"Well, I run out of gas twelve miles out from the McConnell's and I walked the rest of the way here. Lord, I'm tired." He sighed heavily and fell asleep.

Adah felt the bottom of her heart give way. Her ears burned with shame as she went over the thoughts that had come to her while she was watching for headlights at the window. She felt that she stood before a solemn judge who looked coldly at her nakedness and waited for her to speak.

“A woman’s got troubles all her own,” she said. “Men-folks don’t know.” She settled herself comfortably for the night.

The Guiding Hand

Patricia Anne Moriarity

I

“Do you know any nice Jewish boys for my Deborah?” whined Miriam Klein into the phone. “I swear, Mrs. Chahevsky, it’s enough to give a mother grey hair, worrying about an only daughter. She’s twenty-two now, you know, and hasn’t given a thought to getting married some day. I’m telling you it’s like pulling teeth to get her to go out even. I tell her, ‘Debbie, why don’t you go out with that nice Epstein boy?’ and she says to me, ‘Oh Mom, I don’t like him,’ and I say to her, ‘You might like him if you’d give him a chance.’ But she just sits home every night and watches television. You’d think nice Jewish boys grew on trees the way she talks.

“I was telling Jake just the other day, ‘Jake,’ I said to him, ‘Jake, are there any nice Jewish boys down at the store for Deborah?’ But Jake, he won’t do anything. Anything to be done around this house, I do, like always. Jake always says, ‘Let Deborah be. She’ll find a nice boy when she’s ready.’ Just like she had all the time in the world, or something.

“You say Mrs. Shapiro’s nephew is coming soon? Good! Maybe Deborah would like him. I’ll call up Mrs. Shapiro this afternoon and have them all come over to dinner when he comes. Deborah will appreciate what a thoughtful mother she has one of these days.”

Later that afternoon, Deborah came home from her job as assistant in the downtown library. She walked into the kitchen and began setting the table for dinner. As she arranged the three plates on the checkered tablecloth, her mother bustled in and hurried to the stove to put the finishing touches on dinner.

“Debbie, Mrs. Shapiro’s sister’s son is coming to visit her next month, and I invited them to dinner so you two can get acquainted.”

Deborah breathed a weary sigh. “Mom, why don’t you give up. I’ll get married when I’m ready. Your continual matchmaking doesn’t do anything but embarrass me and the poor sucker that gets roped into coming.”
That’s gratitude for you, I’m telling you. You give your whole life to your children and what do you get back but a slap in the face. ‘Leave me alone Mom, I don’t want to Mom, you embarrass me Mom’ that’s all I ever get from you. It’s a curse to be a mother—a curse. Nobody ever appreciates a mother.”

Mrs. Klein continued raving, but by this time Deborah had drawn herself in, only half listening to the familiar speech. When her mother showed no signs of stopping, Debbie slowed her down: “All right, Mother, whatever you say.”

Since Deborah had to work until eight the next night, she didn’t go to the library until ten. As she was hanging up her coat, the librarian walked in and stood before the cloak-room mirror, casually smoothing her hair. “That young soldier was in here again this morning looking for you.”

Deborah glanced at her from the corner of her eye, trying to look unconcerned. “Oh, really? I wonder what he wanted?”

The librarian moistened her lips and evened up her lipstick with her little finger. “He didn’t say. You been dating him?”

“Oh, occasionally,” Deborah answered, wondering why she was so interested in her all of a sudden. “He’s not exactly the nice Jewish boy that my mother is always talking about, you know.”

The librarian laughed. “You can say that again. A more Irish face you wouldn’t find on St. Patrick himself. What a scream if you two ended up together. Some combination!” She laughed all the way out to her desk.

“I’ll have to do something tonight,” Deborah thought nervously. “I refuse to go sneaking around like a criminal any more. I’ll have to do something tonight.”

At exactly ten minutes to eight Glenn Conner walked in the library. Deborah was filing cards in the catalog and looked up just in time to see him walk over to the current magazine table and sit down. She glanced hurriedly at the loan desk to see if the librarian had noticed, but apparently she had been engrossed in telling a patron of the evils of overdue books. She’d see him before eight o’clock, however.

“This has to stop,” Deborah thought nervously. “I refuse to go sneaking around like a criminal any more. I’ll have to do something tonight.”

