

THE SPRINGDALE GIRLS

As usual, I was late getting to the “Springdale Girl’s” reunion. I guess you could say we are retrogrades. We still call ourselves “girls” even though we are now in our seventies. I was supposed to meet the “girls” at 4:00 PM in Guilford, Connecticut. I don’t know how many years we “girls” had been meeting like this, one year seems to blur into the next. We first met in kindergarten at Springdale Elementary School , a drab, square brick building on Hope Street— next door to a converted house that was now the small Springdale Library and across the street from the small clapboard United Methodist Church. It was in kindergarten when the others met each other. I didn’t join the group until second grade.

At first there were eleven of us. Now we were reduced to six. Rita was the first to go. She had succumbed to myasthenia gravis before there was life-prolonging medication. She was not even forty, leaving behind a husband and four children. A slightly plump teenager, disease had revealed a woman as lovely and lithe as a wraith. We watched her slowly fade, like an inner tube with a slow leak. It was our first encounter with mortality. Short, vivacious Annie, who had started chain smoking as a teenager died from emphysema. She had barely turned sixty. Judy, she of perpetual good cheer, who raised two boys on a dental receptionist’s salary after divorcing an alcoholic, suffered two broken shoulders, and never seemed to worry about the rotten deck she was dealt, dropped suddenly from a heart attack. She never made 70. Carol now lives in Florida and was in the midst of moving so she couldn’t make it this year; and no one had heard from Patty in at least two years except for the occasional cryptic message that would be left on my phone. “You can’t call me,” the message would say. I don’t have a phone.” But Patty is a long story.

I had waited too late to leave for the reunion. It was now rush hour and as soon as I hit Interstate 95, I was caught in a monstrous traffic jam. Not a car was moving faster than two miles an hour. Well, no problem, I thought. As long as I had the address of our weekend HomeAway it didn't matter if I got there late. When I finally reached New Haven and stopped at a service area my cell phone rang. It was Rosie.

"We're stranded," she quavered. I could hear the anxiety in her voice. "We've no place to stay for the weekend!" It appeared that the Springdale girls had arrived at their "HomeAway" destination in Guilford only to find that it had been double-booked. An about-to-be bride had opened the door announcing that the bridal party had booked it for the weekend and had arrived the day before. What do we do now I wondered to myself? Joanie had come all the way from Las Cruces, New Mexico and Jessie from Dover, Delaware. The rest of us had come from various parts of New York and Connecticut. Here we were, six septuagenarians without a place to lay our heads. Rosie said she would call me back when they figured out what they were going to do. "Just continue on to Guilford," she directed me.

A while later, after several frantic calls in which we kept missing each other, Rosie announced that the Springdale Girls had decided to go to a restaurant for dinner and that I should meet them there. We would figure out what to do at dinner. By the time I got to Guilford, the Girls had finished dinner and I learned that we had been rescued by the kindness of a stranger. The story they told was that while sitting on a bench in Guilford and wondering what to do, the Springdale Girls had met a woman coming down the street and asked her for advice about a place to eat. After hearing their story, she had invited all six of us to come back to her home in the next town for the night.

After I ate my dinner, a weary gaggle of women dragging suitcases (Josie dragging her bad back and arthritic knees) walked into a three-story converted barn straight out of the pages of *Better Homes and Gardens*--the kind with the chunky Crate and Barrel furniture and Martha Stewart pillow arrangements. There were tennis rackets pinned to the walls of the den, hinting at the athletic prowess of our hostess, a large-boned muscular-looking widow in her early fifties who used to be in sales. If we doubled up, there were beds enough for all of us. Since none of our internet connections worked, our hostess kindly found us another rental offered by VRBO just a few blocks from her home and a short walk from the ocean. That evening we listened to stories about her new fiancée, a Wall Street something or other who lives in Manhattan. The next morning, after promising to stay in touch with her and treating our hostess to breakfast at a nearby restaurant, we gratefully moved into our new weekend home.

We started these yearly reunions meeting in each other's homes when we were wearing miniskirts and sprouting beehive hairdos. The conversation back then was about kids and husbands—those who had them. Later, we rented timeshares or houses on Cape Cod or the Rhode Island or Connecticut coasts—always near the ocean where we could walk on the beach, go for a swim if it was warm enough, window-shop in the quaint seaside towns, eat in fancy restaurants, and retire to our timeshare to play games in the evening. Josie was always the impresario, bringing the cards and other games, as well as prizes for the winners. By then, our conversations had turned to work and, more recently of course, to those inevitable subjects of seventy-five-year olds--health problems and grandchildren--in that order.

The Springdale girls were always conspicuous when we went out to eat. Sherrin, who would talk to anyone, would make sure that our young waitresses knew that we had known each other since kindergarten. “Wow,” they would say, “that’s awesome,” and then Sherrin would

add a few more details about where we had come from and some little highlight about each of us. We could peel away the decorum from even the stuffiest upscale restaurant especially when Joanie, the class clown, pulled off one of her pranks. Two, in particular, stand out in my memory. We are sitting in a historic tavern on Cape Cod when she suddenly fishes in her large handbag and pulls out a long barbeque fork. Getting up from the table she proceeds to go from table to table, spearing the potatoes of the startled patrons while uttering a low, throaty chortle, her peculiar voice a remnant of the polio that had placed her in an iron lung as a child. Then there was the time when she placed a fake rose behind her ear, draped a scarf around her waist and did a belly dance, schmoozing her hips right up against the man at the next table who turns sheepishly white and then bright red, not knowing whether he should be laughing or apologizing to his wife. By this time, the eyes of the entire clientele are on us. One time the Springdale girls were even featured in a regional news broadcast by a TV journalist whom we had befriended at one of our breakfast outings—Sherrin, as usual, making the overtures.

