

ONE STEP AT A TIME
 NATALIA VODIANOVA
 AT THE MOUNT, EDITH
 WHARTON'S HOME
 IN THE BERKSHIRES.
 PHOTOGRAPHED BY
 ANNIE LEIBOVITZ
 FOR VOGUE, 2012.



House of Mirth

When her young life started going sideways, **MAXINE SWANN** took the cure at her grandparents' twelve-bedroom manor house out of a Wharton novel, where eccentricity was embraced.

I was eighteen, in the throes of a nervous breakdown, when I checked myself in to my grandparents' house in the Berkshires. I had recently graduated with flying colors from Phillips Academy Andover, but suddenly I was having trouble doing the simplest things: walking, talking, reading a menu, dialing a phone. The world appeared as if in a fog. I couldn't see straight; I could barely hear. Other people loomed as shadowy figures through the mist, approaching or retreating, nearly always threatening.

It started in the months after graduation. I had decided to take the year off before college and travel. I knew that I wanted to be a writer, and in my mind I was beginning my apprenticeship. I would read and write, explore the world, work at whatever job that came along. First I went to Juneau,

Alaska. I took a job in the office of a theater company that flew around in little planes, performing their shows in remote locales. I found an apartment on the hillside in town overlooking the water, got a library card. The landscape was beautiful, even through the constant blur of rain. But I was spending more and more time alone, reading and writing, huddled in my apartment. One evening, as I was returning home from work, a group of dogs ambushed me on the street. One bit me on the inner thigh, leaving deep teeth marks. I began to feel more and more afraid of going out.

Next I went to London. Through a contact, I found a job in an upscale restaurant called the River Café. One day, I was waiting on a large table of businesspeople out to lunch. They all wanted steak, but each cooked a different way. My ears felt stuffed with cotton; I wasn't **NOSTALGIA**>134

hearing well. I got the orders all wrong and then, confused at my own mistake, dropped a plate, the warm bloody steak landing on my foot with a plop. The owners, two women, gently suggested I rest.

I was feeling more and more jittery, but I didn't want to go home, equivalent in my mind to admitting defeat. If I didn't stick this out, I would never be a writer. "I just have to rest," I told myself. "I just have to get somewhere where I can rest." A man I'd been seeing on and off, whom I'll call Paul, got in touch. He was on his way to France. Did I want to meet up? A friend had offered him a house in the countryside in Bordeaux. On my way there to meet him, I pictured myself falling in front of moving cars on the street, out the doors of the speeding train. I clutched lampposts, guardrails. I even pictured myself falling when there was nowhere to fall, when I was simply sitting waiting on a bench.

Paul was a writer himself, ten years older than me, and full of opinions about how to do everything—how to peel a pear, wear your hair, clean your ears, keep a strict writing regimen, talk to strangers on the phone, wipe a tile floor. Plunging into a relationship in my state was overwhelming, and even more so with a man who intimidated me. I stumbled around the house, tried to force myself to speak, gave up and took to the bed, where I lay nearly catatonic, staring out at the vineyards in their pretty little rows, until Paul finally persuaded me to get on a plane and fly home.

Nervous conditions run through the family bloodlines, along with more serious maladies like manic depression. My grandmother's great-aunt Clover Hooper Adams, an accomplished portrait photographer, was married to Henry Adams

I began to wander through the house, rediscovering childhood wonders: John La Farge watercolors, Whistler paintings, little velvet boxes stuffed with human hair

and written about by Henry James. ("Clover Hooper has it—intellectual grace—Minnie Temple has it—moral spontaneity," James wrote of the two women [Temple was his cousin] who served as models for his great American heroines, Daisy Miller and Isabel Archer.) For her part, Clover once quipped of James's style: "He chews more than he bites off." When her father died, Clover, age 42 and deeply depressed, committed suicide by drinking developing fluid; after spending time in various psychiatric institutions, Grandma's sister, Bunny, was given a lobotomy—the only way, doctors assured the family, that she would be able to return home and take care of her two small children. But not all the stories were tragic. My great-great-grandfather Ned Hooper, who had a proclivity toward depression, lived a full life that included a successful marriage and five children as well as a distinguished career as treasurer of Harvard University—before he checked himself into a psychiatric institute near the end of his life.

I now followed in his footsteps, though in my case the clinic was my grandparents' turn-of-the-century twelve-bedroom



TO THE MANOR BORN
THE AUTHOR'S GRANDMOTHER AT THE AGE OF FOUR.

manor house just down the road from the Mount, Edith Wharton's grand home in Lenox, Massachusetts. At Cherry Hill, as the house was called, mental illness wasn't shunned—there was no woman in the attic—but, rather, managed. I was one in a line of many refugees who showed up at the house in a fragile state and found a safe haven. Decades earlier the arrangement had been formalized when the founder of the Austen Riggs Center, the tony psychiatric institution in neighboring Stockbridge, approached my grandparents with a proposition. The institution was experimenting with a new program in which patients who'd made progress would be sent to live in nearby homes. Aware of my grandparents' acceptance, even valorization, of eccentricity, as well as of their need for money—they had suffered a great loss of wealth during the Depression and afterward, due to my grandfather's spendthrift ways—Dr. Riggs asked if they'd be interested in housing Riggs's outpatients during the latter stages of their treatment.

