Cameo

Nancy Dewey*

*Iowa State University

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by Nancy Dewey

English & Speech, Jr.

"BETTER hurry up," Miss Irene Ellenbecker mumbled to herself. "Little Sarah will be here any minute."

Irene's eyes focused on the only letter she had received in weeks, a note from her niece, Sarah. Her eyes now sparkled with excitement because Little Sarah was coming to see her. She smiled as she saw Little Sarah's scrawl, remembering all the penmanship classes she had taught. "Don't forget to dot your 'i's' and cross your 't's'," she had drilled into all of her pupils. She would show Little Sarah the proper way to hold the pen so that her letters didn't slant so far to the left.

She picked up a comb from the marble-topped dressing table, once a wedding present to her mother. She combed the front of her long gray-streaked hair, which was in sausage rolls on top of her head. Carefully, she replaced a loose bobby pin. After smoothing the front of her faded, rose-colored silk dress, she pressed down the hand-crocheted lace collar that had yellowed with age and many summers of moth balls. Gently, she put the comb back between her father's shaving cup and her parent's wedding portrait. Next, she opened a red-velvet lined, gold filigree box and pulled out an oval cameo broach, her sixteenth birthday present. She pinned the broach at the top of her dress to compensate for a missing mother-of-pearl button. "You see, Father," she smiled, "I remembered. I'm still modest." She thought back.

"Irene, that dress is positively scandalous! I will not let you out of this house in that." Her father pointed to her scooped neckline.

"But, Father. All the other girls are wearing them that way. It's the new fashion."

"I will remind you, Irene, that while you are living in
this house, my orders are to be obeyed. I might also remind you that no decent, God-loving woman would be seen in a dress that exposes her . . . bosom. Now, go on upstairs and cover yourself. Have a little modesty, child.”

She clasped the broach tightly, remembering her father’s warning to be careful with such an expensive gift. She moved forward, adjusted the revolving mirror, and stared at herself in the gilded frame. With care, she centered her face in the oval frame, tilted her head slightly, smiled demurely, and became a cameo herself.

“Irene, I want you to be just like the woman in this cameo,” her father told her on her sixteenth birthday. “Modesty, obedience and purity are what make a woman a real lady. Remember that every time you wear it.”

The chiming of the grandfather clock in the parlor brought her out of her trance. “Goodness, Little Sarah will be here soon. I’d better get the cookies ready.” She turned to go out into the kitchen, but saw the unmade bed where she had been sleeping since the heat had been turned off in her upstairs bedroom.

“People can always tell the kind of person you are by the house you keep,” her father always preached. “I hope you’ll always keep everything spotless. Cleanliness is a virtue, you know, Irene.”

With a sigh, she smoothed the sheets of the four-poster bed and covered them with the patch-work quilt she had made for her parents one Christmas years ago. Father always likes them fluffed, she remembered replacing the pillows. Again, she looked at the room to make sure that it was up to her father’s standards. “There.” She repeated her father’s favorite adage, “A place for everything and everything in its place.”

After turning out the light in the bedroom, she walked into the parlor. She crossed to the old upright piano, opened the bench, and placed her father’s favorite song, “In the Good Old Summertime”, on the music rack. Perhaps Little Sarah might want to hear it later. She straightened the lace scarf that had protected the piano top for years. While rubbing her arthritic shoulder, she turned on the Tiffany lamp, and picked up the leather-bound Jane Eyre she had finished
re-reading, and stored it back in the bookcase. All the straight-backed chairs were dust-free, the pillows on the sofa were placed perfectly, and the globes of the lamps sparkled. She straightened the portrait of her father that always seemed to hang at an angle above the fireplace, and walked over to the windows to open the heavy damask draperies. "There, that's cheerier for a little girl." The light poured in. "The parlor looks good enough for Father O'Bryan to call on us." She remembered how hard she and her mother had worked whenever Father O'Bryan came to supper. "Maybe he'll visit us next week," she said hopefully, forgetting that Father O'Bryan had died in 1934.

She walked on out to the kitchen to fix Little Sarah's favorite afternoon snack, homemade peanut-butter cookies and milk, and to fix herself some nice hot tea to soothe her excited nerves. She lit a burner, filled the teapot with water, and placed it on the flames. Then, she went into the pantry to get the cookie jar, a few squares of chocolate cake, and the fresh pumpkin bread, her father's favorite. After spreading the red-checked tablecloth, she set the table, washed her hands, and waited for her visitor.

Just when the teapot whistled, there was a knock on the door. Rattled, Irene reached for the hot tea-kettle and burned her hand. She quickly turned off the burner and went to the door. How good it would be to have a child in the house again! She reached the door and peered through it expectedly . . . but who's this stranger? She stared at the young woman in disbelief. After a few moments, the woman quietly said, "Hello, Aunt Irene. Don't you remember me? I'm Sarah, Sarah Newman."

