

The Outsider

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IT WAS CHRISTMAS, and we of my father's family gathered for what might well be the last of our famed Christmas dinners. There was a time when we had five of them every Christmas—one at each of the five brothers' houses. Ours was usually the first, on the Sunday before Christmas; and the last was nearly always at the uncle's who still lived at the old home place out in the country, the first Sunday in the New Year. They were great occasions, and nearly everybody in the county knew about them, but not just because they got written up in the social column of the weekly newspaper, which they naturally did. Because the family always talked about them to outsiders—not in the way of boasting but more in some wonderment that that many big dinners could be prepared by so many fine women and consumed by so many good people, year after year. It was as though this talk was their public ritual, to justify the family as a unit and to publish abroad before all the world that this—these wonderful meals eaten together, all five of them—was our own symbol of the family and its meaning.

Of course, as a child, I found it hard to be sympathetic to all this. I got so tired of hearing the same old tales, so tired always of having to eat at the side table where we

younger children were accommodated, so tired of being seen and not heard. And I wondered why it meant so much to all the older ones, just being together and eating together. It wasn't as though they were in any way distinguished as a family: they didn't have any great amount of money, any of them, and they'd never, any of them, done anything particularly exciting or distinctive to set them apart from all the rest of the world. Why, they'd none of them ever even been off to college; and, on the whole, Memphis was about as far away from home as any of them ever cared to go.

On the other hand, I don't think you would have called them clannish, either. It wasn't "just me and mine" with any of them: they had a wide circle of friends all over the county, and the family as such wasn't a be-all and end-all for any of them. And they certainly weren't just sitting there admiring their own reflections in each other. Family, to them, was merely the most immediate group, the nearest community, both to the heart and to the soul—the nearest thing at hand for one to love and be loved back by. But all their hearts went much wider than that one circle.

The one exception to this was the youngest aunt, the uncle's wife who had grown up

in town, where her father had been both a bank president and a Sunday School superintendent. And she had also been off to college and taught school for awhile down in Mississippi. So she knew how things were done elsewhere. Yet the curious thing was that it was her own family, despite the fact that they had, unlike ours, always "had things"—advantages, opportunities, and so on, which was the one that was really clan-ish—not just close, like ours. And furthermore, it was the family that constituted, for them, the principal reason for being and the primary ground for action, any action. There was nothing, absolutely nothing that seemed to please them so much as, whether together or with outsiders, talking about "what Papa had said" forty years ago (and, to some extent, this meant "what Papa had left") and then—looking into the future—counting up their children and grandchildren, to see who had the most. Here was a fierce, willed extension of the personality on beyond present and back into the past, forward into the future, and on and on to infinity, it seemed. And they, really, were much the more insular, more restricted—not so much by geography and means, as my father's family had been—as by some poverty of the affections. Certainly they were unlike our family—they who seemed to open the family outward into others' lives and affections, not present it to the world outside as a closed corporation. Rather, they were isolated by family itself—theirs, that is. Why, they seemed to ask, should anyone look beyond those confines toward any other?

Which is not to say that this aunt was cold and unfeeling: she wasn't. It was just that her sympathies were highly restricted. She was eminently reasonable, extremely practical, and as down to earth about the world's work as anyone could ever expect—or hope—to be. But I don't think the life of the affections had ever meant much to

her: I had never seen her cry in my life, and she laughed only at the more obvious and heavy-handed jokes. I remember how puzzled she was once, when my mother told how a good-looking young man she didn't know knocked on her door, told her his name, and asked whether she wasn't the lady whose father's place he had grown up on. She replied that she was and remembered that he had lost his mother when he was a very little boy and that her family had done all they could to make things easier for his widowed father and his only child. The visitor then said that he now worked out of Memphis, as an insurance salesman, was doing well in his career, and merely wanted to stop by and thank her for all her family had done, so long ago, to help him to what had been his success. When he had left, my mother didn't do anything but sit down and have a good cry; but when she recounted the incident to the aunt I've been talking about, my aunt, I could tell, didn't seem to take it in. *She* wouldn't have cried: I knew that. What would have been the *point* in it? And she certainly wouldn't have sat down, taken time off from her work of the moment to do it. Was she the Martha to my mother's Mary?

