



PENELOPE L. MACE

Pharmacists & Celts: Princeton, 1980

MACE

The summer that Margaret turned ten, her mother inherited a house in Princeton. Kailin's grandmother, the only family member who had not long ago given up on Kailin, left her the house and a small trust to pay the taxes. So they moved from Chicago to Grand Street in Princeton. Cedric, Margaret's father, hated Princeton, found it phony and stifling, pretentious and stupid. But it was a free four story town house right in downtown Princeton, walking distance to everything, so when they had no car, which was often, they could get by. He still hated it. Within a few weeks of moving he became depressed and went off somewhere.

It took a while for Margaret and the other children to get used to this rambling house with rooms and rooms and hallways and towering windows and walk in closets big as rooms. All their lives they'd lived in cramped apartments where they could barely breathe and now they could run, indoors. Their favorite feature of the

dusty old place was the two staircases, perfect for hide and seek and other games. Melanie loved all the bathrooms. At first she made a game out of using each one in turn, but some of them barely worked – the toilets welled up and threatened not to empty and it began to stink. A few of the bathrooms still had smatterings of old toiletries, grimy tubes of toothpaste, bottles of cloudy perfume, a hairbrush with a tangle of dry gray hair. The stuff made Melanie queasy but Margaret found it fascinating, it gave her ideas for plays or stories.

The children noted their father's absence but there was no panic. He'd left before. But, predictably, after a few days, Kailin fell into a state. One morning she told Margaret to watch the others while she went to the store. She walked out and did not come back. That first day and into the evening, the four of them were fine. There was left over Chinese in the fridge, a few eggs, half a loaf of Wonder bread, a whole box of powdered milk. That first night, Margaret and Melanie put the boys to bed and stayed out in the yard until very late pretending that they were the mom and dad and the boys were their children. Margaret always had to be the dad because Melanie refused to be a boy ever in any game and anyway Margaret was older and everyone knew that dads were older than moms. They dragged a sheet and blankets out to the yard

and planned to sleep there because it was cool and breezy but something rustled in the bushes and spooked them so they ran inside, not even taking the bedclothes with them. They slept in the boys' room on the dusty carpet without pillows or covers.

The next day around dinner time they ran out of diapers for Kyle. They had no money. Melanie wanted to call their aunt Siobhan, their mother's sister, who they thought lived nearby somewhere in New Jersey although they didn't know where. They didn't know New Jersey. They had visited Princeton maybe twice but had only fuzzy memories of Aunt Siobhan. They did not have her phone number which didn't really matter since they didn't have a phone, at least, they hadn't found one yet. They went looking and finally found one heavy black phone in a dirty corner of the master suite. Of course, it was dead. In Chicago they'd never had phone service so they didn't find the lack disturbing. Margaret knew, but did not tell Melanie, that they could have simply walked to the nearest phone booth, looked up Aunt Siobhan's number and called her collect. Margaret was enjoying her role as head of household, despite the constant battle to defend her status from Melanie who was always alert for any opportunity for mutiny. Usually Margaret could cajole or bully her sister into doing what she wanted and

if all else failed a few smacks did the trick. Even though Melanie was taller and heavier than her older sister, when Margaret became truly angry she was scary.

On this diaper issue, however, Melanie grew stubborn. She endured several sessions of being smacked, pounded, screamed at, but each time, after she slunk off to nurse her bruises and cry a little, she returned insisting that she wanted to get help. Perhaps she missed their mother and did not wish to admit it. Or perhaps she grew resentful because Margaret had delegated to her all the jobs that she hated, like dishes and scooping out the cat's litter box. Melanie announced that she was going to the neighbor's, to ask for help. They had never met these people but she didn't care. She told Margaret that anybody will help out little kids. The only way Margaret could talk her out of it and thereby maintain control was by insisting that she had a better plan. She got the boys dressed and the four of them walked to the pharmacy on Nassau Street.

In a few years this place would become a CVS, indistinguishable from every other CVS in the world but back then it had a Formica lunch counter, faux red leather stools, family pictures on the walls, and was filled with the smells of over ripe coffee and rubbing alcohol. It was the place in Princeton where working people could get

a quick, cheap breakfast and page through the *Trentonian*. Margaret had been inside the place once already with her mother. On that initial foray Kailin had managed: a blue black mascara, bright pink lip gloss and a jumbo pack of cinnamon gum that she gave to Margaret to use as bribes on Mel and Kenny. Kailin declared the place easy and told Margaret they'd go back soon.

