DOROTHY SPEAK

Authenticity

YESTERDAY, I MET MY parents unexpectedly when I was out walking after my shift at the clinic. This was over on a paved path that follows the lakeshore. There is a narrow strip of manicured park there and a stately column of old black elms marching toward the university, toward the prison, and here and there a bench where you can sit down and look out at the lake. I often go there after work because the bracing lake winds and the sun flashing off the dazzling surface cleanse me of the smells and the rot of patients coming to me with their ailing feet. It is March and the trees are still black and bare and the grass is yellow and brittle. But the warm spring sun has brought out the joggers—students from the university and also soldiers from the military college who run across the bridge spanning the Cataraqui River and follow the curve of the shore to this park. I also passed many old people who have come here to retire because the three-hundred-year-old streets are quiet and lined with quaint stone houses and there is no industrial pollution and because they like the smell of the lake and its temperate effects on the weather.

Then, coming toward me, I saw a strangely familiar couple, two figures leaning into each other, pushing against the brisk wind that always blows off the lake and turns the pewter water choppy and brittle looking as glass. The man was trim, self-important, all style, in a tweed jacket, a striped scarf looped around his neck, one end thrown back jauntily over his shoulder, faun-coloured trousers in an expensive twill cloth, loafers with shiny tassels dancing at the toe. Beside him, half a foot taller, walked a woman, heavy, flat-footed, placid, careless about her looks. With a sinking heart, I realized it was my parents.

"I *told* your mother we'd see you along here," my father said, because he has always believed the lives of his children could be bent to his own uses. The wind had reddened his cheeks and lifted his comb-over, which is stiff as slate, off his small earnest head. He said that we should go and find a coffee shop. I was alarmed to see them and made the excuse that I was fatigued from work and also that I needed to get to my desk. My father turned to my mother, who has always been his willing interpreter, his go-between, and said with a bitter smile, "She hasn't seen her parents in nearly a year and she can't take half an hour to sit down and talk to them."

"What are you doing here?" I said, because they were two hundred miles from home.

"Go ahead, Arlette," my father nudged my mother, afraid to tell me himself.

"We've leased an apartment," said my mother.

"Here?" I asked.

"On the water," boasted my father. He was now retired and apparently bored with Toronto, with life. He believed this move would be an antidote.

We left the lake and made our way into the sad, pretty, awkward town. On the main street, which slopes gently toward the harbour and which is lined with small, musty independent book stores, we entered a coffee shop. I took my mother aside.

"You've got to tell him you can't move here," I told her.

"We've already signed the lease," she said.

"Find a way to tear it up," I said. "This is my town. I've finally discovered a place where I feel happy and want to stay." I'd moved here because the town had texture, being populated by a rich mixture of prisoners, soldiers, academics, writers. I thought it could pull a novel out of me.

"We won't bother you," said my mother. She is a calm, simple woman who believes that people's emotions will go away.

"It's not enough," I said, "that he wanted me to be his clone. Now he has to come here to spy on me."

"He just wants to look at the lake."

I reminded her that we'd had a lakeside cottage, where, every summer, we'd waited in vain for my father to show up.

"He wasn't interested in a lake then, was he?" I said.

"This one is bigger," she answered. I can never tell if she's being ironic or if she actually believes the excuses she makes for him.

We were standing before the coffee shop counter, appraising the muffins, scones, date squares. My father sat at a window table. Beyond the glass, students passed on the sidewalks, trickling down from the university to sit in the coffee shops with their laptops and cell phones. My father looked out at them as though confused by their youth. I noticed his thin smile, the film of fear on his face.

"Why does he look so—lost?" I asked my mother.

"Your father has always needed to feel important," she replied. "Now that he's retired, he's not sure who he is."

"Well, look," I said. "I can't take him over to that goddamned hospital." On the journey over from the lake, my father had told me he was looking forward to having a private tour of the General.

"He's proud of you," my mother explained.

"He doesn't even know me," I told her. I had always though it ironic that a man who repaired people's vision could not even see the people around him. His own children were invisible to him.

"He wants to meet your colleagues. I thought you'd be happy about that," said my mother.

She has pale eyes, a soft mouth. Once, she must have been pretty, in an unremarkable way. But now she's heavy and she dresses in flowered pantsuits, wears her grey hair in a bowl cut. She walks with her back set at a queer angle, as though she's on a fatalistic trajectory. She met my father in a hospital. She was the timid nurse who hid in the linen closet when the all-powerful doctors did their rounds. Once, emerging from one of these when she thought the coast was clear, she ran straight into my father.

