

One

Truth is like God. You cannot see it face to face and live. So when I look at the truth about Angus Aleshire it is often in sidelong glances. I might begin with the paintings. Or with a man who jumped ship just off Peddocks Island, in the winter of 1982. But that's just speculation. The truth is, I haven't seen Angus since.

Except of course, in my dreams. In my dreams I sometimes spot him in a crowd, standing by a bank of elevators, at a party, or waiting for me to notice him at a restaurant table. In my dreams, as in life, he often shows up unannounced.

But dreams are only fancy. They aren't true. I was once in a position to know the truth about Angus more than anyone else. There were also things I didn't know. Angus lied. I lied to myself. Unraveling lies is like picking up the dropped stitches in an intricate and fragile tapestry. It's an enormous risk. The tapestry gives me a precious though incomplete picture of Angus. Dwelling on the dropped stitches, reduces that picture to tatters.

But if I'm going to tell our story truthfully, I must start from the beginning. In 1969 when Angus was fifteen. That's when we met, at Sunday services, which spilled at noon into the parking lot of Old Lincoln Parish. The Chambers, the Aleshires and the Garsides, and the Lamberts, all of us including Grandpa, flocked outside after church, and old Mrs. Cronk was wheeled in her chair by Miss Cronk, and Pastor Jackson with his clean round face, smiled on the steps out front.

The Aleshires lived in a New England farmhouse in Hingham Massachusetts, a property with plenty of land, up a gravel driveway and behind a magnificent hedge. Their house was set on a hill, overlooking the harbor full of boats.

In 1969, my family moved a mile up the road. Our house was tall and messy, with rooms leading off in funny directions, and staircases piled with books. It hummed with life and movement.

Lights blazed. Laughter and conversation burst into the evening air. Tempers flared; music blasted.

The Aleshires had three children, and Angus was the oldest. He did well in school. He was gifted at music, intellectually curious and athletic. He could do anything he put his mind to. But he also had a way of stirring things up, and disrupting the family dynamic, of undermining authority and tearing down people's facades. It was always a battle of wills between Angus and his mother, although she challenged his potential, and I could see she was also quite proud of him.

At the church picnic she once told a story about sailing up in Maine. The family got far out when the weather suddenly turned. The mainsail came loose and trapped at the top of the mast. It looked quite desperate, as the weather came in. "Until," she said, "valiant Angus shimmied up the mast to fetch the sail back down." Hearing that story was when I fell in love with him.

My father Timothy was an ethics professor. He wrote Bible commentaries and lectured at various seminaries. My mother, Nora directed plays down at the Community Center. Whenever one of her plays was about to go up, laundry piled near the washing machine, and her scripts and books of stage blockings and notes for the actors joined other ongoing projects on the dining room table, the audio tapes of Timothy's lectures, Lydia's collection of marbles and shells. Freddy's guitar, next to its case, lent against the bookshelves. Folded blankets piled on the settee. And when Nora became pregnant a fourth time, it was as if to underscore the implication that nothing would ever be complete in our house. Life was underway and anything might happen.

We had always called my parents by their first names, although I don't know why. They were always Nora and Timothy to us, never Mom and Dad. As children we were pure complexioned with healthy auburn hair, small proportions and lively bones. Our natures played off each other, one picking up where the other left off. I was the first, overly sincere and a champion of causes, practicing piano or curled up in the window seat with books;

Lydia, two years younger than me, was petite and trendy, while Freddy was the true musician. He could play any instrument he picked up, especially guitar, and his rebellious nature played out in his humor and the way he dressed: long hair and striped trousers that looked like pajamas.

Sorrel was the last of us, twelve years younger than Freddy - "our little surprise" Timothy called her, making her appearance in 1971. At first she resembled a porcelain doll carried on high in my father's arms, but later she wore her smallness less easily. She was observant and slightly furtive, saving impressions for later use.

We saw the Aleshires every Sunday, but rarely socialized outside church. Picture Angus as a soft-faced boy of fifteen, with pants that were always becoming too short, playing the opening and closing hymns on the Sunday School piano. In between playing the hymns he rocked back and forth on a chair in my father's Bible class. I remember the way he forced relevancy on the least of discussions. How come the cool kids were always the bad kids, he wanted to know. Wasn't it true that good was synonymous with boring?

