



Dream Children
by Edith Pearlman

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Selected by Jennifer Haigh, author of *The Condition*, *Baker Towers*, and *Mrs. Kimble*.

I have always believed that every successful story is a mystery story, and that the most fascinating mysteries don't involve crime of any kind. This is a great example. – JH.

Willa found the first portrait on a July evening while she was straightening her room. She had invited the two older boys to play there before bedtime, and the floor was strewn with chessmen and Othello counters. She picked up these fragments and put them where they belonged: in the next-to-lowest drawer of a scarred, ivory-knobbed chest – an architect's chest, the mother had told her – that stood under the window. Willa's own blouses and underwear lay in the shallow upper drawers. The chest and a lamp and a bed – a bed not quite long enough; she often slept on the floor -- were the only furnishings in this narrow room behind the kitchen; but the other rooms didn't have much in them either. In her country there was a TV in every village bar, and in the Capital City even the poorest family owned a set. But in this New York apartment – none. “We don't like to watch, we don't want the children to watch,” said the

mother that first day, looking up anxiously at tall Willa. “But if you wish ...”

“No, Ma’am.”

“No `Ma’am’ please,” the mother cried.

“No Ma’am please,” Willa repeated.

“No, no, I mean, do call us by our first names, Sylvie ...”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Willa said.

“ ... and Jack.”

The bottom drawer in the architect’s chest was stuck. Every night she caressed the knobs as if to fool them, dark fingers soothing the ivory, and then gave a single sudden yank. Tonight the thing slid out at last. In the drawer were some large, deckled drawing papers, face down. She picked up the top one and turned it over.

It was a pencil and watercolor portrait of a little boy. The left side of the child’s face bulged like a potato, a blue and purple potato. It wasn’t swollen because someone had smacked him, wasn’t bruised either, the worst smack couldn’t do that, he had been born that way. The eye above the bulging cheek seemed okay. The right side of the face was ordinary. The lower lip was a rubbery ledge, bigger on the left than on the right. The upper lip almost met the lower lip on the big side of the face and didn’t meet it at all on the other side. Spittle, she could see it, a few curly lines.

Boy’s costume was like Pinocchio’s: shorts, a honey-colored vest, a shirt, knee socks. The black hair was thick and neatly parted. Somebody was taking care of him. He carried a toy boat. There was a friendly dog at his feet, exactly the color of the vest.

The portrait was signed with a date – five years ago – and initials, J. L. The father’s imagining, then.

Willa put Boy back in the drawer. She went into the living room. They liked her to join them there, just as they liked her to eat with them. They worried about everything – traffic, poisons in food, mosquitoes, whether she was happy.

Dr. Gurevich from across the street was talking, her eyes huge in her square face. “I will bar the door,” she rasped. “I will lie down in front of the bulldozer.” She leaned forward. “I will drill their evil skulls.”

Then she leaned back, as if to get away from her own popping eyes. Maybe she had the goiter. She wore her gray hair in a bun.

The father said, “I heard of a group practice, three men on East Twelfth Street. They’re looking for a fourth, and they’d prefer a woman.”

“East Twelfth Street?” Dr. Gurevich sat up straight again. “I belong here, on West Eighty-fourth Street. The City has given me no satisfaction,” she added.

“The firm who owns your building hasn’t broken any laws,” the father said. “I looked into it, remember?”

Dr. Gurevich was being evicted from her narrow building across the street. She was a dentist, and lived and worked in her second floor apartment. Willa had been brought to see it one day in June by the ten year old, who planned to be a dentist himself. Patients sat on a chair in a bay window. “See, Willa, this would be a dining room for a regular person,” the boy explained. He climbed into the chair. “Dr. Gurevich doesn’t require a dining room,” he said,

opening his mouth and baring his teeth. Then he said, “Wider, please. She eats her soups wherever she likes -- sometimes on the fire escape. Spit, please.”

A firm had bought Dr. Gurevich’s house and the one next door, and sent notices that condominiums were to be built. The current occupants must leave by July 1st.

Willa had watched July 1st come. She watched it go. The other tenants left. The dentist remained, along with the janitor, who lived in the basement. There wasn’t much work for him in the building, so he planted vegetables and fruits in the deserted back garden. Raspberries were just emerging.

“You could plant squash,” said Willa.

“We won’t last until squash,” he told her.

But tonight, Dr. Gurevich, raging in their living room, looked as if she would last forever.

There was a cheep from the end of the hall. The cheep came again; then again; then a rapid twittering of sounds.

Willa got up and walked down the long hall and went into the darkened bedroom. The five-year-old slumbered spread-eagled on his parents’ bed. She rested her palm briefly on his back. His bony face lay in profile on the pillow. The three oldest boys resembled the mother – sharp features, long mouths, narrow intelligent eyes. The little fat fourth looked like the father. “Each one starts out looking like Jack,” the mother had mentioned; and the father laughed: “All babies look like me.”