"I don't work at the hospital anymore," I told my mother. "I got sick of sick people." In fact, I'd been dismissed because of my attitude, the things I'd said to patients. My superiors had mistaken my forthrightness for a lack of sympathy. "Tell him that," I instructed my mother.

"Alright, dear."

We collected our coffee mugs, three banana muffins from the counter.

"How can you leave Toronto?" I asked her on our way to the table. "What about your garden? What about the quilting guild? What about your friends?"

"Oh, they're not important," she said, and of course this was the way it had always been. She flowed around my father's life like water around a stone. I never heard her complain or contradict him or ask for anything. She didn't have the imagination to see beyond the room in which she was sitting, the framework of the day, the hour. Once, she'd said to me, "I'm lucky that it makes me happy to sweep the front porch."

We sat down at the table with my father. The sun pouring in the window had made him remove his wool jacket and in his light cardigan he looked like he'd shrunk considerably since I'd last seen him.

"Bea isn't at the hospital anymore, Archimedes," my mother said. "She's at a foot clinic."

My father's eyes swam with tears. "You could have done so much good in the world if you'd taken medicine seriously," he said. Like a destructive child, he'd pulled his muffin apart. It lay, shattered, on his plate. He picked critically at the walnuts with his fine surgeon's fingers.

"I don't want to do good," I told him. "I don't care about the populace, if you want to know."

"I think it's nice that you're taking care of those old people's feet," my mother said.

"I'm only doing it for the money," I told her.

"Well," she said deafly, "all the same."

"What is this book you've written?" asked my father. "How important could it be? What if it never gets published?"

"Maybe I'll jump from a high building, then," I told him. "You'd probably like to watch."

Stung, my father looked to my mother for help.

"Bea's only joking, Dear," she told him.

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As early as when I was five, my father pulled me forward by the wrist when people came to visit, thrust me at our guests. "This is Bea," he said. "She'll be the doctor." He was head of eye surgery at the Toronto General. He believed there was no more noble calling than medicine. He wanted to pass the torch on to me. In our front hall, dwarfed by adults, I craned my neck, looked up at my father. "But I want to write books," I told him. My Christmas present at five was a medical bag, complete with stethoscope, blood pressure kit, reflex hammer. In school, I excelled in maths and sciences. I could ace exams without studying. On report card days, my father read out my marks and those of my sisters in descending order of achievement, beginning with mine. You would have thought a doctor would know better. It was a humiliation for my sisters. As for myself, instead of pride, I felt shame. Yet, although I was the one with the best scholastic average, the sharpest brain, it's my sisters who've distinguished themselves. "Look at this. Look what Agnes has achieved," my father will tell me, exhibiting a magazine article about the sibling who owns a five-star restaurant in Oaxaca. Another creates award-winning wines in British Columbia. The third has been named the top rock-concert promoter in North America.

Once, in protest, I burned the medical bag my father gave me. I dumped the ashes on his desk. I was seventeen. The next day, I sat down and applied for medical school. When I graduated, my father paraded me around his hospital. "This is my daughter, Bea," he said narcissistically, beaming at me as though at a mirror throwing back at him his own image. "She's an MD now."

I shook his colleagues' hands. "I graduated at the bottom of my class," I told them.

In the hospital elevator, my father said, "Why did you have to tell them that? Aren't you embarrassed about your marks?"

"No," I said. "On the contrary, I feel proud."

I never set up my own practice. Instead, I drifted from place to place. I did locums up north in the bush, in places where most professionals refused to go but where the pay was double. In these remote sanctuaries for fugitives, eccentrics, social outcasts, recluses, I blended in well. I've worked in lumber camps, mining camps; I've doctored on native reserves, where you couldn't drink the tap water and the women's faces were blue with bruises and the children sniffed glue. More recently, I've treated criminals in this city of prisons; I've ministered to rapists and mass murderers, found some of them more lucid and intelligent than people on the outside.

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The foot clinic stands in the shadow of the hospital, a constant reminder to me of my disgrace. When I look out the window of our small supply room, I see the doctors with whom I once worked, passing by the hospital windows, in obstetrics, in post-op, luminous as priests in their white raiment, stethoscopes swinging like holy crosses from their necks, so zealous, are these physicians, so sanctimonious, so oblivious to my existence.

