

that he was considering suicide. Julie persuaded him to come home for dinner. He lived with Julie and Evelyn for the next forty years.

Since Julie was off at sea much of this time, Evelyn's parents were always at some pains to point out the separate bedrooms. As if we couldn't tell a raven from a writing desk! Evelyn wore two wedding rings, one from each man, one on her right hand and one on her left.

Then there was the opulent Hollywood wedding of another remote cousin. This happened in the 1930s when my mother was about sixteen years old. She wore an Alice-blue gown and danced with Lew Ayres. The bride and groom left in a hail of rice and roses. Later that night, a phone call: The honeymoon had revealed the groom to be a woman. Love did not conquer this difficulty; the marriage was over before it began. My mother still remembered this evening as one of the most glamorous events she'd ever attended.

There were stories of earthquakes and accidents. Grandma Hazel's everyday china had been acquired from the Santa Fe Railroad Company when the train on which she'd been traveling west had terrifyingly derailed, and, never one to miss a chance, she collected her set—the California poppy design—from the wreckage. There were stories of illness and hardship. My mother had contracted polio at the age of three; it's what brought the family to California, the hope of better medical care.

There were many, many stories about my grandmother. The time she went to Japan, mistaking it for Hong Kong. The time she and Grandpa took a cruise and she got hives and was confined to her cabin for several days, emerging finally to hear at infuriating length from the other women on the boat how lucky she was to be married to Grandpa who'd apparently been charming the socks off everyone in her absence. A picture of health up until the day of her death, my grandmother put sugar on everything, including celery. When she ate cookies, she buttered the tops and sprinkled them with more sugar.

It was Trudy's idea that we put together a small book for our daughters and entitle it *Sugar Your Cookies*. Each of us contributed five pieces of life advice. Our different personalities come through pretty clearly in this collection. From my practical cousin Gayle: Never leave the house without a sweater. From my inspirational cousin Trudy: Choose a career that nourishes your heart instead of your

pocketbook (advice she has rethought over the years as one daughter became a yoga instructor and the other an artist). There I am, an animal lover to the core, telling everyone not to kill spiders.

Three years prior to this trip, my mother had been diagnosed with leukemia. She'd been nearly symptomless for the first two years and then managing well on regular transfusions. She seemed to be keeping up with everyone. My mother lived in La Jolla; she swam often in the ocean. But on this weekend, in the hotel pool, she went under and didn't resurface. I watched it happen.

It's a terrible thing to know about yourself, that you are no good in a crisis. I'm not the person you want when quick action is required—I will be staring down at you, frozen in horror. The person you want is my cousin Sally. It was Sally who dove in and pulled my mother back up into the air.

Her own weakness had shocked my mother and it shocked me. Our trip was not over, but I was unable to recover the festive, familial mood. This was the moment when I finally understood that my mother was dying and I think it was that moment for her as well.

My aunts and my cousins have talked many times of repeating our reunion, and including our daughters this time. We think it's their turn to put out a new edition of *Sugar your Cookies*—advice for a new generation from a new generation. I think it will happen some day, but it hasn't happened yet. Twenty years later, my mother's absence is still too great a matter.

Karen Joy Fowler is the author of six novels and three short story collections. Fowler and her husband, who have two grown children and seven grandchildren, live in Santa Cruz, California.

PHYLLIS HERFIELD

Saint in Gold Dress, 2004

Oil on wood panel, 10 x 8 in



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