At 8:05 the librarian gave the couple the sly look of one who thinks she’s in on a secret and walked off in the opposite direction. They walked along silently, heading for the little coffee shop where they always went after Deborah got off work, and when Glenn could get away from camp. Deborah hadn’t exactly been truthful with the librarian about the frequency of her dates with Glenn. For several months they had tried to keep their dates quiet, but now it was public knowledge that the little Jewish girl, Deborah Klein, was going with an Irish soldier from the nearby army camp.
When they reached the coffee shop, they went straight to their favorite table back in the far corner and ordered two cups of black coffee. Both remained quiet for some time. Finally, Glenn took out two cigarettes, lit them both, and handed one to Debbie. Aware of the tension that was building up between them, she took it and smiled, grateful for the momentary relief it brought.

The waitress brought the coffee. Glenn emptied a package of sugar in his and began to stir. Deborah sat staring at her cup, as though looking for courage. Without raising her eyes, she broke the silence. “Glenn, I don’t want to see you any more.”

He showed no reaction. He seemed to be unaware that he was still stirring his coffee. Still staring at her cup, she continued softly. “I can’t stand this sneaking around any more. Everybody in town knows we’ve been seeing each other, so my mother’s bound to find out.”

“Let her find out. I’m all for it.” He suddenly stopped stirring. “I was never in favor of this undercover operation. I haven’t done anything to be ashamed of, and I don’t see any reason to hide. I’m going to your mother tomorrow and talk to her myself.”

“Oh no, you can’t do that!” She looked up quickly. “You don’t understand. She probably wouldn’t even see you, and even if she did, she’d make a terrible scene. She’d call you names and me names and have hysterics, and it would go on for days. You see, Mom has my future practically mapped out, and it doesn’t include you or anyone like you. I have been destined to marry some nice Jewish boy and live unhappily ever after, and there’s nothing that either you or I can do to change her mind.”

Glenn looked at her intently. “Debbie,” he said quietly, “how long are you going to let your mother run your life?”

“Oh, Glenn, it isn’t a question of my letting her run my life. She just wants what’s best for me. And besides, I hate to argue with her. She gets so excited, and her heart trouble . . .”

“Heart trouble my foot! That old woman’s got a heart as strong as an ox. Haven’t you ever noticed that her heart only bothers her when you cause her trouble? Any time she doesn’t get her own way—bang! comes a heart attack.”

“Now you won’t even listen to reason.” Her eyes glistened.

“Anything that’s going to break us up is not reasonable,” he shot back.

She dropped her eyes. “I’m sorry, Glenn. That’s the way it has to be.”

He stood up, fumbled in his pocket for a dime for the coffee, and flipped it on the table. He gazed down at her with a pitying expression. “Give me a call when you grow up.” He turned and walked out of the shop.

A week passed. Her mother showed no indication of knowing
about the meeting. That is, not until the day she came storming in from a shopping trip. As soon as she had reached the front door—“Deborah! Jake! Come in here!”

Debbie cringed, knowing what was coming, and walked in to face her mother. Jake entered the parlor with an open newspaper in one hand and his reading glasses in the other. His houseslippers scuffed across the floor. “What is it, Dear?”

Deborah noticed how old he suddenly looked. “Deborah, Mrs. Abrams told me today she had heard you’ve been seeing a soldier from the army camp behind my back, and that he’s Catholic and an Irishman. I told Mrs. Abrams, I said, ‘People should have their mouths washed out with soap for spreading such lies!’ They are lies, aren’t they, Debbie?”

Deborah took a deep breath. Here it comes, she thought to herself. She looked straight at her mother. “No, Morn, it’s true.”

Miriam Klein looked as if someone had slapped her across the face. She stared in disbelief at her daughter. “What is this you’re saying? You stand there and tell me you’ve been seeing this . . . this . . . Irishman, sneaking out and meeting him behind my back?”

“Don’t call him an Irishman. He’s third generation. And I didn’t want to do it behind your back, but you’re so unreasonable about things.”

“I’m unreasonable!” Miriam screamed. “I’m unreasonable. My only daughter brings disgrace upon our house and when I have shame for her I’m unreasonable.”

“Now, Mother . . .”

“Don’t you ‘now Mother’ me, you sneaky little—”

“Mom, I haven’t done anything to be ashamed of. Glenn and I love each other. I didn’t start out to do this. I didn’t want it. But it happened.”

Miriam turned to Jake. “Jake, did you hear? Your only daughter has brought shame to our house. You see how good at managing her own affairs she is? ‘Leave her alone’ you always said. ‘She’ll be all right.’ Well, now you see how all right she is. I tried to tell you that all along, but, no, you wouldn’t listen. Nobody ever listens!”

Jake stared with pleading eyes at his daughter.

“Oh, for Heaven’s sake,” Deborah interrupted. “This is all past history now. I haven’t seen Glenn for over a week, and I doubt if he’ll ever want to see me again.”

