

Arleen
Paré



First First First

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Pat Hurdle and I met when she was six and I was five-years old. We became best friends. When I was nine, I was made to change schools, Protestant to Catholic. This was the first interruption of our friendship, a terrible pall. Her mother died when she was fourteen, a second, worse pall. When I was eighteen, my family moved across town. Pat and I drifted, at first just a little, then a lot. I lost track of her. I was distracted; I got married. Had a husband, children, a career. I didn't really miss her. When I was thirty, my husband, kids, and I moved from Montreal to the West Coast. Later I fell in love, acquired a wife and moved farther west to Victoria. At some point, I began to miss Pat a lot. I asked other childhood friends about her, but no one knew anything. Eventually I lost hope that I would ever see her again. And then five decades later, five decades after we had become best friends, her name appeared in my inbox: the subject line, "Green Circle," the street where we grew up. It turned out she'd been living on Vancouver Island, in Victoria, for several years, ten blocks from my house and three thousand miles from our childhood homes on Green Circle, Dorval. We'd landed in the same city, same neighbourhood, ten blocks apart, curving back on ourselves.

A child gathers answers

Sixty-Three Green Circle Melrose one-one seven five two my locational numbers plus one baby sister for free a mother for safety and a blue car for long drives and one father at work leaving in the blue car morning a Dodge as well as dodge ball and hopscotch skipping ropes skipping *Hopalong Cassidy* how about a date meet you at the corner at half-past eight in the street *stando* yelling *stando* against a brick wall roller skates hide-and-go-seek answers in school also the pressure cooker beef stew steamed lemon pudding the creek behind McTavish's house up-on-the-hill train tracks which a child cannot walk near the golf course where toboggans in winter and brown strap-on rubber boots in the spring saddle shoes tap shoes toe shoes white bucks Pat Boone gumshoe Nancy Drew rubber soles and cartwheels and handstands though at night devils clawed the closet and snakes rustled under the bed despite *now I lay me down to* red rover red rover Red River coats and red Red River mittens grade one grade two grade three a party line a best friend.

A woman questions

How does the leaf know how does Turkish Finnish Kurdish French where do numbers whence negative why and whence zero is it fact or concept how instinct neurons for instance quarks cockroaches rats for instance mirrors mirror cells the Mariana Trench how many creatures will never be seen soufflés pavlova pavlova how cells know how on earth friends the cosmos how

far back where did she go what means without any start missing
and end without end without start quantum physics theoretical
higher math mathematics how the big bang string theory the Cern
Cyclotron Stephen Hawking how does a friend falling off with
Einstein altogether the Earth why and which equations and how
mainly from where.

*

Pat moved in at the end of the week eight months after I moved to the street. A new family. We were five little girls at loose ends after hopscotch running down the street. The family milling getting used to their driveway. The father eyeing the house. I eyed Pat and she eyed me back unafraid. A good sign. Her sister twisted away to avoid our ten little girl eyes. Her name was Susan their mother said. She sucked on the pointy end of her pigtail and laced her free hand into the hem of her mother's tweed skirt. I loved her shyness. Pat stood firm my height and though blonder than blonde I could tell she was mine.

*

Neither Green Circle nor Handfield were true circles. Together they formed an ellipsis, like the elliptical paths of the planets that orbit the sun. The Law of Ellipses.

from **First family: semi-functional answers**

1.

we weren't a happy family *Father Knows Best* nothing like that
but we weren't unhappy either
anxious maybe there was a little neglect they didn't read to us
or tell us stories at bedtime
we never learned to mop floors or bake cakes
or send thank-you notes to aunts and to uncles
for the silver teaspoons and the comic books
I sucked my thumb until I turned twenty-three

2.

there is simple solace in the written word
which is not the solace of lambs in meadows
gambolling unafraid for their preconscious lives
it is not the solace of sea turtles feet awkward anchors
swimming against all expectation
nor is it the solace of trees
light as green foam nor creek song nor a red-shafted flicker
its butt a white exclamation nor is it the certainty of brick
nor a milkweed's soft spill from its winter-hard case
no the written word signifies simply
we aren't alone

Rules for street fighting

no biting

said my mother

no fists no slapping not cheeks face or head

no pinching

no pushing into creeks into streets

down the stairs no kicking

heads stomachs ankles or knees

but pulling hair yes

said Mrs. Hurdle

ponytail pigtail any length any fistful

of hair a yank a firm tug

leaves no visible mark

First place

There is contest without fail, comparison, three judges, a kind of race. Human. There is winning. There is mutton and milk mushy peas and mulligatawny soup. There are seconds. Would you like more mashed potato? There's second place which is better than third but not the real prize pitch perfect the big hurrah ho ho the hearty har har the business end the point the first place. Second is not a real place not lasting pleasure, it's not a golden-thirds classical composition happy face, heart, cabbage on the plate with sufficient sweet yellow butter. Red roasted beef and almost blue and underdone and maybe there's blood. An oil painting, it is not. The sky looks down. Pass me a full slice of life.

