

Pernicious Anemia

Willa Elizabeth Schmidt

*Remember me when I am gone away,
Gone far away into the silent land...
—Christina Rossetti*

I'm thinking today of Harriet Green, though why, I wouldn't know. She is long dead, after all, and who is she to me? Who was she ever, to me, or anyone? One of those wanderers in the rush-rush city: here, gone, back again, until one day they vanish completely, one never learns how or when.

I'm pondering memory, its bottomless depth, the scenes that refuse to fade, the characters who journey along. Extras peopling the mind's farther reaches, grateful for refuge, like faithful pets. How they embrace us, fleeing oblivion, how they bid us give voice to their lives. Why she lingers...all these years after, why Harriet Green still knows to intrigue.

She was slender and vaguely exotic, an erratic, now-and-then guest. I was a child in my first years of elementary school. A friend from my mother's past, from the void before I arrived. They had worked together, shared an apartment, something. I operated on imagination and wasn't inclined to ask.

Harriet Green had black, glossy hair and wore makeup, unheard of among my parents' friends. Her features were sharp. A beauty mark stippled her cheek, which had a distinct pallor, though she never struck me as unwell, not back then. She was slim and straight and not the least bit motherly and while I wasn't drawn to her the way children are to some adults, I didn't dislike her. I studied her. She fascinated me.

"*Oob la la!*" she'd exclaim at anything that surprised, with what I took to be a genuine French accent. She seemed alien, sinful, out of the downtown world none of us on Paris Avenue could belong to. Paris, you must know, was a street on Chicago's western fringe; it had nothing to do with France. A line on the face of the prairie, forecast of suburb sprawl. The war was over and babies needed houses; some namer of streets perused a gazetteer.

Except for her "*Oob la la!*" Harriet Green sounded American, which added to her mystery since everyone else did not: my immigrant parents, their friends—Germans mostly, Swiss or Balts, northern European. I'm speaking here of people from the old crowd, not newer, more casual neighborhood

acquaintances. Our neighbors sounded American, but they were hardly exotic. They had houses and children and gardens.

Harriet Green was French, I decided, even without the accent. I pictured her in a cloud-wrapped Loop office, with her fashionable clothes, her inscrutable air—a secretary, but high class. Her sleek, wicked cigarettes! Men of the old crowd nursed smelly cigars, but women never smoked. While not exactly beautiful, Harriet Green was youngish, younger than my parents and their friends. I was an only child, with aunts and uncles who were names on envelopes from faraway places. I'd never met my cousins. I needed relatives, preferably glamorous ones; she became a glamorous aunt.

For several years she'd come every few months, arriving by bus in mid-afternoon, leaving after supper the same way. (Why was she free during the day if she had an office job? I wasn't inclined to ask.) We owned an old Chevy, but Dad never drove her home. His factory job wore him out; the drive into the city was long.

Then she disappeared. She may have called, but she didn't show her face. She must have called; I can hear my father's bitterness when my mother was ill. *Can't stand hospitals? What sort of friend is that Harriet Green?*

Endocarditis: infection of the heart valves. On a February day the doctor told us my mother shouldn't have died. If she'd come in sooner, if we'd known six months ago, blah, blah. Nothing that made us feel any better. We shivered and shook and forgot for a while about anything we didn't have to think about.

When Harriet Green resurfaced and knocked at our door one September evening, I had turned eleven. She was sorry about my mother. She would have come, she said, but she couldn't stand funerals. My father's greeting was cold; she didn't stay long. After she left, he and I talked.

I wondered if she'd always been alone. Dad poured himself a thimbleful of brandy and settled back in his chair. "She was married once, if you could call it that. Told everybody she was tying the knot soon as her fiancé got home, moving to a bigger place. He was in the service, Japan."

Something new: I leaned forward. "What was he like?"

"We never saw him," Dad said. "Her either, for quite a while, and when she finally showed up, no ring and not a peep about it. Like it didn't happen. We were afraid to ask."

"She made it all up?"

"No. No, Pa Heckenberger met the guy, said he seemed decent. Serious kind of fellow, he said. War'll do that... Pa was our landlord over on Wrightwood, you know, owned Harriet's building too, where she had that basement flat.

Funny. Moves out, and two weeks later there she is, wanting her old place back. So long husband.”

