POORIRMA

Marie Sheppard Williams

Irma was the baby. She may have been borderline retarded, but we did not admit or allow such designations within the family. So my Aunt Irma was just Aunt Irma, and she was a charmer: tall, graceful as a poplar, with short brown finger-waved hair—I saw this in old sepia photographs taken during the Roaring Twenties—a slight hilarious cast in one eye that made her look knowing and sly, a mouth that quirked down on one side, a simpering sly and knowing voice, and a thought process that went directly to what she wanted with a certainty of aim that still astounds me in recall.

Irma was the one of them—of us—who knew how to get what she wanted.

When she was about forty-five—just when everyone thought she was past it—she set her sights on a drunken Irish Catholic man named Francis Aloysius Byrnes from a farm near Elk River, and by God she got him.

I don't know how Irma met Francis—at church, perhaps? at a bingo game? Irma loved bingo. Or did he come into the candy store on West Broadway where she worked part time? She met him, we can surely say, in one of the ominously accidental ways that people do meet and marry in this society.

After she was married to Francis, Irma decided that she wanted to adopt a child—God in His wisdom had made her sterile—and Catholic Welfare gave her Raoul, bright and quirky and delinquent.

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I have a photograph of Irma that other family members—including Raoul—try from time to time to get away from me. It is a picture of her on her First Communion day. She seems in that picture to be somewhat older than the average First Communicant. Well, this would have been true of course because the prerequisite for making your F.C. in those days was that you had attained "the age of reason" and could thereby be presumed capable of responsibly committing a sin. Age seven was formally considered to be the right age: by age seven you were a responsible thinking organism, not entirely finished, you understand, but good enough to sin.

It took Irma longer, apparently, to reach this coveted stage. Generation after generation keens and clamors after that same apple, but Irma was too simple to understand that the mark of a full human being is to crave knowledge.

Irma—lucky—craved nothing that she did not have, or could not easily get. She was the baby girl. She was what they called "sickly." She was dumb.

Because of being sickly, she never went to school, but instead picked up what literacy she had—never very extensive—at home with her mother, my grandmother.

In the photograph, she sits three-quarter-view on an ornate gilded armchair—the photographer's prop—far from the solid square horsehair and oak

parlor furniture of her real life. “Real life”—the designation does not seem to apply to that picture, in which a little girl, dressed in chaste white cotton eyelet, bends forward a little, towards the right of the picture, gazes downward forever, never looks up, will never look up at us. White veiling and lace cascade from her bent head. A boa of leaves—myrtle? ivy?—crowns all and descends along her arms to the arms of the ornate chair.

Her look is delicate, sensitive, serious, hidden. She is a child that *never was*—“too good for this world” is what they would say if such a child were real, were incarnate.

So obviously the camera does after all, in spite of the myth, lie: since Irma was quite real and not very good.

However did the photographer do it? I mean, that picture is something else, a work of high art, a knockout. It should belong, or course, to Raoul, but I will fight hand-to-hand anyone who tries to take it from me.

How do I happen to have it? Why, Irma gave it to me herself. I think she knew that I *had to have it.* She was the kind who would know such things.

She was also the kind who, for sheer random mischief, would keep from someone something that she knew that person *had to have.* Essentially I am saying that she was cruel: there was that capability in her. In all the rest of us too: thus why not in her? She was as I said, dumb, but not so dumb as to rule out cruelty and all the rest of the major human attributes.

But in the case of the photograph, she declared one day that it was to be mine. Raoul never entirely forgave me, never ceased to feel that he should have it. As of course he should. He is perfectly right.

I do not however give it up, even though I feel considerable guilt about it. I believe that the mark of an arrived adult is to be able to carry around a fairly large load of guilt without falling over.

I carry this guilt easily and I keep the picture.

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Why did Irma give Joan her First Communion picture? says my Aunt Anna. Why did you, Irma?

Oh, well, she *wanted it,* says Irma.

Wanted it, says Anna: but why would she *want it?*

Oh, well, my mother sticks in, Joan was always fond of Irma. When Joan was a child. Certainly you remember that.

Joan was crazy about me, says Irma. Simpers.

But she isn’t any more, says Anna. She wouldn’t give you the time of day now.

Oh that’s not true, says my mother.

Oh that *is* true, says Anna. Isn’t it, Joan. (Yes, folks, believe it or not, I am sitting right there, I am privy to this whole conversation.)

