

LEN BERKMAN

Cordelia Lear, a Fable

I THINK I'M WAKING UP. One moment I was having a hard time accepting my father's gifts to my husband and me, and the next my dad was screaming that he wanted never to set eyes on me again. It's the kind of switchback that happens to you in a dream, when the higher you climb a mountain with the most gradual of winding roads upward, you reach a point where your road forgets what it's doing, and as you carefully make your next turn you're in mid-air. You're ten again. You're not married in the least. Your road doesn't even wave goodbye.

My dear friend Edgar knows what to do with dreams like that. He doesn't rush away from even the wispiest cloud he sees as his only support. He lies down as though the wisp were his natural pillow. He tells himself he's out of his mind to lie down on a wisp, but he laughs. "Mad Tom' I am," he shouts, though no one but me, as I fall, is in earshot. His father has no more time for him than mine for me, but he's a boy. Boys learn to get around fathers who puzzle the dickens out of them. Me, I like to play make-believe every bit as much as Edgar, but when I'm mystified I cannot put my mind to anything except trying to learn what I missed. What I did wrong. Edgar didn't do a single thing wrong, but I must have done or this wouldn't happen to me. My papa's anger is more than I can bear.

Honestly, I wish fathers were more like mothers. Of course, I have little experience with mothers, so what am I saying here? Edgar's the same. Though everyone who took care of us when we were tiny were mothers. Sometimes, I felt like I was closer to every mother in sight—I was like a sister to all the girls and boys—when the lot of us played games together under Margaret's watchful eyes. Marianne was my closest sister. I even discovered we shared a birthday, almost to the exact hour. We could have been twins! Margaret looked wide-eyed when I declared that to her and told her how much Mari and I were alike. That was the one time in my entire life so far when Margaret sounded upset with me. She hinted that if I ever spoke like that again, when she was taking care of me she would stop bringing Mari along.

I couldn't bear thinking of Mari all by herself in her tiny, laughable house from morning to night, so you can be sure I held my tongue forever after.

When my mother got sick and died, I thought my world would end. Then I decided, all on my own at first, that my mother didn't die, just like I stopped having a husband. Poof! Mari said that my mother had moved and lived on top of the rainclouds. That made me think of Edgar. I was sure that Edgar knew how to find my mother and tell her she shouldn't worry about me. In a gargantuan whisper, Edgar informed me that his mother and my mother shared a room just big enough for two on the same cloud. Since, to my understanding, they were friends who talked a great deal to each other, they never became as lonely as I became sometimes in my very own bedroom and my very own porch. Edgar has a lovely laugh. He told me that whenever I heard him laugh I was hearing his mother. He used to hear her laugh when she lifted him from his cradle, when she kissed him, and when she put him down again. She laughed about three times each pick-up and put-down, and when she held him to her face after her kiss her face was wet. When Edgar learned to count to three, that's what he most remembered. Her three laughs and her one kiss.

Mari had more sisters and brothers than I could count until I was old enough to count to a hundred. They weren't that many, I imagine, but whenever I tried to list them all by name, I left more than one of them out. Edgar was easier; his only brother was named Edmund, another name with an "e," just like Margaret and Mari are names with an "m." Alphabet letters are fun, unless there are too many. I wish I knew someone with my own name. We would be two "c's," and when someone called our name, we would both come running. That's another thing Edgar and I talked about. His father never called him by his name, and my father never called me by mine. It's really nice when you hear your name come from someone else's voice. Margaret and Mari call me by my name a lot, which gives me a tingle. Edgar tingles me, too. I make a definite point of saying "Margaret," "Mari," and "Edgar" in my sweetest voice. Do you have a sweet voice you can turn to when you want? If I could take one word to heaven with me when I die, I would choose someone's name. My problem is that there are three names I would choose. I guess I'd better not die.

