

Jennifer Morgan, St. John's, Title: A Privilege of Birth

He has been declining again. Passive. No sparks of interest, very little initiative. Whispering. Forgetting. Sleeping. I couldn't get him to work on the shelves with me in the garage. Not that I need him to help me put them together, any more than at one time he would have needed me to help with his projects. What bothers me is his excuse. He is convinced there is a connection between standing on the hard concrete and "dysentery," his word for diarrhea. But it is his medicine which brings the diarrhea. The last time I got him down there he had to run to the basement bathroom. We were alone, so, trying to protect the father-daughter privacy, I passed what he needed around the door. New Attends, I put them together, but through the crack in the door I could see him having problems, taking them apart...no, wait that was earlier, that was in Coley's Point.

The time he had trouble putting the Attends together was a week ago this past Thursday when I took him to Coley's Point. We dropped Mommy off at a meeting. He'd been up and fully alert at a reasonable hour. When I suggested that we go out for breakfast and then to Coley's Point he was happy, he'd gotten dressed with enthusiasm. He put everything on over his pajamas of course, but it was a cold day, Mommy and I said to each other, the extra layer won't hurt.

We arrived at Mac Donalds and I left Daddy to range free for a table. As I gave our order I kept glancing over my shoulder, monitoring his shuffle around the tables, that vague childlike look in his eyes. He looked like Trudy's boy, Christopher surrounded by people he doesn't know very well.

The next time I looked I saw Uncle Don. Sure enough Daddy was sitting with Don and Sue.

"You think you have an original idea and then half the world turns up!" I complained when I reached the table with our food.

"Other people go to Mac Donalds you know!" Uncle Don retorted, "That's how they stay in business."

The conversation was lively. We analyzed last week's funeral of the Queen Mum, which, it turned out, they had gotten up early to watch just like us, Anglophile fanatics, while my republican mother slept in.

"Well I tell you, I figure they must have had that crown bolted on to that coffin with something!" says Don.

We speculated on how the crown stayed on through the lifting, the horse-drawn wagon and then into the hearse. It was Sue who caught Daddy's whispered comment.

"They said, 'ere Mum 'old on to that!'" He imitated the old woman in the coffin, grimly clutching her crown.

"Her last duty for the family," I added.

"Or maybe it was with her teeth," he bit the air, that gleam of humor in his eyes.

Glimpses of my Daddy. They make me wonder what we did right, what we are doing wrong when he recedes...intermittant reward. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. But if you think it's related to what you do, if you think your actions are powerful enough to keep him alive, you are torturing yourself.

We drove in silence to Coley's Point. His eyes were so watery I kept looking at him, wondering if he was ok. As we approached Tim Hortons, I asked if he wanted to use the bathroom there, but he said no.

Walking up the path to the house, I reflected on "the old man's pride." I could almost hear the phrase in my dad's voice, like it was him who was describing this stranger on my right. Gently, excusing the foibles of the elderly. "He was proud you see," my father would say if he was me describing him, "he was proud of the job he'd done, installing the plumbing in Coley's Point. He wanted to use his own bathroom!"

Unfortunately both of us forgot that he'd turned the water off back in January, the day before his terrible spell. The toilet was full of pink antifreeze, so my father went ahead and used it. But when he pulled the handle it wouldn't flush. He was in a panic. He couldn't remember where the valve was to turn the water on. He turned the taps under the toilet, he went to the kitchen, to turn on the source, then back to the bathroom. That was when I remembered.

The fire in the kitchen stove had warmed things up quite nicely. I settled Daddy there to change. Mommy keeps a bag in the trunk packed with clean clothes. I sorted through what he needed, laid clean underwear on the daybed. That was when I put the Attends together-- although through the crack in the door I saw him take them apart and reassemble them. I saw his black cords pooling around his feet, his skinny pink legs. I wanted to look away but he was doing it wrong. He is used to my mom being with him, helping him put them on so he doesn't have to take his cords off.

"Daddy, you have to step out of your pants. Step into the Attends like they're a pair of shorts. Daddy, take your underwear off before you put the Attends on. That's right..."

From behind the door I pretend that I can't see. On his side, his back to the door, he pretends I'm not looking. Always I am wondering, how long can we keep this fragile false privacy?

As long as possible.

After our excitement, my father elected to lie on the daybed and enjoy a nap in the warm kitchen. I addressed our non flush toilet. The plastic garbage bucket seemed an excellent solution. But it liberally leaked all the way up the path from the beach. My gallon of water was only a quart when I got to the toilet. The next time I used the plastic waste basket from the bathroom. A perfect one-flush waste basket. It was a pleasant day to be making trips down to the beach for water. I saw myself from another era, the Morgan maid, fetching water. However, this toilet was making bedpans look efficient; one trip and my great aunt Lizzie would have been done, whereas my job took three. At the beach the water was dotted with chatty seagulls enjoying the community's warm sewage piped into the bay from the concrete under my feet. A fine way to pass the time, the sun on my back, my hands only a little cold from the salt water, the cheerful calls of the birds.

That job done, I wandered around the house with my dad's camera: sunlight on rusted bedsprings in the children's room, the angled view from the upstairs window of the path between the two houses, the beach beyond, and the dark, always disappointingly empty attic, a few oil cans and glinting bottles in front of the one small window.