Well, I think I’d give her the time of day, Aunt Anna, I say.

But it's basically true that you don't like her the way you used to, Joan, says Anna.

Well, I say: I was a child. People change. They don't stay children forever. Irma was like another child to me when I was a child: of course I thought she was wonderful, what could be more fun than being a child and having a grown-up child for your aunt?

I have always been a child, Irma says, and smiles her crooked, crazy smile.

So what happened? says Anna.

I grew up, I say. And Irma stayed the same. Irma didn't grow up. That's all. It isn't that I don't like her any more.

It isn't that she doesn't like me any more, says Irma, and smirks.

Still, says Anna: I still want to know why you gave her the picture.

Oh, says Irma: she wanted it *so much*.

Raoul wants it too, says Anna. It's Raoul's right. To have that picture.

Oh, Raoul doesn't want it *so much*, says Irma: not *so much.*

Well, why did you want it, Joan? says Anna.

God, Anna, *I* don't know, I say. I guess because it is so beautiful. It's one of the most beautiful photos I've ever seen. . . .

And so sad: I could have said that too.

See? said Irma. *She wanted it.*

That doesn't make it right, says Anna.

*

When I say that Irma knew how to get what she wanted—that she was the only sister among the five who knew how to do this—I do not mean to imply that she had a wonderful life or anything like that. She did not have a wonderful life. She had all in all I guess quite a terrible life. At any rate, she certainly got a lot of sympathy for her lot. Everybody was sorry for Irma.

Poor Irma, that was practically her name: Poorirma.

Except for my mother: I don't know why everyone is so sorry for Irma, my mother says.

Why *poor Irma?* she says.

Irma gets everything she wants. Says my mother, Elizabeth.

Irma did get everything she wanted.

The problem was that Irma was not very bright, in the ordinary sense, and some of the things she wanted were good for her and some were not. Some of the things she wanted were also not good for other people: Raoul, for example. However, she got them anyway.

*

One day when Irma was quite old, maybe sixty-five—my God, is that *quite old?* next year *I* will be seventy-seven—anyway, when she was pretty old, I

came over to her house one day: the last house she lived in, the one on North Dupont in Minneapolis.

I didn't come to see her. I came to see my mother, who lived with Irma the last few years of Irma's life.

Who trimmed the lilacs? I said that day.

The lilacs in Irma's back yard had grown riotously for a few years past, and one day Irma said they should be trimmed, and she kept saying it all that spring and summer and all that fall, and still they were not trimmed, nothing ever happened.

That day, though, they were trimmed. Beautifully.

So: Who trimmed the lilacs, I said.

Oh, the men from the Park Board did, Irma said.

Oh, sure, I said: Come on, who did you get to do it, did Raoul do it?

No, said Irma: the men from the Park Board.

We were—the three of us, my mother and Irma and me—sitting around the table in the kitchen by that time. I appealed to my mother: Come on, tell me, I said. Who trimmed them?

It's true, said my mother: the men from the Park Board did it. My mother looked sour.

But for heaven's sake, I said. The men from the Park Board don't come into people's yards and *trim lilacs,* I said. I mean, they didn't trim anybody else's lilacs, did they?

Only mine, said Irma. And smiled: her awful crooked slippery smile, one step I have sometimes thought from an idiot's.

Well for God's sake, I said. How in the world did you get them to do it?

I asked them to, said Irma.

It's true, said my mother. Irma just asked them to.

Well, did you call them up or what, I said.

No, I didn't call them, said Irma. They were out there with their truck cutting down a tree and I went out and asked them if they would trim my lilacs. While they were at it.

While they were at it, I said.

Yes, she said.

I began to laugh. Well. I laughed until I choked so that Irma had to get me a glass of water and my mother looked quite cross and Irma pounded me on the back.

Honestly, Joan, my mother said. You don't have to laugh that hard. You always did laugh too hard, even when you were a child, you were always choking because you laughed too hard.

I do have to laugh that hard, don't I, Aunt Irma? I said. And laughed some more. And choked and drank.

Irma laughed too.

I guess you do, she said. I guess you do have to laugh that hard.

