

The first born of nine children, she always assumed she'd have a big family of her own. So when she got married, in the biggest wedding in town- fifteen attendants and, I kid you not, live doves released to fly out of the vestibule of the Baptist church! She'd made a list of children's names. A list on which she crossed out one name a year, for 23 years till it was too late. Nobody ever said who couldn't have children, but it was suspect that it was Uncle John. Maybe he'd had the mumps as a child; they didn't know how to treat them in those days. We're talking a long time ago. Life was hard in those days, for everybody, not just the poor, which neither of them was. Aunt Penny, short for Penelope Parker Bradstreet, and Uncle John were to the manor born. Aunt Penny's Grandfather was even the doctor in town, but, without the miracle drugs we have today, there wasn't much anybody could do. At any rate, there were no children born to this union.

Since Aunt Penny didn't have any children of her own, she used all of us nieces and nephews, 26 of us in all, as her children. I say *used us*, but not in a bad way. We did work when we went to stay there, we'd be given a list of assigned tasks to do before lunch, then we'd be allowed to go fishing in the pond down by the river in the afternoon. It was a fair exchange. The way she worked it was to have several cousins in the same age group at the same time, so every summer we spent two weeks with the same group, in my case, Cindy and Donny, Bradley, and Jim and me, two girls and three boys. We worked in the morning and fished in the afternoon, then we played cards till the wee hours.

I'll get to that, first though, let me tell you about Aunt Penny- she was a big woman, but she carried herself regally, actually she kind of reminded me of pictures I've seen of Queen Victoria. Aunt Penny always made herself up with rouge on her cheeks, little red circles of rouge and she dressed up- even if she was working outside, (which she did strictly as an example for us.) She wore a long dress with an apron over it and gloves to protect her hands, and rings. She wore these big dowager rings, three to a hand- made from stories- really precious jewels- emeralds, diamonds and sapphires, that she'd collected on her world trips. She and Uncle John used to travel all over the world- they'd made three trips all the way around the globe before he got sick. Anyway, she always wore her rings, and in her pierced ears, earrings that dangled. Around her neck she wore a thick gold chain choker. I don't think she wore her gold bracelets when she worked with us in the yard- that must have been her concession to possibly getting dirty. Don't get me wrong she was not a prissy sort of woman- she just had all the "lovely things" and wanted to use them - so she did, all the time. She laughed, an infectiously, bubbly laugh when she called us her "chickadees" and told us to follow her.

Aunt Penny was magic. When we were little children, not big enough to do jobs for her, she'd take us for walks in the woods. Walking with her favorite walking stick she'd tell us to "hush, be real quiet." as she approached an especially big tree, one with a hollow in its trunk. She'd tap the trunk, at first softly, saying inquiringly, 'Mr. Gnome ?' Then she'd get more vigorous, giving the tree a good thump and turning to us to say that Mr. Gnome must be asleep. Finally she'd sing out, in a high voice, "Mr. Gnome? Mr. Gnome? Are you home, Mr. Gnome? Wake up Mr. Gnome! "

We never actually saw him, but we heard the rustling of the wind in the leaves, and thought that it might be him.

Aunt Penny's house was out in the country, way out from town- in a virgin forest it was said-and there were still wild things living there. There had been sightings of foxes, raccoons and even a bobcat recently. The house was huge, sumptuous, elegant and beautiful. French chateau in design: you walked into a long marble hall with two big pier mirrors on one wall and great glass doors leading to the formal garden on the other. The slick floor was great for sliding with sock feet, and if you got a running start in the living room at the end, you could almost make it the whole distance until some grownup heard your whoops, that is, then the jig was up. The upstairs though was where we stayed, away from the master suite. Here we discovered secret doors to the attic dormers where we could explore her extensive doll collection and her sword collection, among other things. The dolls were from her world travels and were dressed in every kind of costume we could imagine. There were china dolls with delicately painted porcelain faces, and cloth dolls, a few even had real hair. That was a little creepy to me, but anyway, the swords were mostly Civil War relics and we knew were to be distributed one to each nephew at her death. The boys would discuss at length which one would go to which boy, it was understood that the oldest got his choice first so it was pretty moot for Donny and Brad and Jim. They were way down the line. But Aunt Penny had so many dolls that she'd already told us that they were given to a museum as a collected set. She let us play with the ones that weren't in glass cases already.

This summer, though, we were older, Cindy, Donny and I were 11 and Brad and Jim were 9. We had work to do before we could play. For Cindy and me, the task was to wash the wrought iron furniture on the terrace and the big green, glass soup tureen that sat on the table in the garden. After we finished that there was the fine crystal to wash and dry. Now Aunt Penny would laugh and tell us stories about when General Beauregard drank a toast to our ancestral cousin, Aimee, some one hundred years before with these very glasses, and we'd revel in imagining her swooning in reply to his advances. We knew though that Aunt Penny was deadly serious about our being careful with these heirlooms. Neither these nor the fine tureen was to be chipped, cracked or broken in anyway. She didn't have to say the words "Be Careful" to convey her message, the slight tightness of her lips told us she meant it.

Meanwhile the boys were to clean the underbrush from the area just beyond the formal garden. All vines and weeds were to be removed; cut away clean and the area raked so we could all plant a ginkgo tree after lunch. We looked forward to tree plantings, as these were rituals all in themselves.