"But how can something be good and boring both at the same time?" I put in, for I too was a member of the Bible class, and I was a champion of virtue.

"Most of the good kids are the biggest wimps and losers of all," Angus continued, sitting back in his slender long-legged body, a single wave of hair across the forehead. "If you never take risks, it's easy to get by. You just give people what they want."

My father had a gentle manner and eyes that smiled from the corners. "Well," he said. "Sometimes it's risky to be good, too. To stand up for principle, you know."

"Perhaps we should define what we mean by good," he replied.

"All right," said Timothy. "Tell me what you mean by good."

Angus turned his head to one side, leaning on his elbows, thinking hard. "Goodness is integrity," he said at last, throwing out a witty smile. "And to have integrity you have to follow a reliable set of rules. But only with the certainty that they are based

on something authentic.”

The others in the class sat in neutral silence, under a fug of adolescent malaise. “People are sometimes more self-righteous than they are genuine,” Timothy said, delighted to have found such an engaging interlocutor in Angus, “and that’s why Jesus preferred sinners to hypocrites.”

“But wait!” Angus cried, his face filling up with new considerations. “These terms you keep using like sinner and hypocrite. It’s all a question of semantics. Because as I understand it you consider a hypocrite to be sinful.”

“The parable of the prodigal son is about this very question,” Timothy said, bringing in his Bible reference. “It teaches us that being good means more than missing out on the fun. And we need to make sure that our good behavior is not just a self-righteous façade. It has to come out of a heartfelt desire to do what’s right.”

But it was really the piano that brought Angus and me together. There weren’t many kids our age who took it quite so seriously. “That was a rousing rendition of Onward Christian Soldiers,” I remarked after Sunday School one morning. This was before Sorrel was born, so I must have been fifteen, and Angus sixteen. He was sitting in the back seat of the family car, looking through the window grinning at me, as I stood in the parking lot.

“Where do you take lessons?”

“At the South Shore Conservatory,” I said.

“Same here,” taking the opportunity to brag about his teacher: “a concert pianist who handpicks his students. Who is your teacher?”

“The great Mrs. McNaught,” I said. “An extremely old woman who drives down from New Hampshire twice a week to teach. She even drove down when she broke her arm.”

Angus laughed. “What are you working on now?”

“Bach Inventions and a piece by Edward McDowell.”

“Edward who?”

“He wrote *To a Wild Rose*.”

“Do you want to come over for lunch?” he asked.

We sat in the back of the station wagon, suddenly shy without the barrier of the car door between us, looking anywhere but at each other, with the other Aleshire children packed in like sardines, and then we sat in the enormous turquoise kitchen, sipping vegetable soup. His little sister Beth was a blond girl of about ten, who sometimes inexplicably burst into tears and was very keen on making me feel at home. "Here Ruby, would you like a sandwich? Would you like some apple juice? Wait, I'll get you a glass." Cheryl Aleshire was a broad beamed woman, bending a practical head to the passing out of napkins and plates. "Don't expect Angus to help you, Ruby," she said. "If you wait, you'll go home hungry." The table was silent, everyone busily helping themselves to tuna fish, tomatoes, sliced rye bread and mayo. Angus's brother Duncan caught my eye and smiled. He was about my age and had these cute dimples, and tight curly hair. Cheryl turned to the sink, washing out a glass, sleeves pushed up, hands sunk into the suds. "So what's your favorite subject in school, Ruby? Drama, I suppose."

I noticed that some of the kids started their lunch as others finished, and when they were done each of them cleared away their own plates, left the room and vanished into the house.

Angus led me to a parlor decorated with New England antiques and ticking with clocks. The sweet aroma of adolescent boy lifted off his sweater, as we sat side by side on the sofa. Please God, I thought, let this moment never end. A linen shaded lamp shed its light across the book in his hands.

The pictures he showed me were puzzles, M.C. Escher prints: figures walking round a tower, up and down stairs that folded, in a cunning twist of perspective, back upon themselves. In another print, birds flew off the page, while in their negative space fish swam downstream.