Irene looked at her in disbelief. "Oh . . . yes . . . Little Sarah. Do come in." Sarah bustled past Irene into the peanut-butter-cookie world of the kitchen. "My, my, just look at you," Irene at last forced out. She couldn't believe that Little Sarah was almost a grown-up woman. Has it been that many years? Sarah walked on past the kitchen into the parlor that smelled of furniture polish and musty books. Irene followed her, still in bewilderment of the passage of time.

"Here, let me take your coat." Irene had never seen a raincoat that bright before. Her eyes burned from the scarlet color and the shine of the material. Father says only
dancehall girls wear red! Sarah handed her the coat and sat down in one the straight-backed velvet chairs that insured good posture. As Irene took the coat, she was stunned by Sarah's appearance. How scandalous! Her matching red dress is at least five inches above her knees, not to mention a neckline that not only exposes, but emphasises her . . . bosom. What will Father say? She walked back as Sarah was smoothing her long red hair that curled softly around her opulent breasts. Before Irene could say "cover yourself", Sarah interrupted. "Well, Aunt Irene, how have you been?"

"Oh, I'm all right. But occasionally I get a little arthritis in my shoulder." She stroked her aching shoulder softly. "Guess I'm just getting old."

"Not you, Aunt Irene. You haven't changed at all. You look just the same as when I think you were wearing the same dress." Irene blushed at what she thought was a compliment. "And you've still got that lovely old cameo."

With this, Irene tilted her head, smiled demurely, and touched the broach. "Yes, I suppose they'll bury me with this cameo. I've worn it almost every day since my sixteenth birthday, you know."

"Yes, that's what Mother tells me." There was a strained silence.

"Well, tell me, my dear, how have you been? You're so grown up now. I'll bet you're almost out of high school by now."

"I've been fine, Aunt Irene. But, I am out of high school; I'm a senior in college now."

Irene looked as if she had been slapped in the face. That old? "A senior in college? My goodness, how time flies."

Sarah shifted nervously in the chair's rigidity. "Excuse me, Aunt Irene, but do you have an ashtray?"

Irene stared incredulously. Father says that only cheap women smoke, not real ladies. She politely got up and brought her the only ashtray in the house, the one her father used when he smoked his pipe after supper.

"Thank you." She inhaled deeply and the curling smoke seemed to relax her. "Mother wanted me to talk to you about something." She was momentarily frightened of this old lady who was sitting there with a frozen smile, staring at her.
“Oh, really, what is that, dear?” Irene was suddenly on guard. She knew what Sarah wanted to tell her.

“Well, . . . uh, Mother and Dad both think it would be better if you sold this old house and moved into Heritage House. They still have some vacancies, you know.” There, she had said it. *What I mean, you old bat, is that you’re crazy. You need help, and this time we’re going to force you to get it.*

Irene was almost speechless, but she wouldn’t let them take away from her home and Father. “Why, that’s perfectly ridiculous, Sarah. You just tell your mother that I’m fine here and not to worry about me. I can still take care of myself.”

“Oh, we know you can take care of yourself; you’ve lived here for so many years. But, Mother thinks you should be with people, people your own age. It’s not good to be alone all the time.”

“I’m not alone. Christopher and I are quite happy together. We don’t need anyone else.” She pointed to a giant tabby cat asleep by the register.

“Not only that, but you could have medical care any time of the day or night. You said yourself that your shoulder bothers you.”

“I don’t need medical care. I’m as fit as I was when I was sixteen. Father always told me I was the healthiest in the family.” Irene was starting to become frightened. *They can’t take my home and Father away from me, can they?*

“But, Aunt Irene, something could happen to you out here all alone, and there wouldn’t be anyone to help you. You don’t even have a phone to call someone.” Sarah’s voice was getting louder. *Listen to reason, will you?*

“Nothing will happen to me. I tell you I like living here. I have Christopher, and I do have to take care of Father. I do get out sometimes. Just last month, Mrs. Donnelly picked me up and took me to Mass.”

“If you lived at Heritage House, you could go to Mass every Sunday. Oh, don’t you see? You’ve lived alone for too long. You’ve closed yourself off from the world, from the present. You’re living in the past, a past that’s dead, just like Grandpa!” She snuffed out her cigarette, and shifted again. *What I wouldn’t give for a drink right now. “Don’t*
you understand? He's dead. You don't have to take care of him any more. You don't have to listen to him anymore. You can have a life of your own—God, for once a life of your own!” She was shouting now.

“No! No! He isn’t dead! He isn’t dead! Father, Father! Help me! They're trying to take me away from you.” She ran into the empty bedroom and started to sob, helpless.

