

I.

John Harrison, a widower and a drunk, was by all accounts ill suited to the rigors of single parenthood. He fathered six children, four of whom, all girls, were still living under the parental roof when his wife Ida died of cervical cancer in 1924. Within a week or two of her death he had distributed three of the kids among various relatives and neighbors and placed his youngest daughter in an orphanage while he waited, bottle in hand, for Someone Else to figure out what to do with the lot of them. Eventually his sister, Emma, stepped in to take responsibility for the girls, although at some point during the negotiations it was determined that the eldest, Della, was at age 16 old enough to be on her own. Aunt Em, a spinster and the proprietor of a boarding house on the South Side of Chicago that was the subject of enduring rumors, was unlikely to be mistaken for a surrogate mother by anyone, but she did provide a home for Violet, age 15; Lydia, 12, and Mabel, 9. The sisters shared a room at the boarding house and earned their keep by cleaning the lodgers' rooms after school.

The girls still saw John frequently. After Saturday chores, they'd take the trolley to visit their dad, stopping at the alley door of the corner grocery to fetch a pail of beer for him like they used to and giving the family whistle — *wee-eu-wee-eu-wee-eu* — as they reached the courtyard of their old apartment building to let him know they were on their way up. Sometimes Della and their older brothers Wally and George would come, too, for family gatherings that dwindled in frequency as John's alcoholism progressed. After a couple of years, there was not much point to the kids' visits, because he no longer seemed to remember their names.

Lydia Emma Harrison, my grandmother, was a freshman in high school and deep in the throes of her first real romance when her father died of alcohol-related causes in early 1927. Her beau was an 18-year-old taxicab driver, the beneficiary of a minor genetic windfall that gave him the same sort of slow-burn stare and swarthy good looks as the insanely popular Rudolph Valentino. The only surviving son in a family of much older sisters, Howard Albert Tatro been born in his mother's early forties after his father swore off gambling and girlfriends and converted to Christian Science. Howard took Lydia

home to meet mom and dad: Oscar, dignified and devout, white-haired but instantly identifiable as the source of Howard's matinee-idol looks; and Fredericka, a famously dour and taciturn woman who, family lore claimed, could suck the life out of a room by walking through its door.

The Tatro household was modest and well ordered. There was no line for the loo. Rooms long ago vacated by Howard's siblings remained empty. The bedroom of the Tatro's eldest, Lloyd, was preserved intact years after an appalling accident at the railroad switchyard where father and son both worked; a promise made in the last moments of Lloyd's life as Oscar held what was left of him in his arms, waiting for the irrelevant ambulance, transformed the older man from a philandering lapsed Catholic prone to monumental displays of foul temper to a steadfast family man with a convert's zeal for Christian Science. It was an environment which, if not exactly overflowing with warmth, was at least more conducive to a girl's getting her homework done than the overcrowded boarding house, with its revolving cast of slightly dodgy lodgers, or the sour and solitary apartment in which John Harrison, drapes drawn and bed unmade, had set about drinking himself to death. Lydia began stopping by the house every day after school.

Howard was charming and cheerful and paid a lot of attention to her, qualities in a male that were unique in Lydia's experience. Oscar, having earned a gold watch and a full pension from the railroad, rose early, dressed neatly in a suit and bow tie, and spent his days at the Christian Science Reading Room, returning at dinnertime with a rolled-up copy of the Christian Science Monitor tucked under his arm. Neither father nor son consumed beer by the bucket, another very attractive trait in a man. Although Fredericka had long ago exhausted her scant reserves of maternal instinct and affection, she was not unkind, and together she and Lydia would wash and dry the supper dishes in companionable silence while Howard and Oscar listened to the radio in the parlor. Later on Howard would walk Lydia back to the boarding house in the dark, where they'd smooch on the porch until the hoots and catcalls of her sisters drove her inside. "*Lydia and Howard, sittin' in a tree, k-i -s-s-i-n-G!*" Lydia spent so much time at the Tatro house that when her father died it seemed natural that she should move in as Howard's wife.

