

Tin's Grand Entrance

We called her Tin, and she had been old all our lives. She was already in her late sixties when my Mother and her brothers were kids, and christened her “Tin,” abbreviating her name—as young children are wont to do—from Tante Lillian to Ta-lin to Tin. The nickname stuck. Now, at age ninety-eight, and the last living member of her generation, Tin’s arrival created more excitement than Thanksgiving itself.

Mother had inherited the pivotal role of hosting family gatherings, and Tin was always our most honored guest. According to her, timing the meal was everything, especially when preparing a turkey that could easily dry out if overcooked. She had me, my brothers, and all my cousins standing at the ready as she barked out marching orders. “Louis, you get the doughnut cushion and put it on the sofa. Marie, go stand by the screen door, but don’t open it until Tin’s on the landing. Laura Ann, please help your sisters set the table.”

Even for subtropical South Louisiana, this was a particularly hot Thanksgiving day. Mother had all the windows open and the attic fan running full blast. We escaped the kitchen's heat by staying in the living room, enjoying the modest relief that the air's movement offered.

When Uncle Billy pulled up to the curb in his brand new 1962 turquoise and white Chevy Bel Air, we cheered. Uncle Tommy, who still fancied himself Tin's favorite, raced outside to open the car door. We rarely saw Uncle Billy, who lived near Tin in Opelousas. He was really fat. His whole body jiggled, which made all of us kids giggle. We watched as he managed to squeeze himself out of the driver's seat, stretch his arms above his head, and groan loudly trying to disguise a fart. He waddled slowly around the car's gleaming chrome grill, his timing planned to let Tommy do the work of helping Tin out of his car.

Tin's feet and legs emerged first. Half-stockings rolled down on top of dark leather shoes made us snicker, as did the shoes themselves, which laced like men's wingtips but with thick high heels. A good view of her purplish swollen ankles, however, wiped away all but the very youngest children's smirks.

Tin's plain face with its prominent nose and pasty complexion had never worn lipstick or make-up, and her pin-straight, clamshell-colored hair had always been pulled tightly into a bun at the back of her head. She fulfilled the classic role of a maiden great-aunt exquisitely, even down to rumors of having a fortune stashed away. The fuss made over her holiday visits informed each generation that she was special and to be revered. Never was that truer than at Christmas, when Tin would bring each of us envelopes con-

taining cards with a painting of the blessed Baby Jesus in His manger, and a five dollar bill tucked inside. She wrote, "Be good. Santa knows if you're not," and signed every one, "With love," in a very shaky hand.

At last Tin's face appeared, framed by the door of the car. Billy joined Tommy and, together, they delicately supported her frail body, placing her boney hands on the white handles of her walker. Once she took hold, she strained to push her frame upright, but had little force and hardly stood any taller.

Our excitement grew as Tin took her first steps forward and became more fully illuminated in the gold afternoon light. "Tin's here, Tin's here," my little brother Jeffrey recited, the four-year-old jumping up and down with glee as though announcing the arrival of Santa and his sleigh.

"Not yet, she isn't," I heard Mother mutter under her breath.

Marie cracked open the screen door to get a better look.

"Marie Louise, you close that door right now! You're letting the mosquitoes in. Tin's not even at the banquette."

Tin had only taken a few more steps when we heard her squeak and come to a complete halt. "What was that!" she warbled when the neighbor's Siamese cat darted across her path.

"A rat," Billy teased. He covered his mouth and laughed into his pudgy hand.

"Was not," Tin replied sternly. "It was too pretty to be a rat."

Tommy drew near enough to smell the camphor she rubbed on her chest. “Don’t you worry none,” he whispered, “It weren’t no rat. It was just the big ol’ cat that lives next door.”

“Good Lord, no!” Tin said as she slowly raised both hands and covered her eyes. “I’m even more scared of cats than I am of men!”

“Tell you what,” Tommy said, a wry smile curling his lips. “We’ll start by givin’ you a man and see how that goes. Then we’ll try working our way up to cats. How’s that sound?”

Even Tin chuckled.

Tommy put his hand out, pointing the way and inviting her to continue forward. Small beads of sweat on his forehead and upper lip glistened, and rivulets trickled from the top of his head, dampening his collar. It wasn’t simply the heat; walking with Tin wasn’t merely a stroll but a responsibility, requiring timing and choreography.

Tin moved her right leg forward, then stopped before following with her left, which she dragged, the legacy of a small stroke she’d suffered years earlier. She required time to catch her breath between steps. Her breathing came in huffs; her cheeks puffing in and out like a bellows as air whistled through her half-open mouth and over her dentures.

“Doin’ good. Keep going,” Billy said, as he urged her on. I could almost hear Billy’s stomach growl. He loved Thanksgiving and Mother’s savory oyster-dressing. Called it ambrosia. He said he craved it even more than the ice cream pies she made for dessert. Each year, he’d beg her for the recipe, hoping to make it himself, but she refused, telling him it was her claim to the crown.

“Where’s Tin now?” Mother asked as she squared off place settings and slid saucers under the three different kinds of cranberry sauce.

“At the bottom of the steps!” Laura Ann cried.

“Gracious!” Mother exclaimed, and chuckled. “It’ll be December before we eat!”

One step. Stop. Wait. Breathe. Another step. Stop. Wait. Breathe. “Oowee,” Tin groaned as she made incremental progress. Uncle Tommy and Billy kept glancing at each other, trying hard to sequence their movements so as not to rush her or to hold the soft flesh of her arms too tightly.

“Okay, Marie,” we kids at the window yelled. “Open the door!”

Little Marie pushed on the door. Louis repositioned the walker in front of Tin. Uncle Billy and Tommy put her hands on the walker’s handles, and stood like guards on either side of her. As Tin approached the threshold, Mother opened the screen door all the way, smiled, and said, “So glad to see you.”

Tin returned Mother’s smile between gulps of air. Tommy slowly rolled her walker over the threshold and led her into the living room.

“We’ve got a place all ready for you,” Mother said as she walked over and plumped the doughnut pillow.

Tin stopped, requested her handbag, and fumbled with the clasp. “Who wants a butterscotch?” Her voice quavered as her wrinkled hand retrieved a few hard candies wrapped in yellow cellophane. The younger children circled around, bouncing eagerly. Tin patted the tops of their heads with a flat palm, her fingers rigid and extended.

“Let’s wait until after dinner, shall we?” Mother said, clearing the path. The children groaned as they stepped aside. “You wouldn’t want to spoil your appetites.” Mother placed a hand underneath Tin’s elbow. “Come all the way in. It’s cooler in here, and no bugs.” She motioned to the kids to close the screen door. “At least there weren’t any before.”

Tap, clunk. Tap, clunk. With Mother’s guidance, Tin shuffled across the hardwood floor toward the sofa. When she got there, Louis received her walker and parked it. Uncle Tommy extended his hands, took hers, and helped her sidestep to her seat on the sofa. Then Uncle Billy and Louis put their hands under her arms and slowly lowered her.

“There now,” Mother said with a sigh as she secured the screen door herself. Everyone in the room, from oldest to youngest, sensed the relief they heard in her voice.

Tin swallowed hard, several times. It took her a few moments to regulate her breathing before she was able to speak. Once she had, she raised her watery grey eyes and looked at Mother who was still wearing an apron. Then, in a thin, wavering voice, she asked, “What can I do to help?”