*

People always seemed to me to be more or less standing in line to do things for Irma. There was for example—after Francis died, this was, and Raoul had left, when she was living alone—a man next door (I never knew him by a name, when she talked about him it was always just as "the man next door", as in *The Man Next Door cut the lawn yesterday,* or *The Man Next Door fixed the back window, Joan)*. Anyway, the man next door routinely did all her yard work and handyman stuff.

Once when she broke her wrist, my father absolutely *tore* over to her house to be, so to speak, and for the duration, her Right Arm. My mother was a tiny bit pissed about that, but what could she say?—after all, Irma was her own baby sister. In a way it could be said that my father was doing it for her, Elizabeth, my mother.

Even more remarkable was the performance of a friend—it was always very vague how Irma had met this friend. She just turned up precisely when she was needed, as though she had been sent by God, which perhaps she was—a friend named Marybeth, who came to the house often and did a lot of work for Irma, did really heavy, really hard work inside the house (while The Man Next Door was toiling away outside): washing clothes, washing walls, cleaning rugs, etc. And she also cooked. For Irma. Yes. There are people in the world like Marybeth. And they always find an Irma, who happily accepts all labor, all gifts, as a right.

I always thought that there was some Basic Trust thing going on: that Irma somehow managed to believe, in spite of much evidence to the contrary if only she had looked around her, that the universe was benevolent; and that belief was a magic lamp which, rubbed, set up sequences of events that demonstrated—for Irma—that the universe was indeed her friend.

Irma, I thought, was onto something.

*

And the thing is, Irma knew exactly what she was doing. I feel sure of this. She was not the innocent that people thought she was. I somehow feel very, very sure that she knew what coups she pulled off. I feel sure that she knew also that what she did along those lines other people could not do. And I think she derived great personal satisfaction from this knowledge. So all in all, I guess you could say that she lived a fairly satisfactory life. In that way, at least.

*

She decided, as I have told you, at age forty, to marry Francis. Within a year, she was married. Francis ever afterward looked like a man who never knew what hit him. In one way, Irma's decision to marry Francis was a bad decision. Marrying Francis was a bad thing for her to want, because Francis was

a drunk and he beat her up from time to time when he was under, as they say, the influence.

In another way it was good that she got what she wanted, which was to be married and not have to work. People do not do well when they don't get what they want; sometimes they don't do well even if they do get what they want, but the not-getting is worse. Irma quit work at the candy store right after she was married.

She stayed home and took care of my Grandma, and Francis took care of both of them. My Uncle Luke—Anna's husband—got Francis a job at Grant Battery, and Francis made good money. And since he only drank beer, and beer was cheap, he didn't drink all of the money up. Quite a lot of it came to Irma.

*

Irma wanted a child and apparently could not have one of her own, and so she applied to Catholic Welfare and they gave her Raoul, slight and dark, Spanish looking, handsome, intelligent, musical, and delinquent. He was in reform school three years after she got him.

Christ: what *could* Catholic Welfare have been thinking of?

Well, what could the men from the Park Board have been thinking of?

*

I wanted my father to die—Francis, I mean, not my real father, Raoul said to me after Irma's funeral—shaken enough to talk for once.

He was drunk all the time and he hit my mother and he hit me. I could hardly wait to be big enough to hit him back, but he didn't live long enough, I was thirteen when he died and I wanted him to die, I wished him dead, I prayed for him to die, and he did die, said Raoul, and I thought I'd killed him.

What a terrible thing, Raoul, I said: how terrible for you. . .to think that. . .

*

I remember Francis's funeral like it happened yesterday. It was what I think of as a typical Catholic funeral: maybe it wouldn't be so today, but this all happened a long time ago. These days the Catholic church has changed so much that it's gotten almost as boring as the Lutherans.

First there was a wake, at which people who knew Francis or Irma or indeed any other member of the family—either family—came, knelt for a stricken—apparently—minute by the open casket: Francis lying there with his wire-rimmed spectacles on his face, looking peaceful as never in life. And then they (the mourners, I mean, the bereaved) proceeded to have what certainly appeared to be a marvelous time.

They got off the kneeling bench by the casket, crossed themselves soberly, came down a step to the level of the waiting rows of chairs filled with other family members and friends; got introduced all around; said things like: My,

doesn't he look good, doesn't he look peaceful, doesn't he look natural; and He looks like he's just asleep, don't he, my goodness, I expected him to sit up when I was kneeling there. And then they sat around chatting happily with people they hadn't seen since the last funeral.

