



THE MATTRESS

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I look around me and I laugh. I am caught by the interplay of light and color upon the chandelier. From long ago I see a child's triumph. In one dangling crystal I see her face . . .

I remember the hatred that made my eyes burn and sting when I gazed around the two-room tenement apartment where I lived with my family. How I despised those ugly walls which had at one time been calcimined and fresh, but now were fingernail deep with dirt and grease. I would spend many hours digging into the grime, then cleaning my nails upon my skirt. I liked to sit by the window and gaze at the few trees that gave a touch of life to the otherwise bleak and barren sidewalks below. My view was usually obstructed by the grime-caked window screens, so I developed a trick of inserting a straight pin into the grime and wiggling it until one of the clogged holes came clear. This would go on, hole after hole, hour after hour, until my fingers tired of the work. Then I would stand back and look with pride through an eight-by-five inch square to the outside.

There were two hideous common toilets used by fifty-four people housed in nine apartments. My own family numbered eleven. Then there was the rat-infested monster called the garbage bin. It was our misfortune that both toilets and the garbage bin were right beside our apartment. The garbage bin was two stories high and accommodated the refuse of the entire building. The collectors came about once every three or four months. The toilets were to be cleaned once a month. The arrangement was that the tenants who lived directly below us were to clean them in exchange for rent. But as it happened, they were cleaned less often than the garbage was collected. The bowls were always clogged with the newspaper we used for tissue and there was always waste from the effluent on the floor. Being shoeless I entered those slimy places with dread. Worse yet, the ill-used doors were without latch.

There were these things and many others, but in my eyes there was nothing that could set my heart to pounding with such force, nor my blood rushing with such velocity, nor my whole being filled with such fierce hatred, than the sight of the family mattress. It was about six inches thick and six feet long. The outer material had at one time been white with blue stripes. It was an ordinary mattress, although it had doubtless had a harder

life than most. I don't recall when my family first acquired it, but it is safe to assume it was given us by someone more fortunate than we.

In the kitchen there were four pieces of furniture: a table, a wood stove, a cupboard forever filled with cockroaches, and a stand with an enamel wash basin. In the other room there was a convertible sofa, two chests of drawers, and the mattress, which at night was laid flat on the floor for all those who could not fit on the sofa. Besides my parents, there were my four sisters, four brothers, and myself.

During the day the mattress was rolled up and placed against the wall. In this position it appeared innocent enough, provided no one came too close. But it was at night that the true character of that infernal mattress could be observed.

To begin with, it was no longer a blue and white striped design. It was almost solid black. This was primarily because of the hundreds of bed bugs my mother had squashed against it. The other mothers in the neighborhood spent hours pulling lice individually from their daughters' hair. If the louse was alive at the time of its capture, it would make a little clicking sound when the woman squashed it between her nails. But my mother was different. She spent her time squashing the bed bugs against the mattress. I could never bring myself to do it in the daytime. But I know I did it at night, because my arms and legs were streaked with blood when I awakened.

I had always believed the mattress to be most sanitary for I had often witnessed my mother when not busy with bugs, pouring boiling water around the edges of the mattress where she believed the bugs nested. At these times the apartment was filled with evil odors. But even this was better than the times she doused the mattress with kerosene. Food and drink had also been spilled on it, since when rolled up it was used for sitting. But I never sat on it.

At night the shaping of the mattress required some skill. I say shaping, but perhaps the word is reshaping. Every night there was the ritual of rearranging the matted cotton lumps to suit our bodies. It was rather difficult, for there were so many bodies and so little cotton. Most of the lumps were pushed to both ends of the mattress and were used as pillows, while the middle part was flat on the floor. This was all right for the older people; they could rest their heads on the lumps and muffle out the sounds of the rats chasing each other around the bedroom floor. But I was one of the younger ones, and although I was cuddled and half-way warm, my position was right in the middle of the mattress, between two lumps. So I spent many sleepless nights. My hatred grew as I lay awake listening to the rats play.

Partly to lull myself to sleep, but mainly because it gave me comfort and much pleasure, I used to conjure dreams about lovely beds with marvelously luxurious blankets. Always in my dreams, while lying upon the sweetly fragrant and fabulous bed, I would fall asleep and wet the bed. Never were there scoldings or beatings, but instead strong and exceedingly gentle hands would clothe me in warm, soft garments and tuck me into a dry bed more luxurious and desirable than the other. This was repeated over and over again, and I taxed my brain trying to imagine a more won-

derful bed than the last. Inevitably I would fall asleep, and inevitably I would wake up cold and wet.

One morning I awoke to find the stench unbearable. Looking down, I discovered that there were worms crawling in and out of the mattress through some of the holes in its lining. As it happened, my brother and I were the only ones home. Together, hurriedly, we tied kerchiefs around our faces, and bound cloths about our arms and hands. Then we rolled the mattress up and tied it with some rope. Gagging, we dragged that odious burden across the apartment and out into the open. Our intention was to throw it into the garbage bin. This gruesome project we could not carry through, however, for the mouth of the bin was too small. After some consideration, we decided to take it back into the apartment and fling it out the window into the alley below.

We were just children, and the mattress was very heavy. After a long struggle, brushing sweat from our eyes, we flung it out the window. There was a thud. It bounced only once.

The next morning we awoke in a cheerful mood even though we had slept upon the floor with nothing but newspaper for padding. Immediately my brother and I went to the window to look into the alley so that we might rest our eyes upon that hateful mattress and feel triumphant again. We looked, in spite of the nausea it evoked and dreaded nightmares it was to give me for many years. But as we looked down, we could not see it. The mattress was gone. We burst out laughing. Oh, how we laughed! All that morning long we laughed, and that night, huddled upon newspapers, we laughed again and again. We laughed so much that our stomachs hurt and tears came to our eyes. Someone had watched as we struggled with it and finally heaved it out the window. We laughed because someone had actually coveted our mattress.