From eight until two each day, I pass from one small examination room to another. I treat the dying feet of diabetics. I deal with calluses, corns, warts, in-grown toe-nails. I dress ulcers, drain cysts. With liquid nitrogen, I singe plantar warts. The bitter stench of burning skin fills the small rooms. I apply harnesses to straighten hammertoes, prescribe orthotics to relieve bunions the size of tulip bulbs. Wielding a barrel spring nipper, I attack toenails so yellowed and thickened with fungus that they resemble kernels of ripe corn, their odour heavy, foul. Though I wash my hands again and again, I know I will still smell it on my skin when I lie in bed at night.

My patients are brittle, transparent, hollow as reeds. A puff of wind could blow them away. I take their old, silky hands, fragile and lightweight in mine as a sparrow, and help them up a step onto the examination table. They are too stiff to reach their own feet. Seated on a low stool before them, like a common shoe salesman, I remove their worn, shapeless footwear, pull off their unwashed, clay-coloured support hose. The cloud of fine, dry skin thus released chokes me. Their blue-veined hands float in front of my face. With their crooked, arthritic fingers they point at their fallen arches, which have carried them tens of thousands of miles but which they have only now noticed. Their lips tremble as they describe to me the burning sensation in their inflamed toes, the pain shooting out of their heels.

From my low perch, I look up into the thin and sagging faces of these old men and women, see the fear drawing their mouths in, the lipstick smudged on their brown and crowded teeth, the eyebrows bizarrely penciled in black on their foreheads with an unsteady hand, the chin stubble they are too blind and infirm to shave off. Their acid breath blasts down on me like a burning wind. These ancient patients fatigue and depress me. In their jaundiced eyes I see confusion, helplessness, loss. They have reached a place of solitude that I myself fear. I cannot think about this. I try to concentrate on their feet. Like a stonemason, I treat the crumbling foundations of their bodies, cut out the rot, buttress the pilings, fill the chinks.

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My agent calls from Toronto to tell me my novel has been turned down again. "This makes fifteen publishers who've refused it," she reminds me. She sounds tired, apologetic, cautious. I picture her with the phone pressed against her ear, a pretty, dimpled, dark-haired woman with radiant, ivory skin, a body pleasantly soft. She is an optimistic, enviably likable, enviably happy woman who seems to slide through life like the sun's rays through the branches of a tree.

"I'm sorry," she says.

"Well, there are other publishers we haven't tried," I reply.

"What I mean is, I'm sorry, I don't think this novel is going to fly. I'm going to have to send it back to you, Bea. Maybe there's another agent who would be better able to place it than I am. I've put everything I have into selling it. I've run out of contacts."

"What's supposed to be wrong with it?" I ask.

"I'm glad you asked that, Bea. Many of the editors felt it was driven by issues that undermine it and ultimately ring false. You've set it in a culture outside your own. That can be dangerous. This aboriginal society. It's not your world."

"I know that community. I've worked in it many times."

"The readers seem to disagree with you. And they're the people you have to convince. They don't feel comfortable with your portrayals. They've identified stereotypes, prejudices. They sense you're skimming the surface. I'm wondering if you know why you chose this material. Some see it as an exploitation of the sensational. The alcoholism, the incest, the suicides."

"I feel passionate about it."

"Maybe that's not enough. What I've found in working with hundreds of authors is that looking inward produces a better book than looking outward. There's nothing wrong with your style. It's your material. And this brings me to a suggestion. Do you want to hear it?"

"Well, I don't know," I say.

"I'm going to tell you, in case you're listening. There *is* one section of the book," she says. I hear her leafing through the manuscript. "One section that the readers were uniformly enthusiastic about. It's the conflict between the protagonist and her father."

"That was just a throw-away," I say. "A frivolous aside."

"But it's the most authentic part of the book."

"You're talking about a mere fragment of what I've written." I picture her pinching the fifteen or so pages between her fingers.

"Keep this little gem," she urges me, "and throw out the rest. Painful as that may be, good authors do it all the time. Build from this starting point, these two promising characters. Put in a mother, siblings, neighbours, whatever. Dig into the personal."

"I'm not going to write about my goddamned family."

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There is a knock on my door and I find my mother standing on the porch. Behind her, the FOR SALE sign pounded into my front lawn a week ago swings in the wind. She is wearing orthopaedic shoes, baggy madras pants that flap in the April wind. I let her in.