Whenever Aunt Penny planted a tree, she'd have us all stand around it in a circle. Then she'd tell us about what she hoped of the tree; that it grow straight and tall and bear fruit, or golden leaves, or beautiful flowers or whatever God in all His glory had in mind for it. She would have each of us throw a handful of dirt on the roots, one at a time, we'd say a little prayer out loud, then we'd put the hose in place and turn the water on to trickle. New trees need lots of water.

It was a ritual that has stayed with me, I still say a little prayer when a new tree is planted

There was one day we should have simply gone fishing from the get go. No work. No tree plantings. What happened was that after Cindy and I had washed the wrought iron furniture, we decided to split up. I'd wash the soup tureen and she'd start on the crystal. I swear it was not on purpose- not conscious at all- but Cindy and I have always been close- still are- things seem to happen in sync with us- and- you guessed it- soapy glass is slippery. I was the first to drop the top of the tureen onto the marble patio-it went into a million pieces at least. Cindy was next when she clanged two of the hundred-year-old crystal glasses together- the stems fell off of both of them. Crash! Right onto the kitchen floor.

Now you might be able to tell that Aunt Penny didn't really know children like a parent would-or she'd never have let us handle such delicate jobs without close, very close supervision. She had a sort of romantic idea about children that they will always be good, do good, do perfect in fact, if they were *her* chickadees. Ideas that due to the dayliness of living, parents have to give up early on.

Anyway, Aunt Penny's eyes narrowed and she took a deep breath before saying, "That's alright, accidents will happen." She added as if we didn't know, "Of course none of these can ever be replaced. They were over a hundred years old, made of very fine Venetian glass. Each one was hand blown."

She helped us pick up the pieces. Help we could have done without. Aunt Penny made a little clicking sound with her tongue as she picked up each piece of glass. When she stood up, she dusted her hands together, and looked at us. Her pursed lips said we'd done it now, and she was not pleased-not pleased at all.

What can you do? There was no putting them back- no gluing the pieces together. I was pretty sensitive even as a big 11-year-old and a pit formed in my stomach - I fought back tears. One look at Cindy and I knew she felt the same way. For all Aunt Penny's magic, I wanted to go home- I wished I'd never heard of two weeks at Laurelwoods.

It was lunch and I didn't have much appetite after that. I mostly just moved things around on my plate and sat feeling lower than low. We ate lunch and while Cindy and I were quiet, the boys were happy, joking and teasing us till we didn't think it was funny anymore.

We were edgy, feeling miserable and still sorry for ourselves when we all went out to plant the new tree. Then we saw the sight of our redemption- Donny had removed all the vines alright, he'd even cut down the big heavy flowering wisteria vine. Aunt Penny's prize white wisteria that she had trained to climb the arched trellis! Now it was gone completely chopped down, pulled out of the trees and off the arbor. Aunt Penny blanched and gasped, for where there

had been a flower-draped archway, there was just the little bare trellis sitting in the woods. Pressure marks where the vine had folded its way in and out, were empty indentations now. The ground was freshly raked and all the refuse piled high just beyond the path. The blooms from the wisteria covered the top like a funeral bier.

Aunt Penny folded her arms and she heaved a big sigh. She said, " Surely if Donny had looked carefully he would have be able to tell that wisteria was not a weed" But there it was. She sighed again. She seemed soften a bit as she looked around at us standing there- Donny crestfallen, Bradley and Jim looking impish and Cindy and me trying so hard to look sad.

It's amazing how someone else's upset, mistake, or misfortune suddenly makes your own all right. The pit in my stomach was gone- life was good again.

There wasn't much else to say, so we planted the ginkgo and prayed for it grow tall and make shade in the summer and beautiful golden leaves in the autumn.

That night there was a summer storm, a violent thunderstorm that knocked the electricity out. With a crack of thunder, I got out of bed and looked out the window, down into the garden and across the L shape of the house to the master suite. The rain was lashing against the side of the house in sheets when suddenly, with a flash of lightening I saw a small man standing besides the sun dial, right in the middle of the garden. He was very small, no more than four feet tall, dressed in old-fashioned clothes. His pants were brown knickers and he wore a shirt covered with a vest made of bird feathers. On his head he wore a funny looking hat made of big leaves. He had the most delightful expression on his face- he seemed pleased with himself- he practically glowed! And listen to this, he had this long cloth bag hung over his shoulder. I was fascinated to learn what he might have in it.

Now the rain was pelting down- he was getting drenched, but it didn't seem to bother him at all. He was looking in the direction of the master suite and dancing all around. I followed his gaze and saw, to my further amazement, Aunt Penny standing in the window dressed in her long nightgown, her dark hair flowing over her shoulders. She was smiling and clapping her hands.

Of course I wanted to call Cindy to see, but I couldn't take my eyes off of the scene long enough to even wake her. So you just have to take my word for it. Here is what he did: the little man took several small trees and saplings out of his **bag and was** showing them to Aunt Penny. The man then laid them on the lawn, took off his hat and with a wide swoop gave her a bow, turned three times and disappeared into the dark of the woods.

I know it sounds fantastic, but that is what I saw. Now, if you go in the woods and see a tree with a hollow, I advise you to inquire and ask if Mr. Gnome is home. Maybe you'll see him, but if not, then perhaps he's shopping- for treasures. And when treasures appear in your life, just when you least expect them; you never know, they may have been brought to you by Mr. Gnome.