The doctors at Riggs were enamored with Grandma, whose indirect methods and subtle ways they thought of as wonderfully creative. "They were all just so peculiar that you immediately felt that you were OK," Sally Begley, a Riggs outpatient who became a lifelong family friend, says of the scene at Cherry Hill. As part of the curative process, Sally had been enrolled to take care of a baby—my uncle Nick, as it turned out—and took it upon herself to clean up the kitchen every night after dinner. Even after she'd returned to Radcliffe, she would rush back to the house on weekends to study; later, she and her new family settled in the cottage at the bottom of the drive.

My own "cure" was diffuse; it was multifaceted. A good part of it was that, while provided meals and shelter, I was left to my own devices. As children, we had always visited Cherry Hill twice a year—in the summer to sail on the Stockbridge Bowl, in the winter to ski and celebrate Christmas—but until this visit, I had never been there on my own. At first, I just stayed in my room and in the adjacent bathroom, taking long baths. Then, tentatively, I began to wander through the house, rediscovering childhood wonders. Grandma, who was from a family of hoarders, was a hoarder herself: Bare lightbulbs hung from the basement ceiling illuminated rows and rows of ear trumpets, sewing machines, irons, antiquated microscopes, while in the attic rested the entire estates of ancestors long gone—John La Farge

CONTINUED ON PAGE 286

RUNOVER

watercolors, Whistler paintings, Victorian lamps and Oriental screens, little velvet boxes stuffed with human hair. I spent hours up there picking through clothes—wool skirts, velvet-and-brocade dresses, hunting jackets, ball gowns—and sneaking down to my room to try them on.

At the beginning, I dreaded meals—but when I realized that no one seemed to think it strange that I wasn't speaking, or that I was clutching my chair so I wouldn't fall, I gradually began to look forward to them. Except for formal dinners, we ate in the kitchen. The walls were painted eggshell blue, the ceiling covered with silver wrapping paper. Grandma, who wore her dark hair in a bob—in her youth, she had been known as a beauty—sat at one end of the table and Papa, my grandfather, at the other. Each of them wore a daily uniform, Papa black pants and a white button-down shirt, Grandma a denim skirt and a lavender or blue blouse that functioned as her garden clothes. While something delicious had always been prepared—roast lamb with mint sauce and wild rice, a slab of salmon, cornmeal pancakes—everyone was also free to eat what they pleased. Grandma's meal of choice was a large piece of cow liver topped with raw bean sprouts, while Papa's was grape-juice concentrate from the can. Besides my aunt's college roommate, Carol, who'd come for a visit 20 years ago and never left, there were always other people around—my two uncles who still lived and worked on the property and their girlfriends or children, the various inhabitants of the tenant houses, the young men helping to construct the fish pond or rice paddy, family friends like the art appraiser up from Boston or the tiny Austrian spy. The table was piled high with food; when the door was left open, the chickens wandered in.

(In 2001, when the family could no longer afford to keep it, Cherry Hill was sold to a wealthy young banker, who uses it as his summer residence today. Needless to say, it has been substantially cleared out and remodeled. I have yet to see it in this state—though the new owner is amenable to giving tours for our family members—yet what it's lost in eccentricity it has apparently retained in allure. My nine-year-old nephew recently returned

from one of these tours, bug-eyed, and constructed a Minecraft version of what he called “the mansion,” which he eagerly walked me through.)

Little by little, my shakiness dwindled. The house offered much, yet it also requested things. Like Sally, I took it upon myself to clean up the kitchen nightly; I weeded the clay tennis court. I recovered my former athletic prowess by learning to ride my uncle Nick's unicycle back and forth down the hallway from the kitchen to the library.

Gradually I even began to talk, little by little, to Grandma in the kitchen. Having relaunched my apprenticeship, I was reading *The Portrait of a Lady*, and she told me about reading Henry James aloud to her 100-year-old mother and how, when they got to his late style, “the sentences so impossibly complicated,” she feared that her mother would believe that she had finally and definitively lost her mind.

She recounted scenes from her childhood abroad—her father was a well-respected artist who traveled Europe collecting works for Boston's Museum of Fine Arts—and her honeymoon out West with Papa; she talked of her gardening plans, her home-improvement projects (“I've decided that my closet needs to be cleared out every 45 years, and that's now”). We made pilgrimages outside to see the things she'd planted—the katsura at the wood's edge, the pink dogwood out by the curve in the drive that “seemed to have died in despair” because of the drought (“They have shallow roots,” Grandma said) but that, thanks to bucket after bucket of water, was now reviving. One evening, in the latter part of my stay, Grandma took me to see Shakespeare & Company's outdoor performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Mount. We sat on the grass, a picnic between us, and watched as the band of fairies came creeping toward us through the trees.

Several months passed. I could easily have lingered, as had so many others, but it felt like the right time to be going on my way. But not before hearing, as I came down the stairs, Grandma sitting at her writing desk murmuring something into the phone to my mother. (The two had been in close touch over the course of my stay.)

“She seems all right to me,” she said. It was just what I needed as a

benediction. □