II

It's a common assumption that a literal or figurative shotgun must be involved in the wedding of a 15-year-old-girl and an 18-year-old boy. Throughout her life Lydia maintained, adamantly, that firearms played no role in her marriage to Howard. This assertion was backed up both by the calendar and by her grimly comic account of the shock of their wedding night —“You want to put it *where?*” she'd gasped in disbelief—which rang true decades after the event. She'd figured the odd hard swelling that radiated heat when Howard pushed up against her as they made out on Aunt Em's porch was yet another mysterious, peculiarly male affliction, like the compulsion to drink, or stream sweat, or hawk out quivering globules of spit on the sidewalk. The lump seemed to cause him some discomfort, and he'd been grateful when she grazed it with her knuckles as he asked, but she'd refused to actually hold the thing in her hand, as he also requested, because she knew decent girls did not do It until marriage. From what she could glean from overheard snippets of conversation among the slutty seniors at school, a hand job was It. Whatever slices of life served to young Lydia as she made her rounds with mop and bucket at Aunt Em's rooming house must not have included sexual activity. Lacking a mother, the Preparation for Marriage course in the junior-year biology curriculum that was a couple of years away, or hard-core high school harlots to gossip with, Lydia was left to navigate the rocky shoals of human sexuality on her own. She was a was not only a virgin but strikingly ignorant of the basics of human biology when she and Howard, armed with a note of permission from Aunt Em and accompanied by Oscar, took a taxi to the Loop and were married at the Cook County Courthouse on April 15, 1928.

Married women were forbidden to attend high school, so the freshman class wrapped up the academic year without Mrs. Howard Tatro. By early summer, Lydia had developed a brand-new set of great big bosoms and the distressing habit of vomiting her breakfast into the gutter as she waited for the bus to take her downtown to her job at Woolworth's. If Fredericka, a woman of few words, noticed anything different about her daughter-in-law

she kept it to herself. But when one of Lydia's fellow commuters—a “nice older Negro lady”— put an arm around the girl's heaving shoulders one morning and helped her wipe her face, Lydia, grateful for the attention, leaned against her and wondered aloud whatever could be wrong with her—she was so tired all the time and couldn't keep her breakfast down. Lydia's new friend threw back her head and laughed, telling her, with a quick squeeze, “Baby, you gonna *have* a baby.”

A baby! This was thrilling news. Queasy but pleased, Lydia turned 16 during the first trimester of her pregnancy. Over the next few months the young couple bought a wicker baby carriage, a crib, and a big deep kettle with racks to sterilize bottles for scientific baby feeding. They also moved out of Howard's folks' place to their own apartment nearby at 7154 Vincennes Avenue. The nice lady at the bus stop kept an eye on her, asking after her health and complimenting her on the roses in her cheeks as her pregnancy progressed, until Lydia's belly really started to show and she had to quit her job to stay home to await the birth of her baby.

III.

In the late 1920s, first-time mothers-to-be learned about what to expect in childbirth from their own mothers and other female relatives, or from friends who'd already started their families. Lydia lacked these traditional sources of empirical information: her mother was dead, her aunt was a spinster, her mother-in-law was remote and flinty, and her older sisters had not yet married. Her peers were sophomores in high school. She went for check-ups at the local clinic and signed up for classes in which public health nurses in starched white uniforms stressed the importance of keeping Baby to a regular schedule and handed out mimeographed instructions for the hygienic mixing, decanting and dispensing of Baby's formula. The gritty mechanics of labor and delivery were dismissed with the assurance that the modern Mother would be fast asleep when the stork arrived.

Absent hard facts or a biology textbook, Lydia extrapolated a birth scenario based on what the nurses had implied and what she'd observed in her body as her pregnancy progressed. An odd line, faint at first and gradually darkening, had appeared in the middle of her lower abdomen, tracing a straight path from her pubis to her distended

belly button. Noting how much this line resembled the cutting guide on the tissue paper dressmaking patterns her mother had used long ago, she figured it must serve a similar function in human reproduction: a helpful guide show the doctor where to cut to get the baby out. Lydia went through her first pregnancy serene in the knowledge that contemporary childbirth was a painless surgical event. When her baby was ready to be born, she'd check into the hospital and be eased into a deep sleep. The baby would be extracted, she'd awaken tucked up in a hospital bed wearing her new cerise satin bed jacket, and her infant son (she was sure it was a boy) would be placed in her arms as her husband looked on in supportive wonder. She'd spend ten days resting in bed, during which time she could order anything she wanted from the hospital menu and the nurses would show her how to feed, burp and change the baby. She was a thoroughly prepared mother-to-be.