As usual, Angus had a challenge. "Which do you see first? The fish or the birds?"

“The birds,” I said. “You?”

“Both.”

Angus Sidney Aleshire. A name to fall in love with. A name bequeathed with care. But there was very little of the Scotsman in his dark skin and black hair, his strong nose and high cheekbones. “You don’t look a thing like your parents,” I said, taking in the shrewd curve of his mouth.

He looked me straight in the eye. “I was adopted.”

“No! Really?”

“Sure. I was adopted when I was five. Want to see the piano?”

I followed him into the piano room, where he practiced a couple of hours each day. No one in the family was allowed to interrupt when he was practicing - and that was Cheryl’s rule. Play was strictly organized in the Aleshire home. There were music lessons, skiing lessons, sailing, hiking and riding, tennis games, hockey practice. “It’s one of my worst memories,” he said, as I slid beside him onto the piano bench. “Waiting on the platform at South Station with my new family, while my grandmother’s train pulled away.” He leafed through a pile of sheet music. “My name back then was David.”

The piano room was white and bare-floored. The piano was a baby grand - grander by far than our old family upright with its missing notes. The windows of the piano room faced a lawn. He set up the first movement of Beethoven’s Pathetique. His fingers on the keys were broad and brown with clean flat nails. He began the opening measures with feeling and control. I tried to imagine what he was like at five, adopted by the Aleshires, as I listened to the music, and looked across the huge expanse of lawn.

The following Saturday, I checked out two recordings from the Hingham Public Library, one by Vladimir Horowitz, the other by Glenn Gould, both playing the Pathetique. I sat on the floor with the music spread in front of me. I preferred the Horowitz version, and listened again and again, while following the sheet music. But it was a long time before I allowed myself to place that music on our piano, sit at the keyboard and form my hands around those first, exuberant, wide mouthed chords.

Two

Frank Aleshire sat behind us at the Cohasset Ice Arena, dressed in a red-checkered shirt. He had a hearty face, and short hair, which stuck out in thin, layered ridges at the back of his neck. “Hey there. You folks enjoying the game?” Our family had stopped by as promised, to watch Angus’s hockey game, to watch him float past on the ice with a stick, and get into sudden violent scraps with the puck, raucous shouting matches with teammates, to slam against the walls, and charge top speed in the opposite direction. For my own part, I was only waiting until the end when he might skate over, grinning, his black hair showing beneath the helmet.

“You know,” Frank said. “You’ve made a great impression on him.”

“And he on us,” Nora replied. “We’re all very fond of that boy.”

“Such a thinker!” Timothy put in.

Frank chuckled. “Sure,” he said. “Gus can turn on the charm when he likes.” The hockey arena echoed with the cries of the players, the glide and whoosh of skates, the crack of stick hitting stick. I sat alone at the far end of the bleachers, hugging my jacket around me, but close enough to overhear the rest of their conversation. The change in Frank’s tone alarmed me.

“We’ve been having an awful time,” he confided to my parents. “He doesn’t respect the difference between right and wrong. Undermines authority. Calls people out. Always in trouble at school, for back talking or showing up late, and missing important assignments.”

“Frank,” said Timothy. “You know if there’s anything we can do...”

“We think he needs more challenge,” said Frank. “Cheryl and I are hoping we can get him into a private school next year. That would be one solution. We’ll have to see, I guess.”

“Nora,” I ventured, when we were driving home in the old station wagon with wooden sides. “Angus told me he was adopted. But is that really true?”

“Yes,” she said. “It’s perfectly true.”

“He said he was five years old,” I told the family. “He said it was one of his worst memories, watching his grandmother’s train pull away.”

“I’m sure it was,” said Timothy. The windshield wipers thumped out their regular beat across the window. “What happened to his real parents?” Lydia wanted to know.

“I think his mother died of cancer,” Nora said. “The Aleshires have done a lot for that kid.”

“Yikes,” said Freddy. I’d forgotten Freddy was even there. On car rides he had a way of disappearing into the back seat, and looking out of the window.

“I shudder to think what he must have gone through,” our mother continued. “Can you imagine Angus at five?”

I could. And he must have been gorgeous.