You can bet there are names I'd prefer to do without. I wouldn't have admitted that last year, but I can get pretty mean. Edmund doesn't

deserve to have a brother as nice as Edgar. Don't tell anyone I told you that. It sounds too mean. You've known me my entire life, and you very well know that mean is what I'm not. Edmund is one of those young people who tell lies. I can't bear his lies. I'm still young myself but I next to never lie, of course. At least, I think I next to never. I wouldn't be talking to you if I did, I bet. I take that back—what I really mean is that you wouldn't be listening to me. It's hard to tell lies, which makes you wonder why people bother. I'm beginning to suspect that older people lie even better, though. They have more time to practice.

Edgar's father is being punished. Do I know why? Is there always a reason? Edgar can't bear to see his father punished, so he's doing all he can to keep his father safe, which is hard now that he's been blinded. Edgar has to keep his father from realizing that he's the one guiding him through their land of troubles. Whenever his father calls for *Edmund's* help, Edgar has to lie—a different kind of lie—and call himself "Mad Tom." Edgar has to disguise his voice but not his face. He declares to his father that he was sent by Edmund, who suffers each hour that he and his father are kept apart. The two syllables of Edmund's name, Edgar wept to share, were all the abandoned Duke had to hear for his lips to part into a twisted smile. The air through his battered teeth and the endless blood made him look monstrous. Even the sockets from which the Duke's eyes once shone upon his allies found their means to celebrate the elusive idea of his vanished son's return. Edgar handed me these images as though the memories were his and mine to store without need for permission. Upon his final word to me, our silence took hold for what felt like years.

I KNEW I COULD RUN to Margaret and bury my head in her lap. Or ask Mari if she might sit by the pond with me and let me stare at her without saying why. But neither could keep me from the certainty of what Edgar and I had to face: our siblings were not ours to count as kin. There's a poem that begins, "I dressed my father in his little clothes." I'm not sure that's exact. "I put my father in his little boat." "I set my father a-sail across the sea." Fathers need our care. Edgar knew how to offer that care and have it accepted. I felt lifted out of the picture. Whoever created me told me to hush and leave. To relieve his father's pain, Edgar knew he couldn't be Edgar. To exchange with his father the comfort, the trickles of love, that two disposed-of creatures

might somehow sustain in the wake of injustice. I didn't have that skill. I could only be Cordelia and no other: three or so syllables to ignite my father's rage. Rage that slammed the door and forced me into the cold, without the key to sneak back inside—a key like the “Mad Tom” that Edgar had, right there in his pocket. To pluck and turn at his beck and command.

What would *you* have done? Sometimes I try to imagine me different, even now, as I did when Mari and I would play together, and we'd take turns being Margaret. Edgar asked to play with us once, but we thought he wanted to play war, and all we wanted to play was castle and court. Edgar was amused that we had mistaken him for Edmund. Edmund was the one who *always* played war and got quite good at it. My sisters—my *actual* sisters—told me Edmund was their hero. They planned to convince him that they were in love with him, but they had a larger purpose than playing his wives: when someone is your hero—they confided in me as though I would totally understand—love is the mask you must wear. What you truly and dearly dream will happen is that your hero chooses you above all others. My sisters boasted that it was generous of them to want Edmund to choose the *two* of them above all others, even though it's nicer if most heroes choose only one. Sometimes that makes sense to me. Does it to you?

Eventually, though, my sisters got tired of Edmund being their hero. They took off their masks, they said, and each of them found new heroes they *liked* to call their husbands-to-be. One husband apiece this time. Margaret told me that showed they were becoming adults. Everything they pretended to admire in Edmund they admired twice in their husbands: once for how well these new husbands took charge, and twice because they went around with big smiles, knowing how easily they could take charge of their husbands. They said when Edmund caught sight of them doing that, he would snicker, but only because he was jealous. Edmund didn't give up wanting to call both of them his wives. He saw how much my papa was giving to them to make whole armies of husbands-to-be want to call them the best wives in the total universe. Edmund told me I would never be anyone's best wife, and that my papa had made that clear the time I refused to curtsy because my dress was too short. He dared Edgar to prove he was wrong about me. Edgar replied that he didn't like to prove *anything*. I felt silly just standing there between the two of them.