Then, of course, there was the actual burial, people crying in the rain, the snow, etc., etc., prayers and what-have-you, and then the real point of the whole thing: the party at the house, and, as befits the character of the deceased—it was a drunken blast, everybody had a ball.

I personally—I was probably about twenty at the time—downed sixteen glasses of cheap muscatel, absolutely, I was counting them; and the seventeenth slipped through my fingers and smashed on the floor of the dining room.

Oh, look at Joan, my cousin Dolly said—it must have been Dolly—I think Joan is tiddly!

Tiddly!

Oh, I am not, I slurred.

Oh, I was.

It was the first time I ever got drunk in full view of my mother, who was scandalized, but who decided to overlook the whole incident, since it was after all in a good cause: sending Francis off.

Irma also drank too much that day. She cried and cried: Francis was a saint, she said, over and over, to anyone who would listen: Francis was a saint.

Francis was a *saint?* Oh, my. Once again I laughed and laughed until I choked and had to be pounded on the back.

*

Irma had a kidney problem during part of her life, for a few weeks or maybe months. Maybe as long as a year. She went down to General Hospital—Hennepin County Medical Center now, or HCMC—in a special van that came for her from MAO—Minneapolis Age and Opportunity—twice a week and she spent several hours on each of these days hooked up to a dialysis machine.

A *dialysis machine!* I said when I heard about it. My God. She must be really sick.

Oh, Irma has always made a lot of fuss over nothing, said my mother.

It can't be nothing, I said, if they put her on a dialysis machine. They don't put people on dialysis machines for nothing.

She likes it, said my mother. She wants to be on the machine. She eats all the things she's not supposed to, salt and things, so she can be on the machine.

You're kidding, I said. Irma, do you really *like* dialysis? (Yes, Irma was in on this conversation. We don't seem to care what anybody overhears in this family.)

Well, I kind of do, says Irma.

Everybody else hates it, I said. Everybody else thinks it's painful and awful.

Well, it *is* painful and awful, says Irma.

Then how can you say you like it?

It's the doctor, my mother says.

The doctor? I say.

Isn't it the doctor? says my mother, to Irma.

Well, maybe, says Irma. And smiles: her dreadful, slack-jawed, gap-toothed, utterly charming smile.

What has the doctor got to do with it? I say.

Oh, well, the doctor likes me, says Irma. And tosses her head, and titters. (Yes, titters, definitely.) And smiles her lopsided smile again.

He says I'm his favorite girl, she says. And she tilts her head a bit to one side and casts her eyes down, and for a second I can see the little girl in the photograph, and I think what a good thing you didn't look up in that picture, Irma: if the priest had seen the lascivious, voracious, sinful sparkle in your eyes, would he ever have let you make your First Communion at all? Not a chance.

*

One time Irma got very sick and had to stay in the hospital for about six weeks.

When she got out, she was terribly weak. It took her a long time to get any strength back. One Saturday, though, she decided that she would walk the three blocks to St. Philip's church for the four o'clock mass. For confession before the mass.

She would go with my mother.

My mother at that time was just at the beginning of her long series of eye surgeries. Whatever stage she was in, she couldn't see very well. With bright sunlight or white snow she couldn't see at all to speak of.

My mother can't go with you, she can't see, I said. For God's sake, Irma.

I can see, said Irma. I can lead her.

But you're so weak, Irma, I said. How can you manage this?

I can lean on Elizabeth, she said. And laughed. Elizabeth is strong, she said.

I don't think you should, I said. I think it's crazy.

I want to go to church, said Irma. I want to. Don't you want to go to church, Elizabeth?

Yes, said my mother. I want to go to church.

I want to go to confession, said Irma.

Confession! I said. What have you got to confess, an old lady like you.

Well, she said. You'd be surprised.

So off they went.

I advised against it, what else could I do? but when I saw that they were bound and determined, I walked the three blocks with them. You have to understand that I didn't have a car at that time. I had given up driving altogether and was riding the bus.

Remember that you'll have to get home on your own, I said. Are you sure you want to do this?

We're sure.

Bright sun sparkled off the new white snow.

My mother's eyes watered from the brightness of the snow and the sun. She mopped her eyes with a hankie held in one gloved hand and hung onto Irma's arm with the other hand.