I tried to imagine it. Boys were on my mind a lot just then and I tried to picture Harriet Green with a husband. One of the khaki-clad gods we’d giggle at, girlfriends and me, squeezing through crowds at Riverview Park. *Look at me, please look at me...* Or a sailor, gorgeous sailor, bellbottoms taut over snaking hips. Hope for the future, reason to live, dangerous, desirable as stolen fruit.

I couldn’t see her with a GI. She was grown and glamorous, with her wicked cigarettes, but she was different. Too—what? Foreign, I suppose, despite the American accent, bright lipstick, expensive clothes. No. No marriage for Harriet Green.

Some years later, when I was in high school and perhaps sixteen, she was again suddenly there. By that time our household had changed. My aunt—bona fide aunt—and uncle had come. Tante Lisbeth figured Germany would never recover and badgered her unwilling husband across the water to the winning side. My father thought we needed a woman in the house. It didn’t work; they hated each other. But I digress. Harriet Green.

She came on a Sunday, paler and thinner but otherwise much the same. Though the weather was mild, she wore a woolen suit. From a patent leather purse she took wax paper packets three inches thick which, while the rest of us sipped coffee, she daintily unwrapped to reveal coarse slabs of dark bread fatly layered with braunschweiger, soft and fleshy pink. She had pernicious anemia, she said, and had to eat a pound of liver a day. We watched her arduous chewing and swallowing and my father was friendly again, sorry for her, I suppose.

After that, she disappeared for a long, long time. We thought she might have died. Why didn’t we call? I don’t know. I don’t know if she even had a phone; she was always the one to contact us. Maybe she wanted it that way. Maybe it was simple thoughtlessness on our part. My father had turned into something of a hermit; I suspect he worried she might misinterpret any initiative as romantic overture. Unmarried older men worry about those things, I think, and perhaps they’re right enough of the time to make caution reasonable. I don’t know. I’d like to ask him, but he’s gone now too.

When Harriet Green came back I was in college, but it was summer and I was home on vacation. A July or August night, sticky Chicago heat. Nobody on Paris Avenue had air conditioning then; you drooped indoors with a fan or straddled the front stoop in hope of a breeze. My aunt and uncle were on the back porch, watching Kraft Music Hall. Darkness was setting in.

She was thin to the point of gaunt, with shadows around her eyes and hair threaded with silver, yet so unmistakably herself that we knew her at once. She walked into our living room as if she’d been there yesterday.

My father did not look delighted, but he managed to be polite. “Well, Harriet,” he began stiffly, after we all sat down. “How long has it been? Where’ve you been keeping yourself?” One of us surely asked after her health, though I have no recollection of a reply. Conversation had never been Harriet Green’s strong suit. She might nod and respond but rarely inquired in return, even her answers scarcely more than an enigmatic smile.

The room was unbearably warm. Now and again the curtains stirred a bit, but the air remained tepid. I was wilted, lethargic, didn’t think to fetch the electric fan pushing waves of heat around my bedroom. The conversation stumbled along.

There was a painfully long pause. Then, in a motion so abrupt it fluttered the sluggish air, our guest stood up. Relieved, I rose too, thinking she must be leaving, but she ignored me. She crossed the carpet to my father’s armchair and planted herself next to him, resting her hand on his shoulder.

“Willy,” she said. “Let’s go downstairs. We need to talk.”

My father was caught off guard. Such urgency, such unforeseeable assertion of will—Harriet Green? His face went slack. Wordlessly, he too stood and followed her through the dining room, to the door that led to the basement steps.

I felt excluded, indignant, but most of all I was afraid. Harriet Green had stepped out of herself—what was it she wanted? I fanned my face with the *Reader’s Digest* and proceeded to wait.

Five minutes passed. Ten. After fifteen I couldn’t stand it. I got up and went out the door.

The outside air was thick with smells of damp grass, exhaust from passing cars. Fireflies blinked as I circled the block, waving to neighbors on their porches. I stopped and chatted, commiserated about the heat, told them about my summer job packing chocolates at Brach’s on Cicero and Lake. I strolled on, twice more around the rectangle of streets rimming houses and yards so similar to ours in their dull order. When I reached our gate again I stopped. I took a deep breath, strode in, and climbed the wooden steps.

My father was in the living room, alone. His hands gripped the arms of his chair. He was staring at the far wall, his face blotched with red. For a moment he just looked at me, shaking his head. Finally he spoke.

