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Parade

They had a parade in downtown Pittsburgh on St. Patrick's Day. Paula was not Irish, but she went with her aunt to see the smiling spectators on the sidewalks and the school marching bands and Hibernian societies. Her aunt liked band music, even when it was performed by amateurs. Paula's mother said her sister was lonely, so Paula decided to be particularly nice.

They took the streetcar downtown, and she wore nylons and her nice black flats that she usually saved for Sunday Mass. They both wore their good wool coats because the air was brisk and the sky cloudy. "Let's hope the rain stays away," her aunt said.

Paula put her coin in the streetcar driver's box and took a seat beside her aunt. Her aunt tapped her fingers against her leg as if she were expecting bad news in a doctor's office. Across from them sat a girl with green lips and a fuzz of moustache above them. Paula understood why she would wear green lipstick, but it only emphasized the imperfection. Her aunt leaned over and whispered, "It's impolite to stare." Her aunt's breath was hot in her ear. Paula sat straighter and was determined to be more refined. She avoided looking at the girl. She read the posters above the windows and the billboards on the street advertising Pepsi and Coke and the happiness that would accrue with the use of their products: a beautiful girl with curly locks and sparkling eyes lifting a bottle as a toast to the passenger. On another billboard a handsome tanned man smoked a cigarette and the smoke ascended gracefully upward and out of the frame. Paula did not smoke. She had tried a cigarette once and didn't like it, but she wouldn't mind if her husband smoked. Of course, she was years away from a husband. She wanted a handsome husband, one who would love her completely, a prince of a man, and they would travel to faraway places and have three beautiful children, two boys and a girl. The family would have a lovely house and a television set they would watch together in the evening after eating spaghetti and enjoying ice cream for dessert. And then they would read their books before bedtime.

The streetcar clanged. "This is our stop." Her aunt stood up and waited for her. Her eyes sparkled like those of the girl on the billboard. She swayed from foot to foot. "Let's hurry."

She wanted to tell her aunt about a boy she liked, Andy. He read books too.

As they stepped down from the streetcar, her aunt looked at the louring clouds and sniffed. "He has all the power," she said. "Or rather, his wife."

"Who?"

She looked away. "Nobody. I was just thinking. I don't even know how it began."

"How what began?"

"Nothing. It's nothing." She searched the crowd as if looking for a

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familiar face and shook her head. "When I was your age, the world was mine." She stared down the wide avenue, where people were assembling, and smiled as if a warm breeze blew across her face. She stared in the other direction and finally looked down at her feet. "So."

"So what?"

"Exactly." She patted Paula's shoulder. "You're so right. Don't be like your crazy aunt."

"You're not crazy."

"Aphrodite makes us mad."

"The gods of Greece don't exist."

"Right you are. We make our own problems. You're a smart girl. You definitely are my sister's own child. Her life is great. What would she say?"

"Mom's not home. Remember? She's visiting her sick friend."

"Yes, I know." A veil of sadness fell over her aunt's face, aging her.

"Mom thinks her friend will die. She feels sad for her, but she said it was her own fault for drinking so much. Her choice."

"Oh, there he is." Her aunt waved at a tall, dark-haired man wearing a tan overcoat. He smiled when he saw her. "You are my insurance." She held Paula's elbow and straightened. "I'm here to do the right thing."

What was the right thing, Paula wondered. She watched her aunt walk toward the handsome stranger and talk animatedly. Her aunt shook her head as he touched her shoulder. She lifted his hand off her shoulder and pointed to Paula. She turned away from him and marched toward Paula. He took a step toward her aunt, stopped, and finally walked away.

Nearby someone lit a cigarette and the smoke tickled Paula's throat and made her cough. On the sidewalk two boys pushed each other. Across the street, a husband and wife held hands. The wife reached for his face and ran her finger along his cheek and gazed at him as if they were the only ones present. Paula thought she could see her wedding ring. Paula dreamed her life would be like that.

In the crowd mostly were the parents of the children in the school bands. The parade started. First was a fire truck and then a police squad carrying a banner identifying their precinct. After them was the St. Aloysius school band. Paula wished she could've been in the parade. The majorettes stepped high in their green boots. The bagpipes blared. The drums seemed to beat in her chest.

Her aunt dabbed at her eyes. "We should go to a movie after this. Something with music."