

Robbie Pfeufer Kahn

Family Strut

Maybe because I'm often here alone, families on vacation seem to me displays of power. For the moment I have my own. A striking couple in their midtwenties, my son Levin and his fiancée Simone attract peoples' regard while I go unnoticed, having passed into the invisible realm. My feminist side finds the change not entirely unwelcome after decades of unwanted gazes. Like other families we order slithery shiny oysters on the half-shell at Larsen's fish market in Menemsha, and sit on the picnic bench outside to eat them. On the wharf where Levin once stood as a child, young boys drop weighted fish lines from armatures of wood, hoping to catch squid. I watch them, remembering the beginning time as a single mother, that pared down feeling I had as he and I stood on the damp gray wharf where more abundant families also gathered for early night squid fishing.

This evening Levin's dad, Eric, joins us for Levin's Bastille Day birthday, and now I even have what appears to be a husband by my side. Like a family of hunter gatherers—a heritage contemporary witch Starhawk claims accounts for modern-day consumer browsing—we wander the streets of Oak Bluffs. Unlike hunter gatherers, in this warm summer evening our browsing seems dazed and aimless, kind of daffy, salt-water taffy daffy. Not even walking in a straight line up and down the streets, we look idly in clothes shops, go into the fudge store eyeing with a mixture of desire and revulsion huge irregular congealed chunks cut from the recently created lava flow of fudge—strawberry, pistachio, chocolate and vanilla. I engage in these pursuits though I have no money for clothes nor can I eat fudge or the earlier raw oysters. I chit-chat with Levin's father about the aging process. We agree that the impulse to reproduce drives human behavior and are glad to be free of it, though I note to myself that he recently had a child with his second wife. We almost walk arm in arm.

At Oak Bluffs' "Flying Horses," the oldest carousel in the country, the newly restored horses, nostrils flaring, glass eyes gleaming with readiness to plunge forward to the music, draw my attention. But no one shares my interest to sit astride a gaily painted horse and feel the soft salt air blow against my face as the carousel slowly turns to tinny music. Twenty years ago Eric photographed Levin and me astride the original, hundred-year old unrenovated horses, their once-thick manes thin, coats chipped, glass eyes clouded with scratches. We each are wearing Flying Horses T shirts, green as new leaves. In a blur of motion Levin, then five, looks back at me, his fresh, bare arm extended as if touch worked the way eyes do. My then long hair streaming, I reciprocate his effort and belief, though my gray horse races ever behind his white one.

Now, I allow Levin's tall form to herd me good naturedly into the video corridor, a space so narrow that I begin to breathe more shallowly than usual. "It's okay, mom," Levin says in a kindly manner looking at me with his gray-green eyes. His expression—as if no debris obstructed those sea-colored depths, allowing a clear regard of the present moment—draws me out of myself. I am used to him being aware of my moods even without knowing their source, in this case my fear from childhood of being shut in. "Nothing bad will happen," he adds, putting his large hand on my shoulder, the smile folds under his eyes signaling wellbeing. Way at the back of the constricted space is a pinball game "Twilight Zone." Delighted I've never played pinballs, Levin encourages me as I flip the stumpy lever that propels the ball up the board to make lights blink and flash, and unleash popping and beeping sounds. Except for my first try, I can't keep my wits and the silver ball rolls down the trough between the impotent levers. Eric and Simone, who had been looking at another game, rejoin us and we leave the carousel building.

Eric had come down to the Vineyard on a motorcycle he bought in his late forties, a vintage BSA, stylish as a 1950s car. Earlier that day we followed him in a car down a bumpy dirt road. A top-heavy shiny black helmet protected his head but Birkenstock sandals covered his naked feet showing his graceful ankles, while his thin shirt and slacks billowed in the wind. A tall well-made man of six foot three just like his son, he nonetheless seemed frail and quaint to me on the cycle, dressed so lightly and giving left and right hand turn signals with a certain stiff righteousness as if to say, "These are legitimate signals, even if out of date."

Out again in the crowded streets, I can't help returning in my mind to a game, which consisted of shooting lizard aliens, in a video palace we'd visited before the carousel. Watching Levin and Simone shoot pistols at the menacing figures, I suddenly remembered my very early childhood drawings, full of mysterious fleshy v's which could be hearts or swollen labia transgressively touched by a grownup. In later drawings, the fleshy v's became pistols. The pistols appeared in recurrent images of shooting and dying cowboys, their horses weeping over them the way Achilles' immortal horses hung their

