

Laura Chester

“On Being Bluebeard”

MY mother had a passion for building a fire. Every night before dinner she would crush up newspaper and stuff it beneath the logs in the living room. The fire flared up beneath a painted sea scene that hung above the mantel, where waves were caught in an eternal crash—far from our Midwestern landscape.

On occasion, we would set up those flimsy TV-dinner trays and watch the fire for entertainment. My older brother George and I would take turns throwing a chemical powder onto the blaze, creating tongues of blue and green. Our younger sister and brother, Cia and David, sprawled on the floor in their cozy, footsie pajamas. Chipper, our boxer, lay asleep on the floor as I rubbed his floppy ears.

Once in a while after dinner, if our father was in the mood, he would clap his hands together and ask if we'd like a story. In silent agreement we would huddle together on the dark red carpet and watch the fire as it transformed his kind, attractive face into something almost scary, grotesque. We didn't have to ask what he was going to read. It was always the same story, Bluebeard.

Our mother didn't stay to listen to Daddy's favorite fairytale. She retreated to the kitchen to supervise Ethel as she cleaned up the Formica-countered kitchen with its checkered floor, everything nice and orderly, the tuna noodle casserole put away in its Pyrex container, the budgie bird tray swept clean. Our mother had a firm idea of what the perfect 1950s family was supposed to be like and it included bedtimes, table manners and nightly prayers.

Bluebeard, like my father, was a man of means, with grand homes in both town and country. But Bluebeard was ugly, while my father was handsome — tall, trim, with a full head of hair. My father had a playful attitude that drew people to him, while Bluebeard made all the women run away.

After Bluebeard convinced a beautiful young woman to marry him, it wasn't long before he had to leave his estate on business. While he was away, his young wife was given free rein. I wondered if he took along a brown leather briefcase with a combination lock when he handed her keys to all the rooms, filled with gold and treasure.

“Open them all; go into each and every one of them,” our father read in his scariest voice, “except that little closet which I forbid you...”

Of course Bluebeard's beautiful, young wife could not resist the temptation set before her. Her curiosity, after all, was simply a desire to know the truth about her strange marriage partner.

"She then took the little key, and opened it, trembling," our father continued. "At first she could not see anything plainly, but after some moments, she began to perceive that the floor was all covered with clotted blood, on which lay the bodies of several dead women, ranged against the walls."

The key fell from her hands into a pool of blood. The stain would surely betray her. He would know! He would know that she knew.

The waves above the fireplace should have sprung into life at that point in the story, crashing against the shore, washing the key with its magical waters. But my father read on in a tone of great warning, as if we too must always obey and never violate the sanctity of the closet. My father seemed to enjoy the terror the young wife endured awaiting Bluebeard's return.

Luckily, the wife had a younger sister, who ran to the top of the tower to look out for their brothers. LO! There in the distance came the rescuers riding — two brothers racing across the high desert, approaching in a cloud of dust!

I liked this part of the story — riders coming to the rescue. I wondered if my own two brothers would be as valiant. Would they come to my rescue and save me if I opened the door to this book I am writing? Would my sister stand by me as well?

In the story, the brothers arrived just as Bluebeard took hold of the young wife's hair and prepared to strike off her head. Before he had a chance, the brothers ran their swords through the old man's body, and the four siblings were united.

After that, it was time to kiss our parents goodnight, then trot upstairs to our separate bedrooms, where we could say the Lord's Prayer and have "sweet dreams." No wonder I had recurring nightmares.

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Decades later, in my father's will, he left the four of us children our ancestral summer home, an "architecturally perfect" brown-shingled monstrosity that overlooked the shores of Oconomowoc Lake, thirty miles west of Milwaukee. Many considered Broadoaks haunted.

My two brothers and brother-in-law were the executors of my father's will, while Popi (the nickname my son, Clovis, gave to his grandfather), gifted me with all eighty-three volumes of his precious scrapbook collection. These leather-bound scrapbooks contained a hodgepodge of family treasures, both visual and verbal, dating back to the turn of the century. There was no chronological order.

In fact, there was no discernible order at all. It was a treasure hunt without a map; even the X, marking his “secret spot,” was hardly discernible.

Several weeks after my father’s death, when I received this bounty of material, I felt it was a very special gift indeed. The scrapbooks helped me cope with the shock of his loss. They almost brought my darling father back to me — his humor, his wit, his grand all-inclusiveness. What a delightful man he was! Still filled with adoration, I poured over his scrapbooks, culling out the best for a family album.

The strangely-shuffled arrangement of his original scrapbooks was such a mish-mash it was easy to overlook certain things. But as the years went by, on closer inspection, I noticed that the scrapbooks contained numerous clues to another life, which included my father’s occasional chauffeur, who had been an important person in his life for over twenty years.

As I delved deeper into this information, I felt like I had been entrusted with the key to forbidden knowledge, like Bluebeard’s daughterly wife. Now certain repeated images caught my attention. Various postcards and “man cards” had been taped down on all four sides.

I wanted to understand the more disturbing aspects of our family dynamic. It was his wish for me to reveal what he could not — his other life. I know he loved our mother and the four of us immeasurably, yet what he kept locked in the closet of his brain was his most exciting thing!

No wonder my mother was most often furious, a good chunk of her soul left hanging in that bloody room. And what else did she have to sacrifice in order to protect the only man she ever loved?

--from Scrap: A Charmed Yet Secret Life