

## Memorabilia

Colleen suggested that they sit near the window. The view of the courtyard was so pretty, she said, and there was such a nice breeze on these early summer afternoons.

"A marvelous idea," her grandmother Betsy said, patting her lap with one hand to indicate polite enthusiasm. She stood slowly and peered through failing eyes at the antique carriage clock on the mahogany sideboard to check the time.

The apartment was small, just a sitting room, a bedroom with an alcove, a bathroom, and a kitchenette. It was warmly painted, though, and contained a few of Betsy's favorite furnishings from the house that she had shared with Pop for almost fifty years.

Colleen arranged the chairs in front of the window and pulled up on the vinyl window sash until it opened a few inches.

"Don't fuss with it," Betsy said. "You'll get it stuck and then the girl will get cross."

"It won't get stuck," Colleen said, squaring herself to get a better grip on the sash. "And if it does get stuck, it shouldn't, not for what you're paying here. They should call maintenance, not get 'cross.' It's their job to take care of you, Gran."

Betsy moved forward in her chair and tugged at the hem of Colleen's shorts. "Come away! She's always cross with me over something—all she needs is an excuse. Now leave it and sit down."

Colleen gave the window a final smack before doing as she was told.

"Perfect," Betsy said, smirking and patting her lap after she'd settled back into her chair.

There was a long silence as Colleen wondered what else they could talk about. The conversation earlier during tea had been typically random, covering many decades—the weather, the Black nurses who were forever "cross," Mrs. Harris in the yellow house on the corner. Colleen knew they'd all come up again.

"So tell me all about you," Betsy finally said. "I can't believe it's been an entire year."

It had actually been three months, but the error wasn't worth correcting. "Well," Colleen recited, "I'm almost done with school, down in Connecticut. Then I start studying for the Bar. This time next year I'll finally be a real, live lawyer."

"My word!" Betsy said with wide eyes. "A lawyer! As I say, the girls are coming up. Pop has said it, too, though I'd wager they don't have any lady lawyers in his firm." She frowned. "Of course, much of it's because of the War, so we'll see what happens when this mess is over and done with. Pop volunteered for service, of course, but he was judged 4F."

"Yes," Colleen said. "I know."

"Well, my own hope is that everything will go back to normal. When I read about those poor girls in the factories!" She gazed out the window. "Do you remember Mrs. Harris?"

"Yes," Colleen replied. "Mrs. Harris. In the yellow house on the corner."

"Doctor Harris, I suppose, though I always feel awkward addressing a woman that way. Especially a woman with a banker husband and three small children. I suppose it's the Southerner in me."

"Yes, it takes getting used to."

"Of course, I've always said that Boston can be more Southern than old Savannah. Any place with history strikes me that way. In any case, I think it's wonderful that you've become a working girl. Simply wonderful." She reached over and patted Colleen on the knee. "Good for you."

They sat quietly until Betsy pointed at a red-winged blackbird that had lighted on a marsh reed at edge of the courtyard. He sang his sharp, trilling song to warn away rivals.

"They are absolutely my favorite," Betsy said. "He looks the dandy, but he'll never shrink from a fight. I've seen them attack crows three times their size. We have them at the farm." She turned to Colleen. "Have I told you about our weekend house in New Hampshire? We must have you up for a visit."

"I've been there, Gran. Every summer when I was growing up. Don't you remember?"

Betsy dismissed the question with a single wave of her hand. "Well, of course. And I hope you'll bring your own little ones this summer. We've had the most marvelous weather, and Pop is always saying we don't see enough of our little ones."

"Gran," Colleen said, "I don't have any children."

Betsy stared at her for a moment. "But you do. Your oldest girl is—"

"I'm Colleen. Your granddaughter. I'm *Helen's* oldest girl."

"What?"

"I'm Colleen, not Helen. Helen was my mother."

Betsy blushed. Colleen knew it pained her to forget. She saw it as poor manners.

"Who am I, Gran? What's my name?"

Betsy smiled. "Colleen, dear." She looked away, toward the carriage clock. "How silly that you'd even ask."

"Helen is gone, Gran. She passed away. Three years ago."

Betsy nodded. "Oh, yes, of course. Poppy wrote me about that."

"No, Gran, Poppy didn't write you. Poppy was already gone when Mom died. Do you remember Poppy's funeral? At the church in Newton?"

"Not so loud," Betsy hissed, nodding toward the door.

"I'm sorry," Colleen sighed. "I didn't mean to raise my voice."

They were quiet for a long time, until Betsy threw her hands in the air and said, "Did I tell you we saw Glenn Miller?"

"Glenn Miller?" Colleen said, surprised. "No, you didn't."

"Oh, it was something. We were in Boston, with the Bronners, shopping or some such thing. We pulled up to the curb on Arlington Street, in front of the Park Plaza, and there he was, climbing into this big old white limousine. I wanted his autograph, but Pop yelled, *Betsy, you get back in this car before you make fools of us all!*"

They both laughed, the memory of Pop being as clear to Colleen as his imagined presence must have been to Betsy.

"But don't you know I did it anyway!" Betsy continued. "Poor Pop. When I got back to the car he was all but sitting on the floor. We watched the limousine drive away, and Pop said, 'You don't see an A-stamp on that windshield, I can tell you.' He had a C-stamp, which was only supposed to be for farmers and doctors. It didn't bother me, considering all he's done for our soldiers." Her laughter trailed off as she shrugged and laid her hands flat in her lap. "It was so sad when he died. He simply disappeared. I remember, the radio played his records all night. People said awful things later, that a prostitute murdered him in Paris or some such thing. I mean, what makes people say such wicked things?"

"I wish I knew," Colleen said. She was trying to make sense of what she'd just heard. Was it true? Her mother had never said anything about Glenn Miller. The story was a bit too staged, like a remembered scene from a movie, but the detail about Pop and his reaction seemed to make it credible. She said, "Gran, do you still have that autograph? Glenn Miller? Can I see it?"

"Of course. Hand me that frame," she said, pointing to Pop's portrait on the mantle.

Colleen handed Betsy the picture. She used her thumbs to slide away the small metal tabs that held the velvet backing in place and pulled gently to remove it. She took out a small, folded sheet of yellowed paper and handed it to Colleen. Colleen opened it and read, *To Mrs. Betsy Reese, Glenn Miller* in a scrawled hand.

Colleen felt like she might burst into tears, but she composed herself. She folded the paper and gave it back to Betsy. "That's really something, Gran," she said. "Imagine, Glenn Miller."

"I know it!" Betsy said. She put the paper back in the frame and replaced the backing and held the frame in her lap.

"Can I get you anything?" Colleen finally said.

"My dear, thank you. Everything's just perfect, but you're sweet to ask." She turned to see the carriage clock. "Look at—is it five already?"

Colleen knew that was her cue to leave. In Betsy's social protocol, five o'clock was the hour when civilized people could finally cap the sherry and relax with a tumbler of Scotch.

"Will you stay for a cocktail?" Betsy asked.

"I would love to," Colleen said. "but I have a two-hour drive ahead of me." She went to her grandmother and gently squeezed her shoulder. "Thank you for the tea, and for a lovely afternoon, and for sharing your memorabilia," she said, smiling. She leaned down and kissed her on the cheek. "I love you, Gran," she whispered, "I love you so much."

Betsy reached up and patted her hand. "It's been wonderful," she said. "Simply perfect. You must visit again just as soon as you're able. And please deliver hugs and kisses to all my little ones."

"I always do," Colleen said, "you can count on it."



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