No question should go unanswered

Now if I think of the earth's origins, I get vertigo.

When I think of its death, I fall.

—C.D. Wright

genesis the first problem of first hydrogen and carbon
firestorms of wanting the answer
even Einstein and time sand handfuls of clay
layers of turtles on turtles on patriarchs white-bearded
or blue-skinned the problem of
black-holed or string-theoried strung out as in
this happens only inside your mind
the problem of inside your mind
of numbers poeticized epic or lyric
ravenous abstract as in zero as in
not enough concrete images in the lines of this poem
the problem of not enough infinity versus finity
fleece clouds full moon full gauzy white in broad day
the problem of unsolvable becoming almost convincing flimsy
origins without origin
in the beginning already the word
mysterium mysteriosa unnerving nervosa
that no one knows
infuriosa even using very high mathematics
the problem of
very high mathematics

*

When Nancy Drew, the famous girl sleuth, received the first invitation from the United Nations to solve *The Mystery of the Universe*, she declined, citing inadequate math skills and no knowledge of physics, classical or theoretical. She had never studied cosmology and her marks in algebra were not outstanding, despite evening consultations with Ned, her boyfriend at the time. Not that algebra would have helped, or even geometry, in which she excelled. Also, she pointed out, she was more accustomed to solving mysteries that started with at least one dead body. She had already solved *The Bungalow Mystery* which delighted the Green Circle girls who all lived in bungalows with their own mysteries. She had also solved *The Mystery at Lilac Inn* and *The Secret of Shadow Ranch*. And so, though her track record was substantial, in all good conscience, she could not accept the U.N.'s invitation regarding the origins of the Universe. Not yet. She thanked Mr. Bryce, the caller from the U.N., and placed the phone back in its receiver.

Thus, *The Mystery of the Universe* remained unsolved, although several scientists, Albert Einstein included, were curious and tried. The old tropes of theological geneses were wearing thin. So, eventually, Carolyn Keene, whoever she or they, might be, or have been, would set her courageous, girl detective, Nancy, to work on this mystery too.

*

I can't say how I knew she'd be my best friend how she would shape me as much as my mother shaped me or my father. Not that I knew what a best friend could do or undo. I only knew she could be a fairy, a fairy queen, or the kind of angel we perched on top of the Christmas tree every year, spun glass for hair.

It was late spring when they arrived, the new-planted trees not yet in leaf. If there was sun that day, it was filtered. There was a slight breeze.

I walked onto their driveway, a scrum of small neighbourhood girls behind me, crossing the line that divided the asphalt from the driveway's tarred surface. Her family piled out of their station wagon. The oldest, my size my age my kind of kid even though her hair was princess-y blonde. I didn't know how to connect with that kind of blonde, I still don't, but it matters less now.

These distinctions of identity. This new girl had blue very blue eyes. I had the same problem with blue eyes as I had with ultra-blonde hair. My aunts sang me the chorus of a popular song, *beautiful beautiful brown eyes, I'll never love blue eyes again* in case I felt sorry for my own plain medium-browns. Maybe that's what made me want her. Whatever it was, by the time I left their driveway that day, after a peek at the baby wrapped in up a white blanket in her mother's arms, after a sideways glance at Pat's other sister, I knew.

Firsthand

In the inside there is deluge, in the outside there is missing.
Somewhere is refuge. Quickening. Listen. Let is-ness then be
the business, let mothers into story if only for a few more years.
If quickening, there may be answers, whistle, wind, chance
literation, chance marriages, misfits, chance the first chance, do
not reprove the child asking awkward questions. Let blue angora
mittens, a black cat, second fiddle. There is a second layer, liar,
liar, pants on fire. Never mind, there is always porridge with a sift
of salt and garbage bins under the sink whispering misery in an
off-key pitch. Cinch your belts, no one here is as rich as you may
wish. Hey diddle, diddle, kit and kaboodle, cows, spoons, a cat in
a fix. In the inside there are two. In the outside, there is one and
one sitting, unseeing what will be missing. Heaven whistles by in
its finite fevered way, tin whistle stops and lingerie, saxifrage and
lingering, and tips. Q-tips. Second storey is higher than first, pinch
me if I'm wrong, never mind, the second story is typically too
blue, too long.