There was a neighbor named William Shakespeare who had moved

into a tiny cabin—not as shamefully tiny as Margaret’s, he would announce—on the other side of my favorite hill. William watched us a lot. Sometimes from a distance, sometimes pretending he wanted to borrow a cup of sugar when he spotted Mari and me playing castle and court on the hillside. I think he really hoped he could get to know Margaret. Honestly, I think Margaret was more *curious* about him than anything else. She said she couldn’t figure out why he enjoyed making her gossip so much. Even when they did something in bed together that was supposed to be extra fun, she said that what most excited William Shakespeare was how much she gossiped. She couldn’t stop, and Mr. Shakespeare never suggested that she should. Night after night, he pumped her, she said, for everything she could remember about my father, my sisters, and me. Then, when she happened to mention what my sisters felt about Edmund and their plot to seem ready to become his wives and then stop being ready as soon as they were rich enough to find husbands they could control, Mr. Shakespeare got especially aroused. He insisted on every last detail. He said families like Edmund’s and Edgar’s and their father, and families like my sisters and me and our father, were like coins of gold you’d like to roll along a marble floor and then pick up again and pocket.

For some reason, Margaret asked Mr. Shakespeare whether he would be as excited about our families if they had mothers in them who were still alive. Mr. Shakespeare’s reply surprised me. He said that if our families had mothers in them who were still alive, we wouldn’t know what to do with ourselves. Our mothers would all take charge and make every day either funny or a nightmare. Do you understand what that means? Sometimes I tried to eavesdrop when William Shakespeare and Margaret had their conversations, but when I realized that I was the person he was least interested in, I got bored. Eventually, Margaret got bored even more. She kept hoping to gossip about herself. But, hard to believe, Mr. Shakespeare was even less interested in Margaret than in me.

So there I was, with my father locking me out but keeping my sisters and their husbands inside with him, for reasons I suppose you’d have to ask Margaret or Mr. Shakespeare about (before they bid permanent goodbyes to each other, of course, but not before Margaret had spilled all the beans Mr. Shakespeare could ever dream she would spill). I was not told a thing. As I stumbled past Mr. Shakespeare’s cabin to god-knows-where, I had no wish to learn. Those sudden sobs

my most pursed-tight lips couldn't keep from bursting into the air must have sounded real strange, enough for Mr. Shakespeare to lift his window glass and stare with a blank face in my direction. But he didn't call out, and I was too upset to think to wave.

My guess, if you're interested, is that my father was so pleased by how excited my sisters were to learn what he was giving them, even before the end of his life, that he decided to take back what he said I didn't thank him enough for giving me, and he wanted to spend the night with my sisters and their husbands to give them a list of specifics: of everything I would have been able to keep if I had said, "Thanks, Papa," instead of telling him how little it all mattered to me compared to how I felt about being his daughter and life itself. That's my guess.

When I said how little it mattered, and before I compared it to the size of my love, Papa's roar of anger was so deafening I had to shout the rest of my sentence about size, and even then I'm not sure he heard the shouting part, because he raised his fists and smashed them down hard on our feast table, the one that Margaret took such time to design, with delicate mirrors around each plate to celebrate his bequests. Some of the mirrors clattered to the floor and cracked. Papa hearing what I shouted would have made no difference anyway, I can assure you. You've known ever since I climbed out of my cradle, when no one answered my shrieks to get rid of the mouse that was tickling my toes: I'm not as good with words or even loud sounds as my sisters, and they snort whenever they see me try to imitate.

When I showed up at Mari's little home with some leftover sobs still threatening to embarrass me, I was surprised to find myself actually at Mari's door and not even knocking. Margaret was already back, too. She'd come running to the feast table when the ruckus reached her ears in the kitchen. She saw the door slam shut behind me, and she ran back to get her coat. But Papa stopped her. He commanded her to get her broom without a moment's delay. And after sweeping he made her walk barefoot around and around the feast table, just to be sure. My sisters told her she looked like she was doing an around-the-table dance, especially when she stepped on a sliver. The two times that happened and she couldn't keep her own sounds to herself, they applauded. And each time they insisted that Margaret take a bow. She could deal with the blood later.