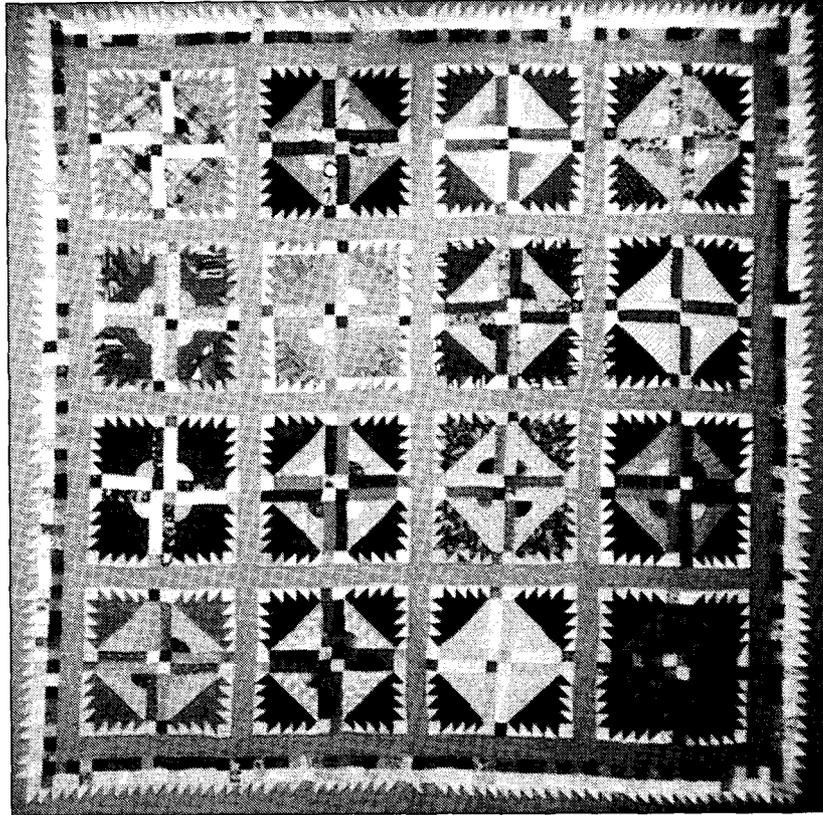
beautiful heads so that their manes streamed down, weeping in lamentation over the dead Patrocles. When Levin offered that I try a round, I declined. I now realize that I'd refused to shoot out of a fear that I might really "get into it," as the saying goes, and disrupt the image everyone has of me (or I that imagine them having) as unsuited to these riotous acts. I wish that I had pushed myself to do it, feeling too much like my mother who declines carousels and swings because they make her dizzy. I want to be able to shoot like Simone, to be tough and sexy at the same time. But I don't ask that we return to the video palace, and go on acting old and momish.

Eric and I leave the two young ones, who run into a friend, agreeing to meet at a dress shop. When Levin and Simone arrive, Simone tries on a tight beige and black floor-length dress Levin picks out for her. Size four at the most. I admire her girl-woman body, shiny black hair, soft smooth face. According to family lore Simone is twenty-fourth generation to Ghengis Khan and she delights in the "parallel" between Khan and Kahn. Though tall and slender, I've always felt out of scale. My generation had to stand in "size places" in grammar school, and it remains true that our culture expects women to not take up too much space. Some commentators associate eating disorders with women's attempts to ease their emergence into the public sphere by appearing diminutive. "I love her taste in clothes," Levin says, leafing through the dress rack, which is a taste for the simple in hues of beige and black. There I am in my faded jeans cutaways and baggy tank top, Birkenstocks and rubber sock around my sprained ankle feeling like a fifty-five year old ten year old. Not at home in this world of slinky dresses. I finger a baggy white linen jacket, something I could imagine trying on without humiliation, and check out the earrings, an item I know about. "Do you like hats?" Simone asks trying on a tight-fitting straw hat with a little round brim. "I like my green baseball hat," I say which is the only hat I wear except for winter ones.

Since Eric treated us to dinner, I buy ice cream for everyone at Mad Martha's. Leaving the store, Levin says unexpectedly, "I think I'm done with ice cream. It's like drinking a pint of half n' half, or cream. I like sorbets now. I can get ices in my neighborhood on the upper West Side, mango or coconut." Clearly New York, where he recently moved, offers opportunities not available in the Cambridge, Massachusetts of his childhood or in Burlington, Vermont, where I now live. "That sounds great," I say, feeling a part of our life together discarded as casually as an unfinished sugar cone. Long ago when Levin was little, we ate a two-toned Softie in Oak Bluffs waiting for the ferry. It tasted so sweet and cool in the heat rising off the sidewalks that we got a second one and the woman who served us said, "I never saw people eat ice cream so fast."

Though I don't eat ice cream myself anymore because of my health, and though the evening is warm, I observe Levin withdraw from a communion food related to the primordial milk he once took from me, which I so gladly gave. Rubbing my bare arms, which were suddenly cold, I wonder whether all the dazed browsing families have similar invisible moments of attachment and loss,

whether any other person refused to shoot lizard aliens imagining it would disrupt the family image of her. Or did she dare that night to break free, the way Levin did of ice cream? In the light of street lamps and shop windows the people I see wandering the soft night look simply content, as I'm sure we did, Oak Bluffing like anyone else.



Judy Martin, "Family Life," 1989. Bear's Paw Pattern. Recycled family clothing, cotton machine-pieced and hand-quilted embroidered journal on white cotton.

"My family's names, along with these words, "art, a good mom, family life, fragments, a diary, joining, connecting, power, moments captured, confusing" are quilted into this piece's sashes and borders." —Judy Martin