Irma gave my mother verbal directions. Here, she said, lift your foot up high right here and kind of swing it across this little drift.

I held Irma's other arm.

She was so weak. She walked very, very slowly, moving her feet just inches at a time.

About every half-block she stopped to rest.

I really wanted to hit her, I wanted to hit them both, I was so worried about them. . . .

At about the third rest stop, Irma said to me: I suppose you think we're not being very sensible, Joan.

God, I was so exasperated.

Yes, I said. That's just what I do think. That's exactly what I think. I think you're not being very sensible.

She grinned at me, that watermelon-slice of smile, purely lunatic.

We were sensible last week, she said.

*

Irma's death was a big event in my life: it was the first death I'd ever seen, been present at while it was happening, I mean. The only one yet, for that matter.

It was so beautiful. I was stunned. I was dazed and dazzled by that death: it was so, uh, whatever can I say: well, so *charming.*

Irma lay on her bed in the hospital covered with a light sheet. She had been ill for a long time, or *ailing,* what the old ladies used to call *ailing*; ailing is when you can walk around a bit, and get dressed sometimes but not always. No one, not even your doctor, knows what's wrong with you; you are not precisely sick, but you are not well, either.

Irma ailed for months. My mother—as I told you before—moved in with her and took some care of her.

Marybeth—who was, yes, still around and still slaving, though The Man Next Door was long gone. I never knew what became of him and no one else

seemed to know either, or seemed to care. Once his relevance to Irma was over, he had no identity in our lives at all—Marybeth did, as always, most of the care.

At some point they moved Irma's bed downstairs into the dining room so she wouldn't have to negotiate stairs in order to use the bathroom. And even later than that, they put a commode next to the bed so Irma didn't even have to make it as far as the bathroom.

The commode was the doctor's idea. He came to the house a couple of times a week to look her over.

Yup. The doctor too. Right in there with the Park Board and The Man Next Door.

I was there once when he came.

How's my favorite girl? he said. He was so young, lord, he looked about twenty.

And Irma smiled. And simpered. Oh, she said, oh Doctor Jim, I'm. . .fine. . . .

She waved her hand in the air weakly.

Fine. . .he said. He took her pulse, listened to her heartbeat.

Well, maybe not so fine, he said.

And ordered the commode.

But none of us really believed she would *die*, you know. Not Irma.

*

One day my mother called me on the phone. (I was living at that time in a little apartment near the University campus.)

Oh, you have to come, she said.

They took Irma to the hospital. She said. In an ambulance. The ambulance came and they took her away. . . .

My mother—I could hear it over the phone—began to cry. Just a little.

Oh, Irma! she said. My only baby sister. . . .

Well, she knew Irma would die, of course. That was what going to the hospital meant to my family. And in an *ambulance!* My God, that tore it. You went to the hospital in an ambulance, you were a goner. Even though Irma had made it safely through the first hospitalization, this time she would surely die: there were only so many miracles to a family and we had used ours up.

Irma was unconscious when I got to the hospital, and never woke again in this world. My mother was there, and Raoul and Anna, and Anna's children, Catherine's daughters, my daughter Margaret, and we all stood around the bed, the deathbed scene from the movies, from the novels, and we watched poor Irma die.

Up to that day I was (like everybody else in this country) afraid of death. A little. Maybe a lot. But that death was so sweet, so simple and easy, Irma died like a child falling asleep; and, her mouth closed at last, wore a more sedate

smile into Paradise than she ever wore on earth. And her eyes were closed too when they buried her, so who could notice if their glance was still wanton?

Dr. Jim came to the funeral. Most of our funerals seemed to be held in snow or rain, as I think I told you before, but when we buried Irma, the sun sparkled off the gravestones, made them look positively cheerful.

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Irma has been gone for many years now. I find myself wishing—now and then, on a bright day—that she was still here so I could tell her I've come full circle, I am an old lady now myself and full of lustful longings.

My prized attainment of reason, my apple of sophistication—whatever it amounted to, never very great—is absolutely down the tubes, folks. And somehow, by some miracle, I seem to be pretty much getting what I want these days: some of the things I want are good for me and some are not, but I do get them: mostly.

Maybe I can yet learn what Irma seemed to know: that rubbed the right way, the universe indeed becomes benevolent. Maybe, by another miracle, I can—we can all—become, as it says somewhere we must, as little children.