Cosmologies

those winter nights the stars replete
as though seen from the Sahara we lived in a suburb
a form of desert fathomless space miles of linoleum sandless
tarred driveways crazy eights ordinary matter
which is what we are made of gravity light the stars
those nights
sweet points on black a freight train blowing straight through
behind the north line of houses
every night hauling howling through the suburban flatlands
the silent nowhere of this almost empty terrain
the speed of the train flatlined under the stars rail cars thunder
dogs
a comfort
as the stars were a comfort their shine so real around us
wonder and roof

The American Wilderness Act

This continent of landscapes alpine forest genetic banks
of trees which one is not worth preserving beauty yes and
renewal prairies too Wallace Stegner's his childhood loneliness
his father reaching down always in anger sky too reaching clear
down to the ground on every side weasels badgers
burrowing owls his Wilderness Letter his prairie defence the
Wilderness Act and this particular claim worth.

Then let me ask

what is not worth preserving what is not vanishing
as if we are not always fading away lonely as if we are not all
grand our places too worth preserving which one of us is not
also a form of wilderness what about my old street risky with
children part circle part hand ditches and ragweed and rain
who will preserve that first place childhood and rows of first
bungalows growing more and more modest and front yard trees
now five times their old size.

*

Despite the surrounding collapse the impending increasing
collapse despite the collapse of ideas and rivers and lakes in toxic
collapse despite equations on over-long pages and pages virtual
collapse of faith and bodies and minds memories quietude the
collapse of morality of cities their sewer systems roads classrooms
the collapse of peace talks of peace and even logic despite all
that from where and what the word though old-fashioned is
whence

having raised this question too many times without any answers
how did the start of the start start not so much how did trees
human voices mouths ants with antennae shining air in the
summer forest ferns sword ferns bracken and curved silver scythes
books with spoiled pages water maiden hair frost not so much
meteorites giraffes sticklebacks mothers with eyes in the backs of
their heads angels perched in trees with over-wide wings

but how unconditioned origins
whence when *no worthy question is ever answered on the same
plane that it was asked* according to Einstein how to frame the
question not knowing the plane on which I must ask it and how
to understand the answer even wrapped in gold paper not being a
cosmologist and no longer a child but old and almost weary wary
of the first question.

*

Take this bunting lamb's wool and square and almost certainly
white shake it from mourning moored in a pram shake it
from sleep beware of memory of theft later if heart and ego
and winter and one mother or two mothers go missing and if
lips chap in the cold red and rough tears and a Red River red
tasseled toque flops over the forehead to the right or to the left
and ice on a iron rail tears the first layer of tongue winters still
bright in the mind.

*

Pat letting a cat into my mother's kitchen sneaking it in just to see
my mother's alarm how she'd run for the bathroom lock the door.

Mischievous or unkind or maybe just curious maybe curiosity
which was vaunted by Einstein exonerates a child.

Whatever it was made her do it I know that humanity the whole
ferocious range of it entered our young bones early on that off-
circular street.

*

Later, Nancy began to work on yet another important mystery more suited to her experience and talents: to find the elusive Pat Hurdle, *The Mystery of the Lost Friend*. 1992. No one could say where Pat Hurdle was. Missions impossible, but Nancy was determined. She studied Pat Hurdle's bio, thankfully much shorter than that of the cosmos. She contacted each of Pat Hurdle's old friends, her teachers, elementary and high, and her skating coaches as well, even Miss Taylor, who once taught Pat tap dance and toe, and her minister, the Reverend Mr. Lorden, her Brownie leader, Carol Knight, and her Girl Guide leader, Mrs. Ann Powell.

Nice kid, some said, a little shy maybe. Smart, always first in the class. First class, said others, especially the skating coaches. Number one, said Mrs. Knight. Pat had been leader of the Fairy Troop in Girl Guides. A bit of a fairy, said one of the younger Green Circle girls, a little sneaky, said another, but that was to be expected. Haughty, according to her sister, Susan, said one of Susan's old friends. Best, said her once best friend, and her first.