One late February day, grim and grey as only a Chicago winter can be, Lydia returned home from the market feeling cranky and cramp-ish. She dragged herself up the stairs and as she fumbled with the keys at door to their apartment felt a warm wash of liquid gushing through her underwear and looked down to see water on the carpet under her feet. The cramps immediately increased in intensity. She went inside and called Howard's supervisor, who notified him via cab radio that the baby was on its way. Howard met her at the hospital, where he was directed to the fathers' waiting room and Lydia, sitting in a wheelchair, was pushed through swinging doors to what she assumed would be a sort of operating theater where her baby would be removed. It was instead a long ward filled with women in various stages of labor. Looking and listening to what was going on around her as they wheeled her to a narrow cot, she understood, with belated horror, what the term "labor" meant. She also understood how far off the mark she had been about birth being a passive, surgical procedure: she watched incredulously as the woman in the bed next to hers, face blood red and contorted, strained to pass the enormous bulk in her belly out between her legs while lying on her back. She was *not* asleep. Extraordinary sounds issued from between her clenched teeth. A nurse with rolled-up sleeves appeared, thrust her arm between the woman's splayed-out legs and

decreed her “ready to deliver.” The woman, still pushing and grunting, was wheeled out of the room, bed and all.

Lydia was terrified. She was also furious at what she viewed as widespread medical deception about the true nature of childbirth. She suddenly had a lot of questions about the process, questions that went unanswered as the attendants took away her clothes and the little suitcase containing her pretty bed jacket, helping her gently into an ugly hospital gown and pausing in their ministrations when the pains hit. What kind of shape would she be in, down there, after squeezing out the huge bulge in her belly through such a tiny little space? What was that dark line for, anyway? And where was the goddamn ether? “Not yet, Dear,” the nurses told her when she begged to be put to sleep, and when she began to thrash about they strapped down her wrists and ankles, put up the side rails of the bed and placed standing metal screens inset with gathered curtains between her and the other women. Alone and immobilized, she could no longer see the other modern Mothers, but she could hear them well enough. In those days, screaming and/or groaning until ether was dripped onto a paper cone covering the woman’s mouth and nose, moments before the baby was expelled, were entirely acceptable options that many laboring women chose to exercise, Lydia included.

IV.

Doris Gene Tatro, my mother, was born on February 28, 1929. Her middle name was given in honor of Howard’s favorite sister, Lillian Jean, ten years his senior and known to all as Gene. A tiny—4 foot 10—single gal with a lot of female friends, Aunt Gene had lived briefly in Los Angeles and been in the corps de ballet for a minor dance company; she often wore child-sized Capezio slippers with trousers, quite unusual for the times. There are a number of photographs of Aunt Gene wearing jodhpurs and tall leather boots, holding a cigarette and/or a riding crop, looking rakish and carefree in her wind-blown bob. In one memorable photo she displays the spread-out wings of a pheasant she’d just bagged, the tie of her hunting costume tie tucked into her blouse and her shotgun leaning against a tree. Back home in Chicago she’d settled down to a career as a switchboard operator at a residential hotel on the North Side, where she lived in a miniscule efficiency

apartment with a sliver of Lake Michigan visible through the window. Gene adored her father and her brother, was kind to Lydia and crazy in love with the baby. She had a little Leica camera with which she took most of the photographs documenting the young family's early years. One of Doris Gene wearing a frilly bonnet, peering around the hood of a gorgeous wicker perambulator, was published in a local magazine under the headline "Peek-a-Boo."

Doris' baby pictures show an endearingly big-headed bald baby being cuddled by a cute young girl who appears to be the baby sitter—a spindly-armed teenager with full lips, spit curls, modish low-waisted dresses, and, in a winter shot, a drop-dead chic cloche hat. A family photo taken that summer on the tiny back porch of the Vincennes apartment shows 21-year-old Howard, darkly handsome in rolled-up sleeves and a bow tie, holding their grinning six-month-old daughter to face Aunt Gene's camera. Lydia, wearing a long-sleeved chemise dress and pearls, looks a little peaked in the heat. It's sometime around her 17th birthday, and this time, presumably, she knows what her morning sickness means.