Just before Margaret could finally leave to go home, she heard them say something to Papa she wouldn't repeat. She asked me not to ask.

Later she told me she did tell Mr. Shakespeare, but only because she expected he couldn't care less about how horrible my sisters decided to be. Mr. Shakespeare told her that horrible details are always to be enjoyed because they are a warning to the wise. That was back when she thought he *was* wise . . . because he was so eager to be warned. Margaret told me I could stay the night, and longer than the night, if there was no one important I could turn to. I had an uncle and an aunt who lived in their own castle on an island. My father once declared war on them, so in all my growing years they never visited. Margaret told me it was time I paid *them* a visit. She assured me she would somehow see to it that I got there. So I stayed with my uncle and aunt until they said it was time I set off on my own. I wondered if it *was* time. They had counted how many letters I received from Edgar during that time, and they told me that was all they needed to know: I'd either choose to be Edgar's wife, if he would have me, or I would drown.

Edgar was only writing to me about his papa and mine, as you can imagine. Uncle and Aunt on their own island wouldn't be interested in the least. They confided in me that they were interested only in someone who was family, so Edgar and his papa were of no interest at all, and Papa—my Papa—they had stopped counting as family, so they were interested in Papa even less. Naturally, I could hardly tell them about the two men Edgar told me had started looking out for Papa in the wilds after my sisters and their husbands threw Papa out of his castle, which they told him wasn't his anymore. If Uncle and Aunt had asked, I wouldn't have been able to explain Edgar's complicated details. If more families were like mine, I guess I wouldn't *need* to explain. But Edgar tells me the only family he knows that's like mine is *his*. That's too bad. Can you figure out how in the world I could warn anyone that they might be thrown out of their castle by their own daughters?

One of the two new men who are taking care of Papa now is named Kent. Isn't that funny? So many men are named Kent, you could float in a lake of them, and they'd support you like salt. I have personally wondered what I would feel if Papa introduced me to a man named Kent, but now I really like that name. Now it singles itself out.

In a dream I had after Edgar first wrote to me about Kent, I named myself Kent. For the first time ever, I singled *myself* out. I had Edgar steal Kent's clothing and ship the whole batch to me, closets full. Also,

all the documents that I would have to show to prove I was Kent. Later, Edgar told me that nobody ever asked for documents that proved he was Mad Tom. He assured me that in dreams you need documents even less. Still, in—and out of—my dream, documents would be nice to have when someone looked twice at you and said, “Kent?”

I suppose I would need a moustache. I always mean to ask Edgar what Mr. Kent looks like and if he has one. After Edgar’s papa was murdered, eyes and all, and Edgar took a while to be able to breathe, Edgar offered to become Papa’s “companion in arms,” just like he’d been with his own. He still signs some of his letters to me, “With befuddled love from Mad Tom, my papa’s companion in arms.” I smile each time before I read his letters again, especially the particular one where he said it would be simple, with just a one-word change: “*Your* papa’s companion in arms.” But Kent beat Edgar to it. And me to it. I didn’t decide to be Kent myself fast enough.

If I actually believed Cordelia could do it. If Papa would accept her coming back. If I *wanted* to come back. I could have done without becoming Kent. Edgar told me Mr. Shakespeare was writing funny things about Papa and me, suggesting that Papa was better off with Kent than if I had helped Papa find a bed to hide under from my sisters, so they couldn’t kick him out. I did ask myself what I wanted to do with large problems. If I remained Cordelia and was being frank with myself, I didn’t yet know. But if I became Kent, I wouldn’t need to know.

