

JANET FRASER

Marje's Bliss

My Great-Uncle Bliss
died in the hospital of his birth.
Did his parents ever know Bliss?
My great-grandparents'
grim faces in oval frames:
Victorian Baptists who feared
the permanent record of a smile.

I have a snap of Bliss's Marjorie
who smoked and danced and drank.
Wrapped in beaver coat and Bliss's arms
this flapper girl spreads painted lips,
grins smugly over the shoulder
of a slumbering Packard.

When I was small Marje winked at me once,
led me from sleepy velvet sofas
to a cool tiled kitchen.
She served me Turkish Delights
and jokes I didn't understand but laughed at
because of her needy eyes.

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Now Marje, a hump-backed lady, laments.
Sixty years of perfect Bliss all gone!
Marje croaks to her only child Jan
(who always said she was a third wheel
on her parents' bicycle built for two).
Jan only half-listens to this distant
telephone voice,
a hollow echo from empty high-ceilinged rooms.

And I can see Marje's bent body at rest,
no lover to feed and caress.
Her gravelly voice shakes
with want, with desire—
the little death,
the trip to Bliss.