Lydia gave birth to two more babies while still in her teens: Howard Ronald, born in 1930, and Gloria Lydia Mabel, born in 1931. Big Howard went from driving taxis to driving trucks around the city for a private delivery service, which gave the family a modest but secure income even as the bread lines and soup kitchens spawned by the Great Depression became part of the national landscape. It also gave Howard a spiffy uniform with a tailored, cropped jacket, jodhpurs and a jaunty cap. Photos from these years show serial babies, a new one each summer, posed on blankets spread on the grass at nearby Hamilton Park. There are several of the three kids, stripped down to sun suits and swimming trunks, sitting in a cart pulled by a photogenic billy goat brought around by an itinerant photographer. An urban-chic shot shows little Doris in a smart wool coat, matching cap in hand, captured in profile as she leaned against the brick exterior of their apartment building.

The young Tatros lived in a neighborhood of other working-class families on the South Side where Lydia and Howard had grown up, sort of, and gotten married. Aunt Em and

Howard's parents lived nearby, and Oscar, at least, would be remembered as a powerful positive force in his grandchildren's lives, sometimes taking the eldest, Doris, with him to the dim hush of the Christian Science Reading Room. Aunt Gene was around a lot. She had a bit of discretionary income to spend on small gifts for the kids, and she'd sew outfits for the girls on a cunning little electric sewing machine that fit into a leather case no bigger than a purse. Lydia's older sisters Della and Violet drifted in and out of the picture according to the exigencies of their own lives. It's probable that the first signs of the serious problems that blighted their mature years—Del was an alcoholic, and Vi endured repeated hospitalizations for what used to be called manic depression—showed up in their early adulthoods, which might explain why it fell to Lyd, scarcely out of her teens herself, to provide a home for her younger sister when Mabel announced that she'd had it with scrubbing floors at Aunt Em's. Mabel was 16 years old, commonly acknowledged as the prettiest of the Harrison sisters and frequently truant from the same high school from which Lydia had dropped out a few years earlier. It was thought that she might help Lydia with the kids, who were 1, 2, and 3 years old. She moved her things into Howard and Lydia's two-bedroom apartment and slept on the sofa—at first.

Four years of marriage notwithstanding, Lydia, at 20, was still a young woman with remarkably limited knowledge of the world beyond the neighborhood where she'd lived all her life. Her mother had died before she reached puberty; her formal education had ended a scant year beyond grammar school and her career as a shop girl ended with her first pregnancy. She had her hands full with three kids under the age of four years living a small apartment in the days before preschool, play groups or daycare, with no helpful extended family members offering to help pick up the slack. Now she was expected to function *in loco parentis* for a girl who'd come to adolescence with even less attention and affection than she'd had.

Lack of broad life experience is one plausible explanation as to why she did not think it odd when, a few weeks after Mabel's arrival, Howard invited her sister to sleep with them in their bed (the sofa was *so* narrow and lumpy); other possibilities would have to include stunning stupidity or simply exhausted distraction.

The children slept in one bedroom; the three (almost) grown-ups shared a double bed in the other. Lydia's place on the crowded mattress was in the middle, an inconvenient spot from which to respond to the nighttime needs of little children. If the kids were fussy or sick she'd curl up on Doris' bed in the nursery, which was easier than climbing over the sleeping bodies of her husband or sister again and again.

Maybe Mabel, at 16, was as ignorant of human sexuality as her older sister had been at about that age, or maybe, unmoored and un-mothered, she simply responded to sorely needed physical affection. Howard's age and far greater experience—he was an adult, a married man, and the father of three children—give him a lot more to answer for. If deflowering his orphaned underage sister-in-law in the marital bed while his wife tended to their children in the next room might *possibly* be seen as an act of spontaneous sexual combustion, keeping the affair that followed at a steady burn definitely required ongoing thought and effort.

Mabel now cut classes to ride along on Howard's delivery routes, sitting on the jump seat in the front of the van and chatting with her smartly uniformed lover while the truant officer pounded on the door of the apartment on Vincennes Avenue, demanding from the harried Mrs. Tatro an explanation as to why her sister wasn't at school—again.

At home in the apartment, Mabel was increasingly cheeky, stealing her sister's lipstick and rolling her eyes when Lydia yelled about her playing hooky. She yelled right back as Lydia lined up the kids and fed them their dinners, gave them their baths and snapped them into their jammies. Howard, declining to support his wife's admittedly shaky advocacy of a high school education, took to nipping down to the corner social club for a boilermaker or two, waiting until the shrieking died down before venturing back to slip into the bed he shared with both sisters. Variations of this scene were repeated nightly, for months, without the true source of tension in the household being identified.

