

LEWIS WATTS

RCA Shiny Door, 2018
Archival print, 36 x 36



COURTESY THE ARTIST

RENEE C. WINTER

A Golden Ticket

Finding lost relatives
at a family reunion

My father's house was off-limits. Invitations to visit ceased when I was nine. The house stood firm in my memory, taunting me like a cookie jar on the top shelf with no step stool in sight. I recalled every brick and feature: its licorice-black shutters, chimney top hat, tic-tac-toe garage door. The expansive front picture window dared me to press my face against its cold, hard surface and peek inside. I imagined seeing my father with his new family, playing Clue, laughing at Sid Caesar's *Show of Shows*, eating bowls of chocolate ice cream. Things he no longer did with us. Surely if someone caught my gaze, I'd be invited in. So I memorized the bus route to my father's house from the one-bedroom apartment I shared with my mom and sister. But I never made the trip. What if my father saw me and looked away? He had put himself off-limits too.

* * *

Decades later, on the afternoon of my father's funeral, the front door to the house was wide open, like an outstretched arm. I'd mourned his loss since childhood, but Mother never permitted me to speak my grief aloud. It nested in my core, clawed at the hardened shell of rage that contained it. When I learned my father had died, I decided to let my grief fly into the open. I'd mourn in public, return to his house after thirty years to sit shiva, a daughter's obligation under Jewish law. First, I would go to my father's funeral. Alone.

No black-cushioned front-row seat was saved for me. No one pinned a torn black ribbon to my chest or offered me a mourner's prayer card. The rabbi did not mention me or my mother or my sister, only the new family who had taken our places. I stood behind rows of metal chairs facing an open grave, my shoe prints in the moist June grass the only evidence of my presence. Mourners shoveled piles of damp dirt onto my father's casket, each scoop sounding a soft plop as it landed, mixing with the mumbled prayers and the sniffled tears. Some of the tears were mine. Afterward I joined the parade of cars heading to my father's house.

The redbrick colonial loomed before me. An oak tree stood tall, protecting only a portion of the massive parched lawn. Gray-haired, stout men walked up the uneven concrete path, dabbing hankies to their sweaty necks and holding the hands of women in black and rhinestones.

My mother, who cha-chaed and tangoed at many a singles' ball in tight skirts and high heels, had been outraged that my father had married such an unattractive woman.

My father's contemporaries, they muttered that sixty-six was too young to die.

I passed blooming clumps of tiny yellow flowers and reached the front step. The living room drapes were parted, exposing the picture window and the six-inch crack meandering toward the center of the large pane of glass. Stepping onto the foyer's checkered linoleum, I half expected an alarm to be triggered. Neither panic nor greeting ensued. I avoided the eyes of those milling around but couldn't escape the wafts of lilac perfume, the swirl of chatter, the stir of guests heading to the dining table where deli and dessert platters beckoned.

Pearl, my father's second wife, stood at the end of the hallway. Guests crowded around her, kissing her rouged cheeks, mumbling words of condolence. A dark dress covered Pearl's bulky torso. Large fun-house glasses distorted her eyes; tightly permed brown hair framed her face. The strings of her black tie shoes were stretched to almost bursting; they would never have made it to the dance floor. My mother, who cha-chaed and tangoed at many a singles' ball in tight skirts and high heels, had been outraged that my father had married such an unattractive woman. And

so soon. "He married her for her money," she hissed. No. I decided long ago that he married Pearl for this house. With its grassy backyard, three bedrooms, and dining table heaped with food, it could have been the set for *Father Knows Best*, the 1950s TV sitcom I loved as a kid, where children and parents lived under the same roof and ate dinner together each night.

Though Pearl didn't belong on a dance floor, she shone in the kitchen. During the brief time of my childhood when I was included in my father's post-divorce life, I'd watch her knead dough for challah or spin eggs, butter, and sugar into sweet desserts for Friday night Shabbat meals. I hoped she'd let me help her. Mother never baked anything. I wanted Pearl to pull me to her cushiony bosom, feel the warmth from the oven, smell the cinnamon sugar that dusted her full apron. But I never got my wish. Although Pearl made space for the nieces she was raising after their parents died in a car crash, she never made room for me. I remember her voice in the background of my father's long-ago phone calls, prompting him to hurry up and finish. Pearl was the supporting actor in our drama who helped set the scene that enabled my father to write my sister and me out of the script.

I stood watching as visitors lined up to see her. No one was seeing me, even when they stared right at me. My father's obituary described him as a "beloved husband," "beloved brother," "beloved uncle," but "father" was bare, exposing the message: his children had not loved him. No one there saw me as the little girl waiting for a father, who never returned, and for birthday cards that never came. To them, I was the prodigal daughter who'd arrived too late to make amends. Is that what Pearl told their friends? Were they whispering about me? Maybe I should leave.

Then I saw my aunt.

Bluma was an easy name to recall. It may have been short for something else or a nickname from childhood that stuck. I didn't know, having no access to or memory of my father's family lore. Aunt Bluma's voice was memorable too, thick and soft like velvet, if velvet had a sound. Her hair was dark brown and straight, just like my sister's.