"I'm not going to try to persuade you to stay," she says.

"It wouldn't do any good."

"I know you have a will of your own."

"You make that sound like a sin."

"But just tell me. Why is it you're leaving, again?" she asks innocently. She is following me around the house as I carry a pail of water, wet rags, a roll of paper towel from room to room. I am cleaning the windows and after this I will wash the floors, the walls, erase myself from this house, like the cathartic shedding of a skin. She doesn't tell me I'm rude and inconsiderate for not stopping to talk to her. I want to avoid her simplistic, black and white observations. I am afraid that she will say something that contains the truth.

"Don't you think I have a right to my own life?" I ask her.

"I'm not sure anyone in any family has a right to their own life. I'm not sure that's realistic. You can move ten thousand miles away and your life still won't be all yours."

She and my father had moved into their apartment the day before. The first thing my father had wanted to do was to walk past my house. They left the towers of boxes and the bags of clothing and the disassembled lamps and the paintings wrapped in brown paper and leaning against the apartment walls and went downstairs and walked past the old granite court house and the hulking stone Anglican church and through the Thursday market. They crossed the main street tilting toward the harbour and entered this grid of short, dusty, deserted streets. When they saw the sign on my lawn, my father asked my mother, "Are you sure this is the right place?" She consulted the scrap of paper in her pocket with the address scribbled on it. Yes, she said, this is it, 211 Thomas Street. My father wept all the way home.

"Why are you telling me this?" I ask.

She says my father has been in bed ever since.

"That's just manipulation," I tell her.

"He's a harmless old man," she says.

"He was never around. He never cared about his children."

"He cared," she says, "though maybe not in the way you wanted him to."

"What other way is important?" I ask.

She smiles sadly.

"What was his life about, anyway?" I ask.

She shrugs. "What is anyone's life about?" In thirty years I will look like her, shapeless as a packing box, solid and meaningless, in ugly laced shoes, maladroit, loutish.

We have climbed the stairs to my study, where, all around, boxes sit, half filled with books. I have emptied my filing cabinet of everything I've ever written, every line with which I thought I was making sense of life. Garbage bags are crammed with notes, story fragments, dead-end ideas, the manuscript returned to me by my agent, all the incriminating evidence of my failure to be what my father said I was unsuited for.

"How do you know what to keep and what to throw away?" asks my mother, looking around. Why is it, I wonder, that a woman in her sixties doesn't know the answer to such a question? I bend over and squeeze dirty water from a rag into the metal pail. "I've sometimes wondered," she says maddeningly, "if the things that give us the most pain are the important ones to hold onto." She goes to the bay window, looks down on the lonely street. "There's no place better than this," she tells me. "Wherever a person goes, there's never any better place because when you get there, you're still you."

The harsh spring sunlight falls on her transparent, crepy skin. She looks tired, stoic, saddened.

I think: the comfort—perhaps the sole usefulness—of a mother is that she knows you are a better person than you are.

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I go over to my parents' apartment and find my mother in the kitchen unpacking the crockery I ate off twenty years ago, with the same brown chips and yellow meandering cracks I remember from my youth. Pieces of the newspaper she used for wrapping flutter to the floor and lie like a sea around our ankles. Her hands are black with newsprint, there are streaks of it on her face. Myopic, she stacks the heavy plates on the kitchen table with a clatter like thunder.

"Do you miss your flowers?" I ask her. "Your tulips would be coming up right about now." I see the lines engraved in her face, the feathering around her mouth, the sunspots, the pitting, the tragic deterioration of her skin.

"We have the balcony," she says optimistically, and we turn and look out through the sliding glass door to a balcony barely deep enough for a dog to lie down. My father is sitting out there on a webbed chair with his knees jammed against the railing. I step out beside him, slipping my sunglasses on to shield my eyes from the glare off the water. The fishy, weedy smell of the lake fills my nostrils. A sailboat disappears behind an island a mile out. Behind us, we hear my mother opening and closing the kitchen cupboards. My father is looking again at the item about my sister's restaurant in the Mexican interior. The article is dog-eared from re-reading. The pages of the magazine flap and crinkle in the wind. His hands, his nose, are burnished by the sun.

Seeing me, he says excitedly, "I saw an ad in the *Whig Standard* for a hospital position. You could apply for it. Get yourself back into the mainstream."

"I can't come over here," I tell him, "if you're going to talk like this."