The owners back then were a husband and wife named Bob and Sarah, he with a thick black moustache and she with a pear shaped presence half his height, both of them wearing tight blue uniforms and big square plastic name tags. The sight of those uniforms along with the occasional whiff of medicine stuff in the air made Margaret's stomach flip. It was reminiscent of doctors, nurses, social workers, all of them with their crisp clothes and rat a tat speeches, all of them determined to do something to you that you knew you were going to hate.

Margaret told Melanie to stay outside with the boys. She found the pharmacist and his round wife perched in their loft in the back, above all the cold tablets and ointments. Craning her neck to try and make eye contact as she spoke, she launched into the routine she had prepared in her head on the walk over and she thought it went well. She remembered to say 'sir' and 'ma'am a lot and they listened and the wife's big plastered on smile never

wavered as Margaret went on about losing the money for the diapers and how her mother was sick in bed and had just fallen asleep, poor mommy, first time in days and, and - the big finish where she promised, really promised, to bring them the money the moment her daddy got home from work that night. Quickly, reasonably, she added that she would call him now, of course, but they had just moved here and he had a new job and she did not know his number. Out of breath, a little flushed, she beamed from one to the other and waited.

The wife nodded serenely and asked where this baby was, the one who needed the diapers. Margaret pointed to the front where they could see Melanie outside, scowling, one hand on each squirming boy. It made Margaret wince inside the way the woman talked to her in a loud, thick voice, as if she thought Margaret stupid or deaf but she kept smiling and nodding. The wife went to the door and brought the others inside. Bob told Margaret to go ahead and get whatever she needed and bring it to the register in front. As she went looking for toddler sized diapers the wife seated Mel and the boys at the counter and offered them ice cream. Melanie rolled her eyes and asked for grilled cheese with tomato on rye bread, with real butter and Swiss cheese, well toasted, and please make sure the cheese is really melted. Of course,

they didn't have anything like that so she tossed her hair and said, fine, she would just have a glass of water. With crushed ice.

The boys got their ice cream in little metal dishes just as Margaret was lugging a column of toddler sized diaper boxes to the front and thinking that she should get more stuff if they were letting her get away with this -what did they need most - maybe sliced cheese or bread? Lunch meat? Soda? She wasn't sure what all they had in the place, but there was a huge refrigerator on the one side and an aisle of canned goods, so she was going to take a look. Maybe tuna fish and noodle soup. Both boys would eat that stuff without complaining.

Just then, as she made a second trip to the front with more diapers and baby wipes someone from the back called her name. She turned around to see Bob and his wide little wife standing with a pair of cops. She let the boxes fall and could feel Mel glaring at her from across the store.

The next thing she knew they were all in a barren room at the police station talking to a social worker. Normally, for the Juster children, the rules for the social worker chat over the obligatory order of pizza or ice cream were about the same as those followed by prisoners of war: name, address, age, no more. But in this case

Margaret made an exception. The social worker was a relaxed African American woman with a quick smile and an ample figure who sat down opposite Margaret and, after the introductions, fixed her with a look and said, you know what I think? I think you get stuck with everything. The other kids, the housework, the meals -even talking to people like me. So don't. Just eat your pizza. Have a soda. Take a load off. You think about what you want to do. I'll be back and see what you have to say.

Then she left them.

Still there wasn't much to tell, even to someone nice and the four of them would have wound up in foster care if Margaret had not been able to spell her aunt's first and last names - Siobhan Feighry. The social worker told Margaret that she had never heard the name Siobhan before (pronounced shh-VONN) and certainly would never have been able to spell Feighry, (pronounced FEAR-ee). Margaret recounted what her mother had told her, that Aunt Siobhan had decided to use the old Celtic spelling of her last name, simplified to Ferry or Feary by many outside of Ireland, and that Siobhan was Celtic for Joan. With a good natured laugh the social worker told Margaret that it was a good thing she was such a smart little girl because she could never in a million years have found her aunt without her help.

Of course, later, Margaret's mother was furious with her on all counts, for getting caught in a lie by the pharmacists (meaning that now they knew to be wary of the family) and for not thinking straight and just calling Siobhan herself and dealing with it "privately" by which her mother meant, without involving family court. The child endangerment charges would be later be dropped, with the stipulation that both Cedric and Kailin attend parenting classes, which they never did.

