

Aunt Aggie, Bobby Kennedy, and My Parents' Summer Theater

by Gretchen Roselli

I was ten, finished with camp, enduring a New Jersey summer and alternating between sweating on the plastic lounge chairs that left marks, reading Nancy Drew, and running through the sprinkler with my brother. We swatted away horse flies that seemed to get bigger and more aggressive as the summer went on. My parents happily escaped to their vegetable and flower gardens. I'd sometimes help but was afraid of the garter snakes that would sunbathe in the rock garden. My mother gave them names and didn't let them deter her from her love of tending flowers. When the humidity retreated slightly in the evening, she'd bake pies from whatever berry we had picked that day. No matter how careful I was, I'd end up with bloody scrapes from the long thorny vines. When I'd shout out after getting pricked again, my mom would remind me that blackberry was my favorite pie. At night while my brother and I watched TV, my mom would read Edgar Cayce books and my dad would read Carl Sagan and books on UFOs. Some nights we would play with a Ouija board as a family.

At a lazy late breakfast, mom announced she wanted to go beyond asking questions using the Ouija board and have a séance. My dad, who would normally roll his eyes at her ideas, was excited and said he'd clean out the shed so we could have it there. Mom wanted to have a proper séance and invited the neighbors to come over that night. My parents had mutually agreed they'd try and make contact with Aunt Aggie because she had a sense of humor.

"Who's Aunt Aggie?" my younger brother asked.

"She was your grandma's sister who died in her sleep," Dad answered.

"Did she have kids?"

"No. She never married."

"Like the Old Maid game?" my brother asked. We both laughed.

"She was ahead of her time," my mom said.

I didn't know what that meant. I wondered if there was a disease you got if you were born too early.

"She lived in the old homestead, the house where your grandmother grew up in Boonton and then in the same house in Whippany," my dad said.

"How did she live in the same house in two places?" my brother asked.

"Because the state needed the land to make a new highway so they moved the house."

I couldn't imagine how they picked up a whole house and moved it. It was hard enough moving my Barbie Dream House from one end of the playroom to the other without it becoming a mess and leaving a trail of clothes and furniture.

"Aunt Aggie was a career woman. She was very stylish and always dressed in the latest fashion. When I was younger and started working, she'd cut the designer labels from her old clothes and showed me how to sew them into my jackets. She told me that I needed to look like I had money."

I pictured my mother getting dressed up on a Saturday night looking elegant, my dad locking elbows with her as they followed a maître d' to a fancy table where my dad would help remove her jacket and she would drape it on a chair, casually looking about and then slowly sitting down after everyone had gotten a good look at her and what she was wearing.

I remember going to Aunt Aggie's house after she died. I was only six. It was mysterious and creepy going to a dead person's house. I had no recollections of her. It was a big two-story house. All of her belongings were on display for an estate sale. I was mesmerized by the number of clothes neatly hanging in her closets, including furs. I thought she must have been rich. My mother was looking through some of her clothes, trying to find something that might fit her.

"Look at the ornate buttons on this one from Epstein's."

She had me try it on so I could feel what it felt like. It was huge but fun playing dress-up. Perhaps my aunt had met someone famous in this jacket. I looked in every nook and closet in the house. There were collections of figurines, artwork and plates everywhere. Anyone with that many plates must have had a lot of people for dinner.



Agnes Glaab

One set had a few chips and I imagined that would be the set she used every day. If I had visited her as I heard my cousins did, she would have let me use those dishes to have tea parties with my doll, serving chicken salad on Parker House rolls and Pepperidge Farm Cookies.

“I tasted my first pineapple on that plate. Have you ever had a pineapple young lady?” a man’s voice asked.

“I’ve had it from a can,” I answered.

He laughed. “No, fresh pineapple. It was very hard to get but Aggie managed to get her hands on it. We ate so much our mouths would burn.”

Shiny sterling silver pieces covered the dining room table. I went to pick up a miniature pitcher and was told not to touch it, that all the silver had just been polished. There wasn’t much to play with for a six-year-old. Everything was very shiny and fancy. I went to the living room and sat on a fabric step stool with bright green tassels. Two women were looking up at the chandeliers talking about the chandelier parties Aunt Aggie hosted.

“What a spread she’d put out for us,” one of them said.

They talked about taking the chandeliers apart, one crystal at a time, cleaning them and putting them back together piece by piece. I had imagined a chandelier party was when people hung from the chandeliers and swung around like I had seen in old movies. Now I pictured her table set with the blue and white China, fancy food on the buffet like my mom would put out for parties, people drinking Champagne from the crystal glasses in the China cabinet and telling stories while they polished each piece.

“And the time Uncle Ted got drunk and didn’t properly affix the metal hanger back to the chain and the whole thing almost came crashing down before we all lunged to save it,” the other lady said.

There was a vanity in her bedroom, where I pictured she had sat and made herself beautiful. It had drawers and shelves displaying large jewelry. My mom told me I could pick something to take. I picked a gold flower pin with a big ruby center. It was tarnished but I didn’t mind. I thought it meant she must have liked it a lot. I wondered when she had worn it last. It was much too big for me to pin on anything and wear but it captured my imagination.

I walked down the hall. I heard the words independent, self-sufficient, activist, caring and entertaining. I wondered if she could hear what was being said about her.

