

One Unplanned

Adele put both hands over her ears and leaned forward onto her elbows. She made a vow on all that was elegant and lovely in the universe, she would avoid hearing any more family disasters. Good thing the desk was solid, because she wasn't about to let one bit of sound inside her palms. Useless drama was an unfortunate hazard of living in a big family, (the big family part being one of her current disappointments with her mother), but listening for more information (like her cousins did) was not something she planned to do. Ever.

The problem with living in a family like hers was its complete lack of elegance. There was constant eating and pooping, cleaning and messing, squealing and quarreling. She had staged a coup last year that had successfully ousted her little sister from their shared bedroom into the big storage closet, which Adele's very clever father had turned into another bedroom. The change had happened on her birthday last year, a birthday on which her parents for the first time had asked her what she wanted as a gift. Adele had said, "A dictionary. Unabridged, please."

Her father had gotten his startled owl look and said, "What?" which she felt showed less insight than usual. Her mother had narrowed her eyes and said, "Really?" and then she had actually stood still for twenty seconds straight, staring at Adele. Her younger brother Brady had said, "That's the dumbest thing I ever heard!" and gave a honking snort, which had contaminated the entire breakfast table. Carmen, who was even younger, made the only sensible comment: "Why do you want a dictionary for your birthday?"

Things turned chaotic then because both Danny & Eddy threw their cereal bowls on the floor at exactly the same moment. The clatter was so loud the twins hung over the edges of their high chairs for a few moments to see if the bowls, now upside down on the floor, would do anything else as resoundingly interesting. Everybody at the table burst out laughing, except Adele, who coldly observed the family was only making matters worse.

Adele had waited a few minutes for the chaos to subside (meaning the mess was still there, but nobody was shouting about it). Then she rose from the breakfast table as

regally as she could. She began her reason for wanting a dictionary by looking directly at Carmen. “I want a dictionary for my birthday . . .” (and then she looked directly at Brady) “. . . so I can rise above the common.” Brady had goggled his eyes back at her and then crossed them for an extra-insulting silent effect neither parent would be able to detect (which means to discover the truth about something even if it is hidden or disguised). Carmen’s eyes had gotten very wide and round as she considered wanting such a thing as a dictionary. Her mother and father had raised both sets of eyebrows as they searched each other’s faces for an answer to this surprising request.

Adele took in all of it. Nothing escaped her. Every nuance of the family’s reaction was recorded in the deep places of her heart. Satisfied she had created the effect she intended, she completed the scene with a graceful exit from the kitchen, her head held high, her posture perfect.

Nobody had called Adele to come to dinner, and her elbows were starting to ache. They were probably turning purple. And she could hear her heart beat in the blood pounding in her ears under her clamped palms. She also knew she ought to go down and offer to help get dinner ready, but she didn’t want to. She’d wait until somebody called her to come and help. She sat back in her desk chair (feeling immediate relief in the elbow and ear areas) and gazed at the pink invitation attached to the bulletin board in front of her.

Then she opened her dictionary to the first page of Bs. Adele had resolved to read each word and definition in order without skipping a single one. But a picture on the middle of the first page of Bs caught her attention. (Who knew an unabridged dictionary was illustrated?) It was a flat slipper with pretty embroidery decorations on it. The word under it was “babouche.” Adele practiced it over and over in her mouth for the feel of it. Maybe soon one of her friends would ask her what she wanted for her birthday and she could say, “I’d like some new babouche. In pink, preferably. You know how lovely they are.” It would be an elegant conversation to have in the school cafeteria.

Her friends would have to hurry up and get organized about it, though, because her birthday was on the first day after school was out for summer vacation. The family rule was each child was allowed to have a birthday party on alternate years. This year she would have a family-only party with a cake and presents, but no friends; this year it was Brady’s turn for a friend party, not hers, and Adele hoped fervently she would not be

expected to endure any part of the shouting and running around she knew by experience would happen at his party. Adele considered the possibility that one of her friends would have a lovely party for her even if her mother didn't intend to . . . maybe with a gift of some babouche . . . wrapped up in lovely pink flowered paper.

Adele had completed all the A words the first year she had gotten the dictionary. She calculated in just twenty-five more years, elegance of expression would be hers. She would be very old by then, thirty-six, which was nearly as old as her Grandma Miriam, but at least she would have the satisfaction of speaking with elegance. Adele was certain because she'd seen it with the newscasters on TV that choosing the best words and speaking them with a certain air—she was less clear on exactly what that was—would create an eddy of elegance surrounding her at all times, despite the crudities of her siblings. She had heard the word “siblings,” on a TV talk show before her father made her turn it off and had gone directly up to the dictionary in her room. It meant, “One of two or more persons who have the same parents but are not necessarily of the same birth.” Adele had smiled. She would no longer have to use everyday words like “brother” or “sister;” she could now be aloof with “sibling.”