Margaret did not know what to expect from Aunt Siobhan. She recalled her vaguely as a tall thin woman who did not look anything like Margaret's mother but when she breezed into the police station her tailored clothes, swept up hair and gold jewelry made Margaret think of a lady on TV playing maybe a lawyer or doctor. Suddenly she was acutely aware of their dirty shoes and ragged clothes, of Kenny's over grown hair sticking up and the smears of dried tomato sauce on Kyle's chin. The four of them stared at their aunt and said nothing. Siobhan looked from one to the next, frowning, and said nothing. Margaret wanted to run away.

Siobhan spent what seemed to Margaret an eternity off somewhere with the cops and the social worker and when they emerged all looked unhappy except for the well-padded social worker who did not exactly hug

them but touched each one gently, briefly, smoothing down Kenny's hair, giving Kyle a tap on his cheek that made him smile, putting a hand gently on Mel's shoulder. When she came to Margaret she held out her hand and Margaret took it. Margaret realized later it was the first and only time she'd ever shaken hands with anyone. She told them to try and get some sleep tonight and not worry and she would be by to visit them soon. They never saw her again.

Siobhan swore it was the second time they had been to her house, which she described to them as a three story condo with many unusual features. They did not respond so she told them in detail about the time they had visited with their mother a while back and Margaret and Melanie nodded and made sounds of agreement but they recalled little .Kyle dozed on Margaret's lap. Kenny who had sidled his way into a spot in the front seat, had a lot of questions: did she have TV (yes), where would they sleep (spare room, twin beds), could he have pizza (no, she was told they just had pizza); did she have a dog (no,no no animals in the house); are you married (yes, my husband your Uncle Claymar is away for work); can I play the car radio(no, and please be quiet now you're giving me a headache). Melanie of course was his little cheer leader adding, yes, yes, what about that, yeah, wow, to his

every question, as she always did, as Margaret sat there gripping Kyle's dead weight on her lap, her thighs going numb, fuming, thinking, yeah, she always goes in with him, doesn't she? She can't keep her stupid mouth shut, can she? Well, she's gonna regret it. Soon as this is over, boy, is she ever.

After a decent interval Margaret asked her only question: who would take care of Mitzy, their cat?

This little surprise visit with Aunt Siobhan would be the first of several over the next few years until Margaret and Melanie learned how to make some money on their own and keep it quiet when their parents went off for days. Years later Margaret would recall with vivid clarity only a few incidents, a few details from those visits, such as Siobhan's way of saying, "pleeeeeezzzz..." when she really meant, *stop, stop, whatever you are doing this instant, stop*. So when, for example, they got to her house that night and made their way inside, Kyle stumbling and whimpering with fatigue, Kenny hyper alert and jabbering about her cool place and where was the TV and what videos did she have, and did she have any soda, Siobhan clapped her hands to her head and emitted her first long dramatic "pleeeeeezzz" of the visit. A minute later, when Kyle headed right for the thick white rug in the den and threw himself down, she repeated her long 'please' and

Margaret went running to get him.

He needed to be changed. The social worker had given Siobhan a black garbage bag of supplies including diapers but Siobhan did not know what to do so Margaret changed him. In the downstairs bathroom. On the floor. Not on the vaguely Southwestern throw rug, which Siobhan snatched up and put away, but on a faded beach towel that she fished out of a storage space, then meticulously folded and centered, checking twice that he could fit on it without touching anything, even the floor. She watched intently as Margaret carefully used the baby wipes and flushed them all but when Margaret asked for a towel to dry him she looked panic stricken and rushed off, returning with a handful of ripped old rags. It was all right, she assured Margaret, the housekeeper washed those cleaning rags in hot water and bleach once a week. Margaret stared then finally took one and inspected it closely on both sides before patting him down, as lightly as she could manage.

I'm going to need some diaper rash stuff for him, Margaret told her. She knew his butt must hurt but at this point he was too tired to scream.

Siobhan disappeared and came back with a small jar of Vaseline which Margaret refused to use. A&D, she told her aunt, who stood over her with the jar in her out

stretched hand. Her nails were pink and perfect. A&D, Margaret repeated. That's what we use.

I think this is fine, Siobhan said in a tight voice, holding out the jar. Just use it.

No thanks, Margaret said.

Really, I think it's fine and I insist.