Howard was apparently so confident of Lydia's continued cluelessness that he scarcely bothered with a credible excuse when he asked for her wedding ring. "I'm going to take it to the jeweler's for cleaning," he told her, and sure enough she pulled the narrow gold band off her finger and handed it to him without question. But the outer limits of Lydia's

vast naïveté were finally breached when Mabel returned to the apartment one evening soon after, wearing the ring on the third finger of her left hand. The younger girl's face was pale and streaked with tears, her gait was a little unsteady, and blood was flowing heavily into bulky cotton wadding packed between her legs.

In 1932, medical termination of pregnancy was legally sanctioned only when the mother's life was in danger—or, more loosely, when having a baby was a matter of life and death. In an era when orphanages were filled with kids whose parents could not feed them, practical application of the law reflected the indisputable truth that during the Great Depression, if a pregnant married woman stated that she could not feed another mouth, it was indeed a matter of life and death. Sympathetic doctors would provide these women with relatively safe medical abortions for a relatively modest fee. The salient modifier is *married*. If the harsh realities of life in the Depression turned married women with unwanted pregnancies into figures worthy of discreet sympathy and affordable medical terminations, *unmarried* pregnant women were still, as ever, considered sluts for whom the risk of a back-alley abortion was but one of the just wages of sin.

So Mabel became “Mrs. Howard Tatro” for a day. In a medical office in the Loop, a doctor listened as the young couple—and the missus did look awfully young, twisting her wedding ring and weeping as the husband put his arm around her for courage—explained that they already had three young ones, and could not afford to feed another. The doctor agreed that it was indeed was a matter of life and death, and Mabel's pregnancy was terminated in his office that very afternoon. Afterward, Howard dropped her off at the apartment and disappeared, leaving his wife to care for her sister—badly shaken, bleeding, and in a lot of pain. As Lydia belatedly connected the dots and choked out her fury, Mabel became hysterical. She refused to take off Lydia's wedding ring: *she* was Howard's true wife, she said. Howard loves me, not you, she told Lydia defiantly. She would get pregnant again and Howard would divorce Lydia and marry her. Just wait and see.

Lydia, galvanized into action at long last, didn't wait to see anything. She threw Mabel out of the apartment. Mabel, pounding on the door with diminishing vigor, continued

shouting about the love that she and Howard shared, but Lydia stood fast, locked inside with her babies bawling and attached to the hem of her skirt like sucker fish. Pretty soon the neighbors started pounding on walls, too, and Mabel left, making her way to Aunt Em's, where she collapsed and refused to speak about what had happened. Howard stayed away for several days; neither sister knew if he was ever coming back.

Legally, the indisputable fact of 23-year-old Howard's having seduced and impregnated a 16-year old girl would be cause for arrest and prosecution under statutory rape laws. In most families, the fact that the girl was his orphaned sister-in-law seeking shelter in his home would mean that at the very least he'd have a lot of explaining to do. The way it played out on Vincennes Avenue, where selected extended family members gathered to deal with the crisis after Mabel came to at Aunt Em's, a small share of responsibility for the affair was assigned to Lydia, whose husband perhaps might not have strayed if she'd been more attentive to his needs. The bulk of the blame was placed on Mabel, whose pregnancy, terminated or not, was incontrovertible evidence of her defiant immorality. The identity of the father of the baby wasn't really the point. If before she was simply out of control, now she had been tainted by illicit sex. It was feared that, unchecked, she might continue sleeping her way into full-fledged sluthood and her life would be irretrievably ruined. Thus, Aunt Em, Mabel's legal guardian, filled out the forms that consigned her to a facility just outside Chicago whose straightforward, descriptive name said it all: The Home For Wayward Girls. Mabel was locked up there until her eighteenth birthday. Her sisters visited her on holidays. Sometimes Lydia brought the kids along to see their Aunt Mabel. Howard, as per his agreement with his wife, stayed home.

At the time, Howard pretty much got a pass on his enormous betrayal of his family, the logic being that a man has his needs, and anyway he had three children and a wife to support. What good would legal punishment do? Better to forgive, even if forgetting seemed highly unlikely. In fact, Howard's affair with Mabel was to have life-long repercussions for the two sisters, shaping a complex relationship characterized by fierce competition, loyal affection and operatic acts of revenge. But for the time being, Mabel

was out of the picture and Howard's home and his marriage, severely damaged, was patched up. Jacqueline Lee, Lydia and Howard's fourth child, was born within the year.