As Adele closed the dictionary, she heard a tremendous crash in the kitchen, which was directly below her bedroom. She put her hands back over her ears. If she couldn't hear a disaster, she didn't have to do anything about it, right? Adele thought about how to say the idea in a very elegant way for a few minutes and came up with this version: *There is no moral obligation to respond to a crisis unless you heard one unfolding; if you did not hear it unfold, the crisis does not exist in your sphere of responsibility.* She lifted the edge of one palm to check the noise level. The roar was down to the level of destruction that accompanied meal preparations in her house.

Adele gingerly removed both hands from her ears, testing, and took down the pink invitation from the bulletin board. The card was smooth and glossy like it had been enameled. Adele reread it for maybe the fortieth time. Lanny, her cousin, had invited Adele to her birthday party. Lanny not only had an elegant name, she was also born to an elegant mother who created elegant birthday parties for the elegant life of her most elegant eldest daughter, who called herself a sophomore in junior high school. (Really she was going into eighth grade next year, but saying it the other way sounded much older.)

During her Lanny's last visit, Adele had said she was going to be a sophomore in middle school. Her school organized grades differently, so she was really going into seventh grade next year. Lanny was not pleased and had assured Adele the two grades were not parallel in any way. She, Lanny, was turning thirteen, while Adele would merely be twelve, and the year's difference between them contained many indefinable gradations of advancement (meaning Lanny thought it was great she was a whole year older than Adele and, besides, eighth grade was cool and seventh grade wasn't.)

Adele sat in her highly ordered bedroom, lovingly stroked the pink satin finish of the invitation, and thought about the heady pleasures of being at an older girl's birthday party. Of course Lanny's sister, who was almost a whole year younger than Adele, would also be invited. But still, Aunt Lana was known in the family to be the aunt who gave the most wonderful parties imaginable, and Jacey was a highly civilized cousin. All this in contrast to Adele's mother's birthday parties, which were far less than elegant, even something of a scramble. Brady was obviously highly uncivilized, Carmen was not even approximately the right age for a guest, and Adele thought she would never endure the humiliation if her mother let those walking bits of destruction, the twins, show up at her party next year.

How the twins came to be part of the family was an embarrassment in itself. Both of her parents admitted they were unplanned and joked about it with friends and neighbors. For years Adele had accepted the fact, but then she learned what "planned" and "unplanned" meant, and the whole idea of her parents being involved in that was horrifying. Adele simply couldn't believe it had gone on in her own house. In a room just two doors away from hers, just a few walls away from her private, quiet bedroom. It was unthinkable.

So Adele did not think of it. That is, unless she had the misfortune of hearing her mother once again announce the existence of the twins to somebody as an excuse for why the house was so messy. "Unplanned" should be limited to zoning for streets or something. No, Adele did not think about that. Except for when she had to.

Which was frequently, since the fact of the twins' existence was ubiquitous (meaning found everywhere). The evidence was their marauding entries into the inner sanctum of her private space (which was a very elegant way of saying the twins got into her bedroom sometimes when she was at school, pulled stuff out of her drawers, and made a

terrible mess.) These depredations caused Adele a great deal of grief. She planned out her approach to her parents for several days before she said one morning, “Mother. Some people enjoy privacy in their rooms without siblings destroying things while they are gone to school.” Adele had thought it was a sensitive approach, considering how angry she felt.

Her mother had said, “Sorry, hon. What do you want me to do about it?”

This was another failing of her mother’s. Calling people “hon” instead of their real names. Her mother said it was short for “honey” and therefore a sweet name Adele should adore. But Adele believed her mother couldn’t remember people’s names fast enough in their busy house, and that was why she had taken to calling everybody who lived there “hon.”

It was an objectionable appellation in the second place because the image of a Hun, as in Attila the Hun and his marauding band, flitted through her mind as she imagined her little brothers heading for her room to pillage and plunder while she was off at school. A further insensitivity was her mother asking Adele what should be done about the problem. Her mother was the parent, not Adele; her mother should know these things.

Consequently Adele had been obliged to openly lobby for a key to lock her room. Her parents had agreed on condition it be locked only when she was not in her room, for safety reasons. Adele thought of frying in a house fire and then agreed. There were so many grizzly elements to life. It was most unnerving if you had to contemplate very many of them at the same time.

It lingered with Adele as a disappointment that the matter of her room being kept sacrosanct (meaning holy or sacred, which Adele realized was probably a stronger word than she needed—the point being simply that no little siblings should ever go into her room) had not been handled in the delicate manner she had envisioned.

Just then Brady shouted up the stairs, “Adele! Dinner!”

Adele sighed, envisioning another scene of dinnertime bedlam, and replaced the party invitation in its place in the mirror frame as she prepared herself.