

LETTERS TO AYLA

Cleveland Home

Hi, my Lovely Girl—

I was born in Cleveland, Ohio on July 2, 1923. Why there, when my mother had moved to Youngstown, Ohio after she married my father? Poor lady! After the sophistication of the large, culturally active, educationally renowned city that was Cleveland, the relatively small steel town of Youngstown must have appeared somewhat primitive. Of course, there were obstetricians in Youngstown. (When my brother was born, he was delivered by one.) But because I was my mother's first child, she determined to return to her native city for my birth. My grandmother and grandfather, along with Mother's three sisters and her brother were still living in the house where my mother grew up. They were happy—or at least willing—to welcome and nurture her. And so they did—until I was six weeks old, at which time I was bundled into my mother's arms as she, in turn, was bundled into my father's car for the sixty-mile return trip to the duplex which my parents shared with Dad's sister and her husband and three-year-old son.

It was with some frequency that a visit to Cleveland was in order. As I grew old enough to recognize and remember the Cleveland branch of the family, I was excited at the prospect of a trip to the Big City. Even as a very small child—perhaps three years old—I can remember my grandparents' home. It stood on a broad, leafy street and appeared to me at the time to be a very large house. As is customary in houses of that era, there was a basement, then a first floor which consisted of a living room, dining room, kitchen (oh, what a kitchen!), and a fruit "cellar." The top floor had four bedrooms, a wonderful sunroom, and one bathroom.

On the front of the house was a large porch. (Whoever

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heard of a patio in Cleveland!) The driveway consisted of two well-worn ruts (with a concrete strip between them) which led to a one-car garage beyond the back of the house. There was a small area beside the driveway which contained flower beds, and I was sometimes allowed to sit on the concrete strip and play there with cousins who might visit from time to time.

In the living room, there hung a painting which I loved. It was called "The Boy in the Torn Hat," and the subject was just that—the head of a young winsome blue-eyed boy, wearing a light hat which, on one side, was torn away from the brim. It wasn't a large painting; in retrospect, I would guess perhaps 12 x 16 inches. I loved that boy so much! I would stand looking at him for what now seems to me many minutes at a time. More likely it was a fleeting glance, but my remembrance of his face is so clear that were I an artist, I could draw him for you.

Also, in the living room stood a rather forlorn upright piano on which my mother and her sister Carrie learned to play. How is it possible that beat-up instrument was the cornerstone of my mother's career?

The kitchen was a high-ceilinged room. A heavy cast-iron stove stood against one wall, opposite a large round oak table surrounded by several ladder-back chairs. Tall glass-fronted cabinets displayed china and stemware along with a collection of hand-painted vases. To my mind, those cabinets were impressive. How anyone reached the top shelves I can't imagine. There must have been a step-stool, but I don't remember one.

Just off the kitchen was a long narrow room, with shelving on both sides. This was the "fruit cellar," in which Grandma kept all the jars of fruits and vegetables which she had canned. It was also a place of safe-keeping for the cookies—oh, those very thin, very crisp, melt-in-your-mouth sugar cookies! Grandma usually locked the door to that room, so that scavengers, old and young alike, wouldn't make short shrift of her wonderful baking. Oh, yes, she baked her own bread. I remember the dough, rising in

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a large bowl, covered with a towel. When the bread was baking, when the cookies were in the oven, the smell in the house was marvelous.

Off the living room, a stairway led to the upper floor, where the bedrooms and bathroom and sunroom were located. Ah, that sunroom! There were windows on three sides and the view of the neighborhood was lovely. I enjoyed wandering into the sunroom for another reason. To get to it, I had to walk through Aunt Marcy's bedroom. Aunt Marcy! I adored her because she was, in her own special way, flamboyant. She had flair; she had verve. Marcy was in her early twenties during these Cleveland visits. She was attractive, in a zesty, emotional way. And she was vain! Her closet brimmed with the latest fashions (which my grandfather could not always afford); her accessories were everywhere. On her dresser sat a beautiful tray filled with myriad bottles of perfume. The scent in that bedroom was captivating. I enjoyed it to the fullest, as I walked into the sunroom. I don't remember playing with toys or books or any of my own things. But I do recall a closet in the sunroom which held many of Marcy's hats and handbags. Many years later my mother gave me an hilarious account of the time when one of the cats who were part of the household—a very pregnant cat—chose one of Marcy's large hats in which to have her litter. My mother was still at home—as yet unmarried—and so was witness to Marcy's hysteria when the kittens were discovered. Can you imagine that scene!

The room in which I slept during our visits was toward the back of the house. It was a small room. I don't remember any of the furniture except for the white iron twin bed which was allotted to me. For some reason, I was fearful of being in that room alone. Maybe it had a cell-like quality. It wasn't large and airy like some of the other rooms. I think there was only one small window. It wasn't the most charming of boudoirs.

My grandmother sometimes took me with her when she

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walked to the grocery store. Grandma was a particular shopper; she bickered with the clerks over many things. I liked being in the midst and bustle of 105th Street.

When I was eighteen, my newly widowed mother, my brother, and I moved from Youngstown to Cleveland. A few years later, I married and soon had children of my own. One day I had an urge to see that old house. I found my way to Pasadena Avenue. I remembered that the house was second from the corner. I parked my car across the street. How could this possibly be the home I remembered! So small and shabby. The house had become a Bible school, with signs posted on the railing of that once charming front porch and banners hanging over the second story windows of my grandparents bedroom. I sat on the curb and wept.

Nostalgia is a bitter-sweet road trip. You inspire a more utopian highway. Gigi

The Clan

Hi—once again—my Lamb—

*M*y paternal grandparents, Joseph and Esther Brody, emigrated from Russia to the United States in 1902. I never knew my paternal grandmother. She died before I was born. I'm named for her as are two other cousins. (Esther Jean, I didn't start going by my middle name, Jean, until I was in my twenties.) It was traditional that the first daughter of any of my grandmother's surviving seven children (I'm told she gave birth to fourteen kids!) were to be called by that name. I know of only one girl whose