But always, after we have exhausted our litany of aches and pains, our conversations return to Springdale. In this yearly ritual time is eclipsed. We are back in Josie's basement, in a modest working-class house on Camp Avenue across the Metro North railroad tracks that run through the middle of Springdale and end up in posh New Canaan. The room is festooned with dozens of balloons and a string of brightly colored letters spells out "Happy Birthday," words we have only recently learned to read. Josie's brothers hover somewhere in the background as a dozen seven-year old girls voraciously eye a table piled high with presents and Josie's mother's famous lasagna. "After you eat, girls," Mrs. Liscio is saying, "we will play Pin the Tail on the Donkey and Blind Man's Bluff and then after that we'll have ice cream and cake and Josie can open her presents." After the games we all snap open the prizes that have been put at each of our

place settings and dig into vanilla ice cream while Mrs. Liscio passes around pieces of a large chocolate cake that she has gilded with yellow and green butterflies. The elaborate decorations, the abundant food and the organized games were something to marvel at. Josie's parties were always the best. True to her heritage, the adult Josie started her own event planning business, filling her garage with those large cellophane-wrapped baskets full of salted caramel toffee, spiced nuts, boutique coffee roasts, and European cheeses that she would deliver to various businesses for their Christmas parties.

At our Springdale Girls' reunions we are once again eight year-olds in Miss Bache's third grade class. In those days married women were not allowed to teach, so all our teachers were what we disdainfully called, "old maids." Miss Bache, or "Bachey-ball" as we dubbed her, was one of them--a tall, scrawny spinster with a wicked temper who was known to lock kids in the closet when they were bad. One time it is Franny Cebulla, chased by a baseball-bat wielding Bachey-Ball who climbs through the window and out onto a second-story ledge. I can still remember his taunting face leering in at us on the other side of the glass. I guess year after year of unruly working-class kids had finally lit Miss Bache's fuse, as she marches straight to the principal's office for help. Franny Cebulla will not be seen again by us.

Our fourth-grade teacher, Miss Emerson, whose long hound dog face teetered on a skinny neck like an elongated billiard ball balanced on the tip of a cue stick, was a bit milder. I don't remember a thing I learned from her because my eyes were always riveted on her frilly décolletage blouses which revealed, as she bent over our desks, a set of wrinkled and withered pears.

At our Springdale Girls' reunions we are once again back in Miss Bennett's sixth grade classroom. Short and rotund, she has turned her back to us and is writing something on the

blackboard when Bobby M. aims a water gun at her head hitting her on the nape of her neck. A bird-like titter rises in the room. Miss Bennett turns around, glowering at the class over her round, wire-rimmed glasses. “Who did that?” she bellows. The tittering stops. The room is sepulchral. “No one will confess? she cries out. “Then I’ll just have to search every desk.” Miss Bennett, now on the warpath, takes her stout form and bobbing grey bun from desk to desk demanding that each student open the lid of their desk. I sense her behind me now. She is approaching my desk. My color begins to rise like a Geiger counter, signaling the unused water gun hiding beneath the scratched and ink-smearred desk lid. Thankfully, she passes by without asking me to open it.

Saturday nights were roller skating nights. The Springdale girls would congregate in the parking lot of St. Cecilia’s Church on Weed Hill Avenue. The lighted “roller rink” was presided over by a priest, I’ll call him Father Donovan. Was he the priest who had told Rosie, Josie, Joanie and Rita that we Protestants—Sherrin, Judy, Patty, Jessie, Carol and me--were not fit to enter heaven? Catholic dogma was always baffling to me. Why did you have to eat fish on Friday nights? Why were Rosie, Joanie, Josie and Rita unable to participate in our Friday night sleepovers because they had to go to confession in the morning? What was “confession” anyway? And why were they forbidden to enter our Methodist Church as if it were some kind of leper colony? How can a real man called Jesus turn into bread and wine? And what was the meaning of Rosie and Josie dressing up as brides for their First Communion? I still have the photo that Josie gave me. There they are, looking like diminutive brides in their white organdy dresses and veils. All of this was mystifying.

In the 1950s Stamford had as many Catholic schools as public schools. When it was time to enter junior high, Joanie and Rosie were sent by their parents to Sacred Heart Academy which

meant that from then on we saw less of them at, least during school hours. The rest of us went on to junior and senior high together. But we remained friends in the after-school hours, joining and then getting kicked out of the Girl Scouts together; going on long walks all over Stamford, once getting lost in a large swamp as darkness descended; spending long summer days on the beach at Shippan Point where some of us flirted with the boys, posed for pictures like bathing beauties in a pageant and came home red as lobsters with skin that blistered and peeled for weeks; dancing in basement rec rooms to the tunes of the Everly Brothers, Bill Haley and his Comets, Buddy Holly, Chuck Berry and Elvis Presley. Our seventy-fifth birthday reunion would be the last. But we're still in touch, and we're still the Springdale Girls.