And I’d have a new friend with me, I think: this other man who generally acted silly but would cry real tears—according to Edgar, of course, who was acting silly, too, since he could only watch Papa if he sprang out dancing, completely unrecognized, from behind a tree, and did a duet. If I became Kent, I would immediately stop Papa looking so sad. I would gently lift Papa’s stiff fingers away from his shirt’s top buttons and loosen those buttons faster than *he* ever could. Kent—the Kent who was only Kent—and the silly man Edgar danced with wouldn’t *dare* do that. Papa would only let *my* nimble fingers loosen his buttons, and he would tell me that only his daughter, the daughter named Cordelia, could comfort him that quickly.

And when I heard him tell Kent that, I’d take off my Kent clothes. And I’d say, “Look, Papa. Look.” And he would not be able to speak. And I would know I’ve forgiven him without his needing to ask. But he *would* ask. He would be so full of apology I would need to put one of my fingers to his lips, straight from unbuttoning his shirt.

When I wrote Edgar about this dream, he asked me how my dream made me feel. I answered that dreams never make me feel any different than I do feel; dreams are my very feelings. Edgar said he thought about this for days. He's not a dreamer; he's an actor. He doesn't wait to have dreams. He doesn't *want* to have dreams. Dreams confuse him, but when he acts his mind is clear. I told Edgar that when Margaret and Mari hug me, I am as clear as when I dream. Would someone's hug do that for him, too? I asked that but he didn't answer.

Edgar ran into Mr. Shakespeare by accident the other day. He let it slip that I was considering a nervous return to Papa, or at least that I was dreaming about it. In return, Mr. Shakespeare said something odd. He said Edgar had given him an idea. Edgar did tell Mr. Shakespeare that such a comment made Edgar curious, but for a moment all Mr. Shakespeare could mutter is "How can I make it make sense?" Then Mr. Shakespeare asked Edgar, did *you* say she had to come home? Edgar is such a sweet and wonderful man. Do you know what he replied? He keeps no secrets from me when there's anything I truly want to know. He said, "I asked Cordelia what her dream made her feel." For once, Mr. Shakespeare was interested in how I answered. But Edgar told me that Mr. Shakespeare was confused by my answer. He told Edgar he would have to change it.

Then he asked Edgar if I had married. For once, Edgar got annoyed with someone. He told Mr. Shakespeare I was married to God, but of course Edgar knew that Mr. Shakespeare would be confused by that response as well. Mr. Shakespeare was so typically full of thoughts, he began to mutter even more to himself. Edgar felt he could tiptoe away practically unnoticed, and Mr. Shakespeare would not stop muttering in the least. "But of course, as well" was the bit of mutter Edgar heard. And then, even odder: "Should I give her a husband?" Edgar felt like laughing, "Why?" But he thought a question like that, even muttered, might be a trap of some kind. How can Mr. Shakespeare even start to find a husband for me, if the only husband I ever longed for was . . . No, why name names? Don't press me to sound so ridiculous. Names are not behind my telling you all about my life. I don't want you to wait 'til I stop chattering away, so you can go running to spread some gossip of your own, especially to someone who cares about me more than he will ever admit. Someone who doesn't need words or dreams to show me how much he cares, even though he is fully aware that I can never take the place of his own goodness. His own kindness. Not

even if he dreamed of me doing so. Edgar is a miracle, and I must leave him like that.

As for Mr. Shakespeare, he can give me all the husbands he wants. I think I am finally waking up to do in my own way in my own life what my dreams express of me. I will tell my Papa on his deathbed that I love him without his deserving it. I will tell him that, when he locked me out of my home, I was shaken, but I followed my heart, first to Margaret and Mari and then to his worst possible family enemies, my aunt and uncle who are every bit as horrible as he told me they were but also every bit as horrible as my Papa.

I will tell him there are three people in this entire world whom I love with my entire being and who deserve to be loved right back. I will tell Papa he does not need to apologize to me because I will never believe his apology. But I will be sad for him. I am sad for so many horrible people, and most of them don't know how horrible they are. I can only wish that, if for no more than a second or two, the people in my life who are miracles could know they are. We would all then take a breath, smile, and welcome modesty and doubt to join us and our miracles of goodness and kindness, as the little parade of us go on with our lives.