When she was 12, her parents bought her a Persian cat. She loved the cat, whose fur was so long and so soft, who rolled on her back in such a laconic fashion, and made such endearing noises. She gave the cat a name, and sometimes the cat would answer to it.

But the cat had ringworm, a thing discovered only when the girl herself became badly sick with what proved ringworm. The parents, perhaps on medical advice, had the cat put down without hesitation. For the girl, now pink with health, there would be no cats for some years.

Her hair was, as the cat's had been, thick and red. Genuinely red—in fact auburn. She was, inevitably, beautiful, as a teenager and a young woman. She wore in those years her thick, curly, auburn hair long, and it surrounded her head and swam on the tops of her shoulders. Had she been thin, she would have been a precise exemplar of the ectomorphic neurasthenia so specific in southern women, so attractive to so many. But she was not thin—she was rather somewhat buxom. So only in the beauty itself of her early years did she offer any physical analogue to what was becoming her character.

Later, in either stubborn misunderstanding of taste, simple repression, or an effort to scar off her husband, she wore the hair shorter, at first in a bowl shape that in a less attractive woman would have been frumpy, later so short that its shape was merely that of her head. By then the hair was no longer red or even brown, but largely grey.

As a girl, in the days of the cat, she had been simply unhappy. Her spectacular log of academic and social accomplishments, her procession of dates never off a step, weekends at the nearby beaches, mastery of the arts of self presentation and, to a lesser extent, wit, were no match for the xenophobia of her tiny swamp father, for her mother's loathing of his origins and impeccable daily character assassinations of the man, undetectable to all but the family itself, and for the easy successes in the boy-scout, little league, hunting and fishing arenas of her brother, a man slightly taller than the father and one year older than herself.

In short, the brother got whatever benefits there were. His wartime decorations, won as a paratrooper who never saw combat but sustained injuries owed to his personal ineptitude, gained a place on the family mantle denied to the demented and interminable sequence of awards she won at the academically glamorous university she went off to, one day, on a train, accompanied by three trunks and one photograph that stayed in them, of herself in debutante gear—the one true pleasure she ever gave her mother.

By this time her teeth were straight. Orthodontics had remedied the incaution of her brother, who at age five had dropped her on her face in the first of many acts she would not forgive him. Her mind was resolute. Her obsessive machine-steel perfectionism in place. Her goals mapped with a scale of one inch to the mile. Her dedication to style, pitched off the side of the wagon. The one glimmer she had ever seen of absolute pleasure, extinguished for life. Her husband, rather quickly identified and soon on board, a man whose life would be devoted to errors in her eyes, to a mission of continuously loading her into whatever basket would contain her and her many disappointments, and to rare moments of small delight away from her.

Of their bedroom practices or lack of them, their child, their trips, cars, bunglings and successes, it is not appropriate to speak here.

She attended the symphony. She learned a little about the dance. She endured her career. On the days when the New Yorker arrived, she seemed happy. She learned to cook at an advanced age.

She always had a cat or two. She loved them with an ardor she showed nowhere else, but she never allowed herself more than two. Excess had never been a possibility for her, and by the time she died, she had won a kind of reasonableness.
INFORMATION

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