Willa bent down to the cradle and slid her hands under the newest soul. Her fingers

found a place beneath his head and her thumbs hooked around his moist armpits and she swung him up onto her shoulder. This always satisfied him for a while; he slept again, his nose against her neck, pressing the pulse there, life to life.

She brought him to the changing table that was wedged between sink and tub in the apartment's bathroom. The floor tiles were chipped but there was a stained glass window featuring a tall robed red-headed figure. "After Burne-Jones," the mother had bewilderingly said when she was showing Willa around. The mother was a part-time professor. The father was an engineer.

Willa changed the baby. He opened his eyes and stared at her. She carried him into the living room and handed him first to the dentist, who pressed him against her dress; and then to the father, who laid the child on his own wide thighs and stared at him as if to memorize the eyelids, the lips, the damp folds on the neck; and then to the mother, who said "Thank you, Willa." The mother released her firm little breast from her shirt; milk was already spurting.

"What a warm night," the dentist said.

"Warm," said the father serenely. "Warm?" he repeated with a nervous twitch of his cheek, as if he sensed a hurricane.

"Warm, sir," said Willa. That nightmare child in the bottom drawer – it was like having a secret family.

The baby suckled. The father and the dentist and Willa silently watched. They might have been under water; they might have been floating on the surface of a pond; they might have been sitting on lily pads like the illustrations in the favorite book of the second boy, the eight-

year-old -- a textbook about frogs.

The mother shifted the baby to the other breast. “Good night,” said Dr. Gurevich. She let herself out and walked down the three flights and crossed the street.

A week later, at five in the afternoon, Willa opened the drawer and looked at another picture.

Its subject seemed to be female – at least, the figure was wearing a smocked dress. There was trimming on the puffed sleeve; she could tell from the swift little circles that the trimming was lace. Fine lines on the slender hands represented wiry hairs; broader lines on cheeks and chin were hair, too. There was fur on the scalp. This creature’s eyes were dull. Her nose was all nostrils. The upper lip was long, and the mouth stretched widely in a smile without happiness.

The date on Monkey-girl’s portrait was eight years ago, and the paper was initialed with the father’s two letters. If he were hers, Willa thought, she’d insist that he purge his bowels with bark, once a week if need be.

Willa came out of her room to find Dr. Gurevich in the kitchen, heating some of her own soup. “My electricity has been turned off,” said the dentist. “The janitor is hooking it up again, to somebody else’s line, please don’t ask me how.”

“All right,” said Willa.

“Willa, Willa, what is to become of me?”

Back home this old woman would have been respected. She would not have been forced to work. People would have brought her stew and beer and smokes, and she would have sat on

her porch and looked at the sea. “I have a ... leaf,” Willa said.

Dr. Gurevich was silent. Then: “Something I could roll?”

Willa nodded. “I can show you how.”

The woman sniffed. “And will it find me a new apartment and a new office?”

“It will ease your spirits.”

They exchanged a long look. “Please,” said Dr. Gurevich.

All of Willa’s herbs were in the third drawer from the bottom, above the chess pieces.

Rolling took a few minutes. She left Dr. Gurevich smoking in the kitchen. She picked up the

baby without waking him and went down to the curb to meet the day camp bus. How tanned

they had become. The five-year-old buried his face in her belly – it was a long day for him.

The ten-year-old trudged into the building, the eight-year-old at his heels.

Upstairs the boys crowded into the kitchen to help prepare the evening’s baked rice and

salad. Dr. Gurevich took her weed into the living room. There, dark and featureless against the

window, she looked like Aunt Leona, who told the future. “You will be useful to the family in

New York,” Leona had promised. “They will be kind to you, in their way.”

The father came home. The mother came home. The janitor rang the bell and called up

through the intercom that Dr. Gurevich’s electricity was on again. Dr. Gurevich, throwing

Willa a sweet glance, left the apartment to join him.

Dr. Gurevich’s water got turned off early one August morning. The janitor – no longer

on salary, but still occupying a room in the basement -- said he could attach their pipes to

another main, but not before nightfall. The dentist canceled that day's patients. She had fewer patients now than formerly, and those that came urged her to find new premises. "They think it's easy to pull up roots," she said. "You understand how hard it is, Willa."

Willa nodded. She was holding the five-year-old on her lap. He had begged to stay home from camp that day. So the dentist, the mother, the baby, Willa, and the five-year-old, all sat on the stoop of the family's apartment house and watched the empty brownstone next to Dr. Gurevich's house get wrecked. Neighborhood children who didn't go to day camp watched too, and some of their mothers. The wrecking ball swung forwards and backwards, attacking the façade like a boxer. Stone and glass and wood and plaster crumpled at its touch. Debris piled up. Meanwhile an earth-mover in back picked up the junk and deposited it into an enormous dumpster. A few scavengers hung around.