His eyes grow watery. He has reached the point in his life where there's nothing to think about but his children, the very people who never think about *him*. Seagulls soar and float and bank above our heads. This is an old apartment building pressed against the lake on a quiet street. The neoclassical city hall and the parking lot where they hold the farmer's market are a stone's throw away. The apartment building is subsidized. It's filled with misfits, the mentally unstable, deaf-mutes, the physically handicapped. I just rode up on the elevator beside a wheelchair-bound woman with twisted limbs.

I step back into the apartment, where the livingroom is crowded with furniture transplanted from my childhood home, incongruous, jarring now in this cramped space, as out of sorts with its surroundings as my father. He has come from his big, panelled office at the top of the hospital to this collection of tiny boxes, tight as compartments in a honeycomb. Sunlight shrieks off the lake, shimmers liquidly against the walls, so painfully bright that it makes my eyes tear up. Now my mother has moved to the livingroom to pick her biographies of Frank Sinatra, Ava Gardner, Bette Davis out of a cardboard box. In the kitchen, the wind stirs the crumpled newspapers, they sigh like voices. My parents do not own this apartment. They must rent because over the years my father managed to spend them into bankruptcy. All those Ferraris and Hugo Boss suits finished off their fragile savings. They've sold their house in Toronto to pay off the bank; they've had to give up their car. There will be no winter holidays, even to lacklustre Florida.

My father comes in off the balcony and says, "I rented a DVD for us to watch after supper."

"I have another commitment," I tell him.

"Can't you cancel it?"

"I'm sure it's something important, Archimedes," says my mother. "Bea is very busy."

"I went out this morning in the rain to get this," my father tells me.

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Once again, it is fall. The trees are bare. I run into my parents when I am walking along the narrow park hugging the lake. They were drawn to this city by reports of the snowless winters, the solid hospitals, the promise of long walks beside the water. They'd heard there was an infrastructure here for seniors—movie clubs, lawn bowling teams, bridge leagues, lecture series. But, already, my father is finding fault.

"Does the sun never shine here?" he complains. "Where does all this wind come from?"

"People aren't friendly here," he says. "I never thought the days would be so long." He says, "It never occurred to me that I'd be lonely," though these are the very things he's been warning his retiring patients about for years. His name is no longer on the lips of the staff at the eye institute. There are no nurses standing by to glove and gown him for surgery. He receives no phone calls, no emails, even from his daughters. "We spend all our time alone in that apartment," he tells me bitterly. My mother stands at his elbow, smiling bravely, her face glassy, benign. As usual, she floats above everything, she glides over life like a figure skater on ice.

"Why do you never come and see us?" my father asks me. I look into his face, hoping that some day I may find there the reason why I took my house off the market and decided to stay in this lakeside town.

"She was over last night, Archimedes," my mother reminds him gently.

She strikes out, then, across the lumpy grass toward a mobile canteen parked on the road, to buy us some coffee. While we wait, my father and I sit down in the shelter of a gazebo, a Victorian confection, with slender wooden pillars painted in peach, avocado, citron. A spine of iron shaped like a wave runs along the peak of the cedar shake roof. The gazebo is light and airy; it's like a pretty, wall-less house, offering no protection from the elements, just like my childhood home, I reflect. We are feet from the cobalt water, from a strip of beach where the smooth stones will slide and turn under your feet as though alive. You can get to the ocean from here, I think, tempted. You can follow the St. Lawrence River all the way to the Atlantic.

My father says, "Your mother had an affair once."

"*Mom?*" I say.

"You can't blame her," he says. "I was always at the hospital. It was with the fellow we hired to lay the patio stones around the pool. Can you believe that? A man with no education. She actually went as far as running away with him. They were headed for British Columbia. They were going to settle down in some small, obscure town in the interior. With his skills, he could get work anywhere. She called me from Sault Ste. Marie, from what she thought was a safe distance, to tell me I needed to go home and make sure you girls weren't killing each other. I persuaded her to come back. I begged her. 'I'll be around more,' I told her. But of course, I wasn't. As soon as I got her back, I reverted to my old ways."

We turn and watch my mother approach, stepping gracelessly over the uneven ground in her thick, terracotta-coloured stockings, her clumsy shoes, the three coffees borne in front of her, like sacred offerings. The wind grabs at her magenta skirt, it pastes her flowered blouse against her breasts.

Out on the water, sailboats rock on the rough waves. The light thrown off the lake is transcendent, devastating, redemptive.