“She wanted to stay,” he burst out. “To live here, with us. I told her no, out of the question, there’s no room. ‘All I need is a little corner,’ she said, ‘down here in the cellar. I won’t be a bother. You’ll never hear.’” He shook his head again and looked at the floor.

I thought of our downstairs, its unfinished concrete, the stinging smell of coal dust from the bin in the corner by the furnace. My father’s carpentry workshop, the little darkroom where he developed his photos.

“This anemia...,” he sounded hoarse, as if the words seared his throat, “It’s not good. She hasn’t got long. And she’s broke. She says she’s broke.” He got up, paced the length of the room, stopped. “She begged me. *Begged.*” He threw up his hands, lowered them like spent wings. “I said no. No, absolutely not.” He sat again, took out a handkerchief and blew his nose. “What could I do?” he asked. Was he talking to me? I wasn’t sure. Was it my tenderhearted mother he needed to convince, or his own practical self? Or was he thinking, *Where were you, Harriet Green, when we needed a friend?* “I gave her ten dollars and drove her to the bus stop.” He stuffed the handkerchief in his pocket and frowned at the wall.

I couldn’t speak. It seemed heartless. Still, when I tried to picture Harriet Green living there with us, it was impossible, I couldn’t see that either. What should he have done? What would *I* have done? Didn’t we have problems enough already?

“I suppose she thought we’d take care of her until she died,” Tante Lisbeth sniffed when I told her, peering over her half spectacles. “I’d get all the work, as usual. Your father was right. He did the right thing.” It comforted me slightly that for once they agreed.

We never saw Harriet Green again.

I suppose there’s a chance she’s alive, but I doubt it. She’d be well past seventy now. She was doomed, not destined to grow old.

I talked recently with Tante Hedwig, another of my mother’s friends. Hedy is eighty-five, the only one left of the old crowd, and though I’ve always called her that, not my real aunt either. Harriet Green. Did she remember?

“Oh yes, only too well.” Age and widowhood hadn’t diminished Hedy’s irascible energy. “She used to come into Wieboldt’s when I ran Books and Stationery. She’d stand around my desk and I couldn’t get rid of her! Never seemed to figure out I happened to be at work and couldn’t drop everything, wouldn’t take a hint. A misfit is what she was, a born misfit.”

What did she mean, I asked.

“Exactly that,” Hedy retorted. “She didn’t fit in. I don’t know that she ever held a job, not for long anyway. Some of the time she was on welfare, whatever they called it back then, relief, though how she got it I don’t know, she looked able-bodied enough. Polish. She told us once her family was Polish, though she never spoke of her parents at all. An odd duck. Too much alone.”

Not French, I thought, but foreign. I could see them, the old country parents, clinging, suspicious as my own, but worse, closer to the boat. I imagined young Harriet wanting so desperately to be American, carefree, rid of the dark clothes, somber Catholicism, the blurred consonants of their rushing speech.

And the name! The name none of her schoolmates could pronounce. She’d have gotten rid of it soon as she could.

How had they met, I wondered, she and my mother?

“Let me think. It was on Wrightwood, the flat.... When you were born they had to move from the Fullerton apartment, and one day your mother walked by the house on Wrightwood—Heckenbergers’ place, not far away—with you in your baby buggy. Harriet had just come out the door and stopped to look, and they talked, and Harriet told her someone was moving out. Your mother used to say it was the most she ever heard Harriet talk. It wasn’t easy, finding an affordable flat,” Hedy sighed. “No more than now. Your parents scrimped and saved and bought the house way out west. Harriet was lonesome. She needed someone, but I suppose nothing worked out. No substance, no backbone. A born misfit.”

That was all Tante Hedwig could say. She had no recollection of the two-week marriage. Or maybe she’d heard and since forgotten.

I’m wondering now if anyone else remembers Harriet Green. Remnants of an abandoned family? The former husband, still somewhere alive? Most likely not, but if so, what memory did *he* keep? A pale, unreachable cipher? A whining, hopeless nag? Or a drowning woman whose bottomless need sent him bolting into the night seeking simple joys—a laughing girl, a beer at the nearest tavern...

I don’t know why I should care, or think about it at all. How can we say what stays, what doesn’t? Memory is mystery: there are drifting souls who, having no other recourse, seek out a receptive host. Ghosts, spirits, call them what you wish, but treat them kindly. Write down their names. For who among us might not one day, given opportunity, given need, stake a similar claim? ☺