I picked up one bottle. Small enough to lie on my palm. It might make a gift for David in California. Despite stains and rips, the label still spelled its contents, "Lemon Crystals." Downstairs I photographed it on the windowsill, lit by sunlight wavy through the melted glass window.

That was when I went outside and sat in the sun, between the two houses, and enjoyed the shelter from the wind, the rough rock foundation biting into my back. I moved here and there until I and the foundation met with a compromise. The light on my face and the smell of salt water, the rock-gravelling waves, coupled with the cry of gulls! If I moved my head to the right I could see it-- or I could just sit straight and look at Harry Dawe's house, the shed on the hill with the green crescent painted on the door. When did those little pine trees grow up? It will soon be as forested as when Abraham Morgan arrived from Port Aux Grave, bringing Rachel Andrews as his wife. I must have sat there an hour enjoying Abraham's wall, before pangs of hunger led me back to the house. My dad was lying on the daybed, his eyes open.

"What would you like to do for lunch? A trip to a restaurant, or home delivery?"

"Option two," he said, his speech slurred, but his mild humor still shimmering behind the tumor.

As a young adult I thought my family were crazy people. Coming over to Coley's Point to work like dogs shingling, painting, doing yard work. Or like today, coming all this way to use the toilet and lie on the couch. But even at my most cynical, I have always been under the influence of this place. We all are. I'd seen it that morning in my Uncle Don's eyes.

"Oh, are you going to Coley's Point?" The light, the pleasure, the brief considered look, (shall I go along?) the remembered duties (my car's in the garage, we promised Trudy we'd meet her,) the expedition postponed.

When we get here we don't do much. Light the fire. Sit and talk. Eat a lunch. Some, like my mother, or the younger ones, who itch to be doing something, will go for a walk across the beach or up the hill. In the fall I picked blueberries like a mad woman, obsessively trying to beat invisible rakers who use plastic rakes that destroy the bushes. Listening to the gulls cry, feeling the wide bay stretched out behind my back, facing the hill, smelling the soil.

But my dad and his generation are always happy to just sit in the house. In the kitchen. Talking. It is only these last months that I named what this house means to us. The Coley's Point house is our totem. We were not artisans like the Haida. But my people built this old house. By hand.

My dad used to point out the beveled edges of the wooden beams inches above his head. Hand planed. Some One, some man, decided it needed to look fancy, or at least fancier than a shed or a boat. Maybe it was his concession to a woman he loved, or his own internal idea of fancy, but he took the time to hand bevel the beams. That man was my great-great-grandfather, Abraham Morgan, who built this home in 1867, the year Canada, the country next door, was founded.

When David came to visit he understood this.

As we eat the deli food I'd bought at Dominion, Daddy asked me, "What was it that David said about this place?"

"David said he couldn't believe he was in a house that had been build by my ancestors, people related to me. He said he had no continuity like that. To think that one family had owned this land for five generations." My dad smiled with pleasure. He liked that story.

Earlier that afternoon, leaning against the old house, I had been aware of the fragility of this structure my people once built. The sway of the foundation stones, the dip as the well settles into its

underground hole. The crooked clapboard. It's egg-shell white paint flecking off the silver-grey wood beneath. It looks transparent. Suddenly I was reminded of other totems. The piles of rocks on barrens, wind whining through the holes. Napalese prayer flags on Mount Everest. Ragged, bleached, flapping human artifacts holding on to this beautiful spot by one thin, unraveling thread. Then I feel the burden of this house. It's urging imperative. I want to bring fresh paint and new clapboard, to mend and fight this growing transparency, this fading I see before my eyes.

Not just for Abraham and Rachel, but for George Henry, who drove Morgan's company car all the way from St. John's. And Mac who bought the 1950's style lawn chairs, who's arm chair sits in the living room. For Violet who planted the trees that now block the view to the beach. For George, my dad, and Greg, my brother, who built the deck. Like the bear and the frog and the raven, I feel their eyes on me when I sit in the sun, with my back to this house, enjoying the privileges of my birth.

After lunch, my father and I pack up. We padlock the door and walk to the front lawn. My dad has a plan. He holds the car he bought at Toys R Us-- "to photograph." It is a model of a 1940's car which he has painted green to look like the company car he remembers riding in when he was a child, during the war. Except now he is confused. He brought it to photograph in front of the house on Kenmount Road. But we are at Coley's Point.

"Daddy, let's photograph it here." It will be a trick photograph.

Daddy puts out his hand, the toy car resting on his palm. My job is to photograph the car and the house, not showing his hand.

"Like the hundreds of photos all over North America of soldiers in Europe holding up the leaning tower of Pisa," says my dad.

But at the last minute I see him. Holding the green car in his hand. Smiling down at it in delight. The old house behind him, soberly watching. I back up a step, and take a photo of my dad, enjoying his joke.

It's only after we've left that I remember the bottle on the windowsill. Remember that I was going to give it to David.

"The Lemon Crystals." Looking at the photos later that week my mother will say, "Every Newfoundland household had some. If you were offered a drink you could always ask for a glass of Lemon Crystal. I hated it even as a child. Remember the Lemon Crystals George?"