Willa, abruptly homesick, thought of her mother's little house on stilts, and the foaming sea, and her own three daughters in their school uniforms.

The building gradually collapsed. The debris mounted in its stead. By mid afternoon the wrecking truck had driven off, leaving the busy earth-mover to its work. The ice cream truck jingled down the street.

The mother took the baby upstairs for a bath. The five-year-old dozed in Willa's lap. The street got more crowded: cars, teenagers on skates, the knife grinder, a bicycle whose wide basket carried stacks of straw boaters. "Hats! Hats!" shouted the cyclist. When the camp bus came it couldn't pull up against the right curb and so it parked on the left. The children would have to step out into the street, Willa saw. The bus had its flashers on; but who knew? "Hold

him, please,” said Willa to Dr. Gurevich, transferring the five-year-old to the dentist. Willa went out into the middle of the street and stood beside the bus, staring down the impatient cars. Behind her back she heard the children crossing the street – her two, and some others from the building. The father rounded the corner from the subway, and he started to run, though it couldn’t have been easy, he was so fat. “Where’s Paul! I don’t see Paul!” he yelled, and Willa pointed to the child on the dentist’s lap, and the father stopped running and took off his seersucker jacket and mopped his face with it, though she had ironed all his handkerchiefs just yesterday.

That night she looked at the third picture. This one was a baby dressed only in a diaper, a baby of about a year, the age of toddling. This child would never toddle. Instead of legs he had flippers; instead of arms, flippers. His eyes had no pupils. His bare chest was like any white baby’s: pink, the nipples suggested by rosy dots, so sweet, she wanted to kiss them.

The date on Seal Baby was ten years ago. There were no more drawings: just the three.

When the youngest started to run a fever, the mother gave him some liquid medicine, not aspirin. “We don’t give aspirin to babies, Willa.”

“We don’t either, Ma’am.”

“*Ma’am* again – oh, oh, oh.”

“... Sylvie,” Willa managed.

When the fever continued – down in the morning, up again in the afternoon, higher still at night – the parents brought him to the pediatrician’s office. Willa and the boys did a jigsaw

puzzle at home. Virus not bacteria, the pediatrician said; it will run its course.

“But how long is its course?” moaned the father on the fourth day. “*You* never had such a high fever,” he accused the eight-year-old, who burst into tears. “I am sorry, I am sorry,” said the father, and he hugged his son.

At night the adults took turns tending the infant, sitting in the living room rocking chair. While the mother was rocking him Willa slid into the kitchen. She carried a packet of the reddish powder Aunt Leona had pounded from various nuts. She boiled water and let the powder steep. By the time it was her turn to rock the baby, the tea had cooled. She poured it into a bottle and slipped the bottle into the pocket of her apron. She took the baby and sat down on the rocker. Exhausted from fretting, he fell asleep on her shoulder. She heard the mother stumble into the bedroom. The father came out; she heard him in the kitchen opening some contraption, a folding chair maybe ... There was a full moon. Through the living room window Willa saw Dr. Gurevich and the janitor walking down the street, arm in arm.

Willa took the bottle from her apron. She shifted the baby to her lap and cradled him and stroked first his left cheek and then his right, and at last he opened his eyes and then his mouth and she inserted the nipple. Looking at her, he drank about two thirds of the bottle. She could feel the heat draining from his body, feel his breathing become slower, feel the rasp in his chest grow still. He slept again. He smiled in his comfortable sleep. She got up and carried him into the kitchen. The contraption she had heard was an easel. The father was working at a drawing, intently using the side of his pencil to create shadows ...

“Jack.”

He turned. “What! What!”

“The fever has broken.”

He took the baby from her. He was not ashamed to cry. But when she stared at the drawing – only a head, this time, pointed ears and one eye missing and an open mouth, lipless – he gave an embarrassed snort. “It’s like an amulet; it’s to prevent catast ...” She touched his shoulder to show she understood. Then she moved to the sink and took the bottle from her pocket and unscrewed the nipple and tipped the thing, and the rest of the amber-colored potion poured out in front of his eyes and hers.

Edith Pearlman’s short stories have appeared in many prize anthologies: the *O. Henry Prize Collection*, the *Best American Short Stories*, *Pushcart Press*, *Best Stories from the South*, and others. Her own first collection, *Vaquita*, was published in 1996. It won the Drue Heinz award for fiction. Her second, *Love Among the Greats*, was published in November 2002. It won the Spokane Prize for Fiction.