The study was crowded with lively people. They talked mainly in words I didn’t understand, like when my parents watched the evening news. Many of them were looking at a framed picture that sat prominently on the coffee table between her desk and sofa.

“Thank God for Agnes’ hard work or we’d never have carried New Jersey. Kennedy got 49.96% of the vote to Nixon’s 49.16%, a margin of .80%. We all paced like mad that night, Aggie keeping us in drinks and food between shouting at the radio in the kitchen and the TV in the living room.”

I watched them raise their glasses. “A toast to Agnes Loretta Glaab, one of the hardest working Democrats in the country.”

I’d seen grown-ups make toasts before but I didn’t understand what they were toasting. I did recognize the name Kennedy though. As many of them left the smoke-filled room, I imagined my aunt as part of some powerful secret club. Much more powerful than the ones my friends and I would make up for the treehouse. I walked into the room and over to the silver-framed photo. I was afraid to pick it up so I kneeled on the floor, got close to it and tried to figure out who the people were.

“Are you a relative?” A tall woman was looking down at me. She smoked a cigarette, wore a tight dress and had her hair in a bun.

“Yes. My father told me Aggie was my great aunt.”

She knelt beside me. “Do you know who that is in the photograph with your great aunt?”

My aunt stood tall and looked serious but happy. She had a coat on with a huge fur collar. She stood next to two men. One was young and good-looking like a movie star; the other was older, balding and larger. I recognized the man in the large poster they were standing in front of. It was President Kennedy.

“That is your aunt with Bobby Kennedy. He’s the one standing next to her. We all hoped he would be the next President of the United States. He died three months ago. I don’t think Aggie ever recovered from the news.”



Aunt Aggie and Bobby Kennedy

She put her cigarette out in the overflowing ashtray.

“I know I haven’t,” she said quietly.

She stared at the photo for a few seconds before standing up. “I’m sorry for your loss. Everyone loved Aggie. It’s a big loss in many ways.”

She tried to smile, but couldn’t, then walked out of the room

My mother loved drama. On the day of the séance, she kept saying she was sure Aunt Aggie would come to visit. Neighbors started to arrive as it got dark, well after dinner. My mom announced it was time. We all walked with flashlights from the house down the path, past the rose garden, the blackberry bushes, and the tall grass to the shed. She and my father seemed excited about bringing Aunt Aggie back. I hoped that she wouldn’t be mad at me for taking one of her brooches. My mother asked that everyone sit down in a circle on the dirt floor that my dad had partially covered with hay. She lit a hurricane lamp and asked everyone to turn off their flashlights. We all watched the light flicker in the center of the circle. My mom asked that we all hold hands. The shed was full of mice and my imagination felt them scurrying around me though I knew

it was just the hay rubbing against my bare legs. My mom became a different person as she called for Aunt Aggie. Her trancelike voice took on a tone that I had never heard.

“Hello, spirits. We come in peace. Please hear us spirits. We are requesting to speak to dear departed Aunt Aggie.”

The only sounds were the mosquitos, crickets, and frogs from the neighbor’s pond. I squeezed my neighbor’s hand hard and she squeezed back. I guessed she was as scared as me.

“Aunt Aggie, can you hear us? Are you there?”

Silence.

“Aunt Aggie, if you are there, please tap twice on the roof.”

There were two taps on the roof of the shed and we all screamed.

“Quiet!” my mom instructed. “Aunt Aggie, thank you for visiting with us. We miss you. We want to know that you are okay. Please tap once if you are at peace.”

There was no response. The quiet was only broken by our heavy breathing. My mother repeated the question. There was one tap on the roof. All of the kids and a few adults jumped. One of the grown-ups said, “Well, at least we know she’s at peace.” My mother shushed her and continued.

“Aunt Aggie, is it possible to see you once again?”

I dreaded this question. I had no desire to see any ghosts. I was scared to death of what might appear in front of us. Kids and adults alike screamed as a shadowy figure flew across the ceiling of the shed. We ran out of the shed, down the path and back into the safety of the house. We were all talking at once and catching our breath when I heard someone scream.

“There’s a cat in the house!”

We didn’t have a cat, no one brought a cat, and none of the doors were left open. Some of the younger kids started crying, a few of the adults were running around trying to catch the cat. Someone opened the front door and the cat bolted by and out into the night. Most of us were shaking. I held back tears and just wished everything would go back to normal. I longed to go up to my room and crawl into my bed but was too afraid to be alone. The kids who weren’t with their parents jumped on the sofa and we huddled together sweating.

My parents entered the house laughing hard. The kind of laugh where my mother could hardly catch her breath to talk. My dad was telling everyone to calm down, that everything was alright. They explained between giggles that the whole thing was set up. My dad had tied a rope to the branches above the shed so when he pulled on it, he could make the tapping noise. The ghost was a homemade prop he made that day he had attached to a wire. The adults started laughing. Most of the kids were mad that my parents had played such a dirty trick on us that we practically peed our pants. Someone asked, “How did you manage to put the cat in the house?”

My parents looked confused and said “What cat?”



Gretchen Roselli had a career as an actress, dancer, singer, and model and owned a performing arts school in New York. She now writes plays and non-fiction. Her articles have been published in *Red Rock Life Magazine* and *The Colorado Sun*. She has had two plays produced and is a member of the Playwrights Group. She loves theatre, competitive running, belting out show tunes, dancing, tumbling, and fostering dogs.