"Renee, come sit," she stretched out her hand, motioning me toward a flowered sofa. Had she been waiting, hoping for my arrival? Bluma's cheeks were soft and pink, like cotton candy.

"It's good to see you," she greeted, as if we were picking up after a separation of only days or weeks, rather than decades. "How are you? And your daughter?"

"Fine. Thank you," I answered. Did she know about my recent divorce too? Maybe she had kept track of me all these years somehow. Perhaps my aunt had actually missed me, cared about me. I wish she'd have reached out to me during my childhood years. Any communication from her during my father's long absence would have diminished my sense of rejection, like fan mail to a struggling artist.

I sat down next to her. The cherry scent of Jergens greeted me. "Yes, we're fine. Stephanie's bat mitzvah is in the fall. What about your family?" I realized I had no clue about them. Maybe I had more cousins. I leaned closer to hear her above the scraping of chairs unfolding, set up to accommodate the increasing number of visitors.

"We have four children," Bluma told me. "Surely you remember Rosalie? She's about your age. Or maybe she's closer to your sister's."

Wow. Four cousins. I could have had sleepovers with them, could have attended their birthday parties. I searched the room. Rosalie might be the young woman in the blue sundress offering coffee. Or perhaps the brunette distributing prayer books. I remembered nothing about her. As though I'd conjured up an amnesia long ago, a protective shield to keep me from feeling the magnitude of all I'd lost when my father left.

"All but one live out of town," Bluma continued, cataloguing her kids' locations, spouses, careers, children. As she talked, the family members piled up, like a tower of chocolate cupcakes I craved that was growing so tall; I feared reaching for one would topple the entire stack. Was it too late to claim my cousins?

"Beautiful. What's she doing this summer?" Bluma handed back the wallet-size photo of my daughter. My aunt's fingers were long and slender, like mine. I wondered if she played the piano, as I'd always wanted to. Was this newly resurrected aunt as curious about me? She seemed eager to fill in the long gap of time spent apart. My father's death may have emboldened her. Or maybe she was just being polite.

"Tennis, gymnastic camps, the usual." I tucked the photo of my curly-haired, brown-eyed teen back into my purse. "And we're going to Israel next month on a bat mitzvah trip."

Four cousins. I could have had sleepovers with them, could have attended their birthday parties.

The sofa cushion jostled as someone sat down next to me, paper plate filled with corned beef, coleslaw. I scooted closer to Bluma, wanting to shut out the others, the chewing, the chattering. Just the two of us mattered: an aunt and a niece, catching up. I relaxed into the cushions. My father must have sat in this very spot. Newspaper in hand. Perhaps chomping on a cigar? Had he ever thought of me? Photos in the room were covered, as dictated by Jewish mourning practices. I wondered if a picture of me was somewhere under the white protective cloth. No. Pearl wouldn't have allowed it.

"Really, Renee! Israel? How wonderful. Here, I must show you this." Bluma lifted a hefty purse to her lap. "We have relatives in Israel," she said, her voice rippled with excitement.

We, did she say *we*? Was she including me? She thrust a white envelope at me, with names and addresses written in black wavy letters. The writer had carefully crafted each line, each loop. The return address read "Aharon Winder, Ramat Gan, Israel." Winder?

"It's the Polish pronunciation of *Winter*. We have cousins in Tel Aviv." That *we* again. "Our cousin's son is getting married. Here's the wedding invitation." She offered a quick sketch of the family tree. A whole clan had grown up in Israel.

"No one in our family has met any of them." She leaned toward me, flushed. "Perhaps you can. Here, keep this."

It would be wonderful if you and Stephanie visited on your trip.”

I clutched the thick white envelope in my fingers. My golden ticket, it provided access to my father’s family. Would they welcome me? Maybe my aunt was trying to make up for not coming to our rescue all those years ago, for not dragging my father to my door. For not insisting he invite us back to his house. This house.

“Thank you, Aunt Bluma. Thank you. I will. We will.” I wanted to hold her hand, keep her close. Hear more stories; ask more questions.

Her husband, Sam, an aged Clark Gable look-alike, approached. “Bluma, it’s been a long day. We should go.” He turned and smiled at me. My Uncle Sam. I reached out and hugged him, not wanting to let go. But it was time for me to leave too. Maybe no one else there would talk to me.

“Thank you so very much.” I leaned over and kissed Bluma’s cheek. The words seemed inadequate for the gift she’d given me. “I’m going to go now, too. And I definitely will contact him,” waving the white envelope. “Take care. Bye.” Would I see her again?

I walked through the living room toward the open front door, careful not to jostle the lingering guests. No one said a word. Pearl was nowhere in sight. Reaching the hallway, I placed the wedding invitation in my purse and closed the door behind me.

* * *

A month later Stephanie and I played on a beach in Tel Aviv, tossing balls, dashing into waves, building castles. At twilight we sat on the sand and enjoyed Pavarotti live in concert. We did all of this with family. My family. The Winders.

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Bluma, I later learned, is Yiddish for “flower.”

Renee C. Winter’s essays have been published in *Exposition Review*, *Qu*, *phren-Z*, and *Coachella Magazine*, as well as in *Tales of our Lives: Reflection Pond*.

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