Margaret turned away and fastened up the diaper, then picked him up as he thrashed his legs and spilled a few tears from his half-closed eyes. She pushed past her silent aunt who still held the Vaseline jar in her hand and went to the guest room with the twin beds where Mel and Kenny, in compliance with Siobhan's directive, were sitting on the floor between the beds.

You all have to get baths now, Siobhan said.

Kyle had fallen asleep in Margaret's arms so she eased him down on the colorful area rug where he sighed and turned over on his stomach pushing his newly cleaned rump in the air.

In a loud voice, Kenny announced that he did not want a bath. Margaret fixed him with a look. Siobhan left the room and came back with towels and washcloths.

I'm not goin' first, Kenny announced then saw Margaret's face and, scowling, grabbed a towel and stomped into the adjoining bathroom.

In a few minutes he emerged, complaining that these

new pj's made him itch. He'd been so quick that Margaret knew for sure he'd barely got into the water let alone washed but she said nothing. The girls bathed together and came out wearing the stiff too big nighties the social worker had provided. Kenny was already in bed but still wheedling.

Can't we get a pizza, please, please, Aunt Siobhan? I'm still hungry and I promise I'll clean up after, I'll do the dishes, anything you want.

Siobhan sat primly on the other twin bed which she had crisply turned down and ignored him. Him now, she said, pointing at Kyle.

Margaret said, what?

He gets his bath now. Please wake him up.

You can't wake him up now.

Why not?

He'll have a holy- uh - fit. (she almost said, shit fit, then caught herself) He'll get all upset. He'll keep us the whole night.

Siobhan's face fell and she stared down at the chubby toddler with his blackened feet and food stained face, his back rising and falling gently. What's the matter with him?

Nothing. He's asleep. I'll give him a bath in the morning.

She seemed to consider then folded her arms and aimed a look at Margaret and in that moment Margaret sensed a distinctly chilling resemblance between her mother and this woman who understood nothing, who had everything. She said, I'm sorry, that is not acceptable. He's utterly filthy. He is not getting into my clean bed like that. Wake him up. Please.

Eventually Margaret was reduced to pleading. It did not escape the notice of Kenny and Mel that this skinny woman in a gray suit had reduced their sister to such a point. Even Kailin could not accomplish that anymore. With her, Margaret knew how to negotiate. The two of them watched the exchange as if they were center court at Wimbledon, their heads snapping back and forth. Kenny forgot about pizza and TV. This was better.

The compromise: Kyle would sleep on the floor. Margaret stayed with him between the twin beds, the two of them covered by the old beach towel, another rolled up towel for a pillow. In the morning, Margaret was sore and stiff but she got him into the tub before anyone else awoke. Whenever she got into the tub with him he loved his bath and would even let her shampoo his thick red hair without screaming. So they both got a good scrub and she dressed him in the ugly clothes the social worker had provided.

It was a few days before Kailin resurfaced and proceeded to talk her way through the system. Initially, she was allowed to see them only when the social worker, never the same one twice, brought her to Siobhan's and stayed right there in the same room with them but still she managed to cajole her sister into loaning her money, clothes, shoes, earrings, so that by the time her court date rolled around she was the classiest person in the room. And she could rap a line of course, always could. She had grown up in a family of lawyers and judges, minor politicians. She knew where their buttons were and just how to hit them.

Finally, she took the children home.

Cedric stayed missing a while longer. By the time he reappeared there were only the legalities to contend with.

On the day that Kailin arrived to take them, they were more than ready to leave Siobhan's. She had not wished to use any vacation time on them so she had pressed her housekeeper into service as babysitter and clearly the woman resented it. Margaret overheard her telling Siobhan one night that Kyle must be retarded: he was three years old, still in diapers and couldn't talk.

Margaret leaped to the doorway and screamed that he could talk fine when he wanted to and that she hadn't

had time to potty train him because of moving and everything and it wasn't his fault.

Once home, Kailin didn't let Margaret get away with botching things, putting her to all that trouble of going to court and so on. She gave her a good pounding and tossed her into the basement. But those basement punishments never lasted long for Margaret because without her there was no one to watch the boys. (Melanie was a terrible babysitter, inattentive and indifferent, quick to anger, heavy handed, a complainer; her stints as substitute mom never lasted long).

Even after being the basement for a whole day, Margaret remained in charge.

This experience had been a good one, she decided later. It inspired her to begin the long series of little cash jobs she would get around town for the next 8 years until she left home, lying to her mother about how much she got of course but tossing her a cut, stashing most of it for times when the four of them were on their own.