Sarah ran in to comfort her. *Just like the old lady to break down and cry.* “It won’t be that bad, Aunt Irene. You'll have friends, for once. You'll have your own apartment with constant attention and care. You won’t be alone any more in this big old house with only reminders of the past.” She wiped Irene's eyes and hugged her tightly like a mother hugs a little girl who has just fallen down for the first time. “It'll be all right. Really it will.”

“Oh, Sarah. I know he's dead. But I took care of him for so long, I just couldn’t think of life without him.” She was shaking now.

“Well, you’ve got to face it and start living for yourself.” *Finally. The old bat has realized the truth. Maybe the rest of the family can get some peace now.*

“I’m frightened, Sarah. So frightened. I’m not sure I can move out of this house, away from all the memories. They’re all I’ve had.” She had stopped crying, but the terror was still in her eyes.

“I’ll tell Mother, and she’ll come down and take care of it all for you. I’ll even have her call Heritage House and make the arrangements. It’s really the best thing for you.” *And us, too.*

Irene nodded in agreement. “Do you think they’ll let me keep the piano?” She looked a little more hopeful.

“Oh, yes, I’m sure they will. In fact I’m sure you can keep all the furniture that will fit into the apartment.” *At last, Mother will be able to get that dressing table she’s been wanting for so long.*

“You know, this old house really is too big for me. I’ve had to have the upstairs closed off because it is so expensive to heat. It might be nice to have a small, new place just for myself.” She was almost smiling.

“All the appliances are brand new, there. No more lighting the oven or the burners. They just turn on.” Sarah was
smiling now. *It would be a relief for all concerned to have her in Heritage House.*

"And I won't have to find someone to mow the grass for me and there'll be plenty of hot water and I won't have to use that old wringer washer any more and—"

"*And you won't be alone any more.* They'll have people to watch over you so you don't go totally batty.

"No, I . . . won't . . . be . . . be . . . alone . . . anymore." She had settled down now and seemed almost excited about her future.

"Well, Aunt Irene, I've got to run. I'm sorry I can't stay longer, but it's a long drive back to school. I'll call Mom tonight and have her make all the arrangements for you. She'll be down sometime next week." She went to the closet to get her coat.

"Oh, the cookies!" Irene suddenly remembered. "Please stay, Sarah. I baked them especially for you."

"I really can't stay. I'm late now. But, I'd love to take some with me. They've always been my favorite." Sarah was in the kitchen now.

"All right, dear. I'll put them in a plastic bag for you." She rummaged through the drawers, found a bag, and scooped in the cookies. "Here you are, dear."

"Thanks, Aunt Irene. I'm so glad you've finally decided to move into a smaller place. I know it's the best thing for you." *The rest of the family will be so relieved and pleased.*

"Yes, so do I. Now, drive carefully, Sarah."

"'Bye, Aunt Irene." Sarah got into her car and slammed the door victoriously. *Thank God that's taken care of. I wonder what this old house will bring?*

"Good-bye . . . Little Sarah!" Irene closed the door and the house overwhelmed her again. She heard the car drive out of the driveway and down the road. She walked back into the parlor and closed the heavy drapes. "Father always says that too much sun isn't good for the eyes," she muttered out loud. Her head throbbed and her eyes burned. "Maybe I'll take a nap. Father always says that the best thing to do when you're upset is to take a nap and then when you wake up, everything is forgotten." She walked into the bedroom, but stopped in front of the mirror. With a tilt of her head and the slight smile, she regained her former com-
posure. Her hands were shaking when she unclasped the cameo at her throat. "Oh, no! The cameo!" It had slipped out of her hands and fallen to the floor. She stooped quickly, only to see the broach cracked down the middle. "Oh, dear, what will Father say?" She cradled the piece of jewelry in her hand softly. "Poor thing. My beautiful cameo is broken." She looked at it carefully. "Wait. Maybe I can glue it back together. Yes, I'm sure I can. No one will even notice. Not even Father." She went to her desk drawer to get the glue. "There, just as good as new." She looked down lovingly at the broach. "They almost broke you that time, didn't they?" She walked over to the dressing table, opened the lid of the gold filigree box, and placed the cameo gently inside. She closed the lid of the box and said, "Now, you're safe again." She patted the box softly and walked over to the bed. "Now we're both safe, again." She pulled the patchwork quilt back and crawled into bed. "Good night, Father. I'll see you in the morning."

When I Was Younger

by Dean Womeldorf

History, Jr.

someone, my brother
i didn't know him
gave me a penny for peace
in the union today
as pictures emerged
from the depths of my mind
of gettysburg and my lai
chicago and the creek
where i played
when i was younger
when justice and peace and truth
were meaningless too