And yet she had some of the world's finest qualities: fidelity, honesty, zeal. But where was the big heart that all my father's family had? It was not selfishness either, I suppose—not as we usually understand the term, at any rate—that was her trouble. She gave her time, her money, her efforts to every good and worthy cause. And yet I wondered, did the heart go with such gifts? Yet perhaps that was unfair too. Her heart went as far as it could. But it simply couldn't go beyond her own family, "Papa's" dicta and "Sister's" sanctions. They were the ultimate authority and carried final validity in her life. But again, she wasn't under anybody's thumb: it was just "our family," "my father," "our children,"

in the abstract. That was her home province, her real religion.

So no wonder she thought my father's family strange in some ways. They loved nothing better than telling tales on each other, tales on their friends and acquaintances, tales on the whole world. And my aunt sometimes said they were downright perverse in all this—especially when they laughed at peculiarities or infirmities of both mind and body. It was useless to tell her that, often, such laughter was but little removed from tears: they laughed, then, to keep from crying, I always felt. Also I think because they all of them saw some sort of great joke in the universe—though of course I'm sure they couldn't have *told* anyone this. Deeply religious—good Methodists all of them, they were no prudes or killjoys. They laughed easily, and they cried easily. But the laughter always seemed somehow an acknowledgment that the universe was imperfect: *it* could and would go wrong, no matter what God thought of the matter, nor how much thought you yourself took for the morrow. And you were a fool if you thought otherwise. And it was those people, that kind they were really laughing at. Perhaps my aunt then felt some of their laughter directed at her; I could tell it disturbed her that she couldn't understand it. But then her authorities were frozen and embalmed: "Papa's" words, "Sister's" advice, the family's authority. They couldn't change, whereas the universe could, did, and would—and constantly and in the most surprising ways.

In some ways, the long contest she had waged with my father's family was drawing to a close; she might now even have been considered the winner. Now all but one of the brothers were dead: there was only the uncle who was her husband left, and he was old and feeble. But there was no gloating in her triumph: she was younger than he,

it was the way of the world, she would do all in her power to make his last years comfortable, and she would then survive him probably for many years to come. She would do her duty by him now as she had so many times before, and no one anywhere could fault her in any way. Her clan, it seemed, had vanquished our family. And I imagined it was a particularly modern triumph too: utility over affection, the family as production unit over the family as communion of saints.

These and many other thoughts passed through my mind as we sat there at my aunt's out in the country, at the old home place. There were few enough of us now: three or four aunts—the widows of the uncles. And most of their children, of whom there weren't too many, lived too far away or had children who were too old to uproot and take away from home for Christmas.

Yet somehow the table seemed crowded, with ghosts of other Christmases, ghosts of the old tales, ghosts of our beloved dead. And little by little the ghosts became more palpable, more evident as one aunt after another began talking about her husband, what he'd said and done—alone or with the others—that made him lovable and memorable. And laughter, not unmixed with tears, began to flow all around the table; but even the tears were happy ones: how great, how wonderful to have had such joys in one's life, even for only a while! What did their loss finally matter? One had had them, they had really *been*, and that was enough. And so the voices grew louder, weaving in and out like some fugal composition, as the laughter rose into some sort of hymn-like celebration of love given and received. No sadness here, really, but quiet, ultimate joy, at the bottom of the laughter. The older aunts blossomed out as they hadn't in many a day; and even my uncle came forth, almost like Lazarus.

Then I looked over at my youngest aunt, his wife; and I could see she was still puzzled by it all. The old must be humored, so she was prepared to be indulgent. But she was outside all this, as she had been so many times before. (Had she had no ghosts, no dreams at all—no real tears, no real joy?) And she was not on the home territory—“Papa’s” words, “Sister’s” advice, “our family always did . . .”—now. That would come soon enough, though. She would nurse my uncle until he died, then

bury him as dutifully as possible; and then she would live on and on, withdrawing more and more into her family as home terrain—where she’d never altogether been able to get my uncle to join her (he knew the enemy, yes indeed). She would win, finally, perhaps had already won now; but, as I looked across the table at her now—fine, faithful, good, all that, I knew that she really felt an unbidden guest at this table, at this feast. She had always been a strong woman, but I was sorry for her now.