's ironing, she made a point of telling me how nicely she ironed her own kids' clothes at home. I knew her kids and it was true—they were terribly well pressed. Nothing to be ashamed of. But nothing special either. None of my siblings found the Regina kids interesting enough to befriend. They did just as poorly at school as the Shaw kids, though the teachers were not as inclined to ridicule them as they were the Shaws. I had noticed since the first grade that teachers would cut even the dumbest kids some slack as long as their parents sent them to school tidily dressed and with a proper lunch.

"Mom," I asked once, "Why do they pick on the poor kids for having a bad lunch and crappy clothes? God, shouldn't they feel sorry for them instead of making it even worse?"

"They should," Mom would say, "But people don't always know better. You know better."

Yes, I did. I not only knew better, I knew more. Mom was a pushover who thought it was a case of people lacking a refined sense of empathy, and they couldn't always help this lacking. I knew that it was, in fact, about snobbery's single most absurd delusion: the thought that being near people with the good life will magically transfer good things to you. I'd seen people suck up to my grandparents when they had to know she wasn't going to cut them a check or give them her jewelry. No matter. They just wanted to be near it. Just look upon it. As

if by proximity they'd absorb the good life by osmosis.

I made fun of Mrs. Regina when I got home and declared that she had a lot of nerve accusing Ginny of theft. "Who the heck is she?" I asked Mom, "If she's so hot, how come she needs to clean Grandma's house? She's just a maid."

"That's a terrible thing to say," Mom replied, "Who are you, I might ask?"

"But she called Ginny white trash. You said yourself that was as bad as saying nigger."

"It is. But Mrs. Regina doesn't know any better and you do."

"Well, she should know better. What, she gets to go around being mean to people just because she's a moron? Why can't somebody say something so she'll stop being a moron?"

Like most of my siblings, I enjoyed a good argument—even if I knew Mom was unlikely to engage. She sat back and listened appreciatively when my left leaning big brothers discussed politics with our right-wing father. She was proud of the rhetorical talents they bore on defending their respective positions. But, if forced to articulate her own case, she could muster only the simplest statements. For instance, "It isn't about what Mrs. Regina should or should not do. You can't force people to be kind. You have to make them *want* to be kind. So just set a good example. And don't call Mrs.

Regina a maid again." Then came, as always, the refrain, "Didn't I teach you to be kind?"

Over the next forty years, each of my siblings has become enamored of some cause, of some political, religious, cultural or ideological slant and, in due course, added our mother to various organizations' mailing lists. I loved going to Mom's mailbox because it was always filled with the most amusing variety of propaganda. I can recognize each sibling's ideological hand as I sift through pamphlets from such disparate organizations as *Right to Life* to *Planned Parenthood*. There was *PETA* and the *NRA.* There was *The Southern Law Poverty Review* and *The American Family Association*—all addressed to Mom. We all got a kick out of teasing her and asking, "You do know that the NRA and the SLPR are mutually exclusive don't you?" Better, we got a deep sense of assurance knowing what the reason was that each of us, however opposing our views, could assume Mom would pledge allegiance to our own respective cause. It was because we believed that if something were deeply, truly right, then our mother would naturally be on its side. It was because what we really trusted was that which was deeply, truly right in her.

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