Angus liked to stop by unannounced. He poked his head in at the Community Center when Nora was conducting her drama workshops and he’d stand there grinning from the door. Nora sat in the middle of the hall on a straight-backed chair, her belly growing ripe with the baby due in four months’ time, and she had this laugh, which she couldn’t seem to let out all in one go. It bucked and rolled and tossed her about, and then flowed out like fast running water. “Oh, hello darling, what brings you in here?”

“I’m on my way to practice,” he said, hockey gear jammed in a bag.

Nora turned briefly back to the stage, where her favorite student Ari Braun was going through a scene with me. “Ari,” she called, “I want to see the thoughts on your face, darling, before you speak. Remember that it’s thought, action and then speech.”

“Timothy said I could stop by Friday,” Angus continued, “for a game of chess.”

“Sure. Why not?”

“But it’s Freddy’s twelfth birthday on Friday..” I threw out from the stage.

Then Nora remembered. “Oh, that’s right. We’re going out to supper at the Aloha. But we’d love to include you.”

It was on account of one of Freddy’s favorite dishes there - the Pu Pu Platter - that all of us, Grandpa included, squeezed into the semicircular Polynesian booth, in the low ceilinged dimly lit Aloha Restaurant. And to my joy, Angus came as well. Five different conversations were conducted at once. Everyone ordered fruity drinks with miniature parasols propped inside them. We passed around plates of batter-dipped shrimp, eggrolls, and chicken wings. We cracked open fortune cookies, and unraveled the messages inside. “Your hard work will soon pay off,” Timothy read, putting on a funny accent. “Openness is a quality that has its rewards,” read Lydia. “Help,” read Freddy, unraveling his fortune. “I’m being held captive in a fortune cookie factory.”

I remember we thought up names for the baby that evening, trying on identities, on the baby’s behalf, a dressing up box full of characters, which changed according to costume.

“Victoria!” Timothy suggested, looking round for reaction.

“Nah...” we all cried.

“How about Sebastian,” suggested Lydia.

“Oh dear,” Grandpa muttered, blotting his mouth with a napkin.

“Maybe we should call him David?” I suggested.

“What do you think of Elimelech for the baby’s name,” Freddy put in. It was a name from Sunday School, from the book of Ruth and everyone laughed, so that only I saw the expression on Angus’s face then. Our eyes met, and fused together and everything else fell away.

The Aleshires went to their cottage up in Maine for several weeks each summer. But we remained in Hingham, taking weekend drives to the Cape, while Nora grew bigger by the day, until at length she sat on the wicker sofa on the sun porch, red faced and miserable, and completely lacking in energy. "I feel like an unexploded bomb," she wailed.

Sorrel was born at home, with the help of a midwife, at the end of July during the summer I turned sixteen. I remember how we sat in the living room waiting for the birth, Freddy and Lydia and I, and how Freddy kept on going outside, hoping to overhear birth pangs and baby cries, while I was reading *Swan Song* by John Galsworthy, and Lydia was poised to tape record our thoughts, just at the crucial moment. She recorded Freddy's voice, still unbroken, "I hope you are a boy. I really want a brother...so I hope you feel terrible if you're a girl..."

Sorrel was a name from a Noel Coward play, which Nora had kept up her sleeve in case the rest of us objected. And how could we, once we saw the baby? Because she did look a lot like a Sorrel, with her determined and compact face, her big green eyes. Timothy made the telephone calls to all the relatives and friends. "It's a girl," he said. "Sorrel Elizabeth."

We gathered around our mother's bed, laughing in amazement and joy, because our sister Sorrel was in Nora's arms, tiny and primal, as if she had come from the sea, and just a few minutes old. Then the baby turned her mouth down as if with disappointment. "Oh darling!" Nora said. "They're only laughing at you because you've got cream all over your face."

Timothy had wallpapered Freddy's old bedroom in a duck, drake and bulrush pattern for the baby, and painted Nora's chest of drawers to match. Freddy meanwhile, moved into Lydia's room, and Lydia moved into my old room, and I was now on the very top floor, in a room all by myself, with dormer windows. The excitement of the baby, the feedings, the wakeful nights, the burping and the changing used up the rest of the summer. We all had time for reinvention. Freddy was no longer youngest. Lydia