This statement abruptly halted Miriam’s ravings. “You mean you won’t see him any more?”

“Oh no, I’d see him in a minute, make no mistake about that. But he won’t want to see me. He’s being shipped out in a few days anyway, so I’ll probably never see him again.”

Mrs. Klein breathed a sigh of relief. Then, remembering, she slumped down in the nearest comfortable chair, panting. “Oh, my poor old heart. What a strain it goes through.”

Jake padded out and brought her back a glass of water. She
drank it, then leaned back, lightly fanning herself with her handkerchief.

“Oh, dear,” she sighed. “Sometimes I don’t think living is worth all the trouble it takes.”

IV

The family had gone to bed early that night, right after the TV news. The light in Deborah’s room was still on when she heard a pounding on the front door downstairs. She heard her mother padding past her room on her way to answer, with Mr. Klein shuffling along behind her.

When Mrs. Klein turned on the front room light and opened the door, she faced an excited soldier. She knew instinctively who it was.

“Is Debbie in? I know it’s late, Mrs. Klein, but it’s very important.”

“What do you want here,” she whispered. “Go away. Deborah doesn’t want to see you.”

“Please, Mrs. Klein.” Glenn was almost begging. “Try to understand.”

“Miriam, let the boy come in. He has the right to see Deborah if he wishes.”

She turned on Jake, trembling with rage. As she turned, Glenn stepped into the room. She wheeled back to Glenn.

“Get out of here!” she shrieked. “We don’t want you. You’ll bring us nothing but trouble.”

Then a soft voice behind Miriam said, “It’s all right, Mother. I want to see him.”

As the couple stood facing each other, Miriam felt her grasp on the family slip. Neither she nor Jake made any move to leave the room.

Deborah broke the silence. “How have you been, Glenn?” She realized as soon as she had spoken how ridiculous it sounded. Glenn stood stiffly with his arms at his sides, conscious of their eyes on him.

“Debbie . . . I’m being shipped out. I don’t know where. I’ve got twenty-four hours before I have to report. Twenty-four hours that we could spend together. I waited for you to call. I told myself the first move would have to be yours. But I can’t wait any longer. Time’s run out. Please, Debbie. Come with me.”

Deborah showed no emotion. Her parents stared intently, waiting to see what she’d say.

“Just a minute. I’ll get dressed.”

Her mother paled. “Deborah, what are you thinking? You mean you’d walk out of here in the middle of the night with this . . . this . . .”

“I’m going Mother. Don’t try to stop me.” Deborah spoke not in anger but with a quiet determination. Her mother couldn’t believe her ears.
“Am I dreaming? Is this my little girl speaking so to me?
Don’t you care about us anymore?”

“Good God, Mother, I’m twenty-two years old. When are you going to let me make my own decisions? You’ve run my life up to now. Now, I’m going to take over.”

“Dear God, help me,” moaned Miriam. She fell back into the chair and leaned back, gasping for breath. She felt sick. Her head was burning, but she was cold all over.

Jake rushed over to her. “Miriam, are you all right? What’s the matter?”

She just sat there, moaning, gasping for air.

“Deborah!” Jake screamed. “Call the doctor! I’m afraid it’s her heart.”

Deborah was confused. She didn’t know what to do. She had always thought her mother was faking before. She looked to Glenn for help.

“Debbie, call the doctor, then leave with me now. If you don’t, you’ll never get away.”

She was helpless. “Glenn, what if she really is sick? I brought it on. I can’t leave now. Glenn, she’s my mother!”

Glenn’s face was dark. He stared at her for a moment, then turned and stalked out.

“Glenn, wait!” she called. But it was too late. He was gone.

Several months passed before Deborah heard anything more about Glenn. Then she received a letter from a buddy in his outfit. “Dear Debbie—Glenn talked about you so much that I feel I know you. He would have wanted me to write to let you know of his accident. It was over quickly. I doubt—”

Debbie leaned back in the chair. She was conscious of her mother chattering on the phone in the other room. After a while, her mother came in.

“Deborah, Mrs. Kuhn and her son are coming over for dinner tonight. Be sure and wear your pretty blue dress. I’m sure you’ll like Harold. He’s such a sweet boy. And it’s time you met some nice Jewish boy and settled down.”

“All right, Mother,” Debbie said. “Whatever you say.”

The Tent

Jean F. Campbell

A bright slice of sun cut the sleep out of Johnny’s eyes and he sat straight up in bed. The house was quiet. That meant it was early—or else Saturday. Janie slept hunched on her hands and knees in her baby bed across the room. He started to sing one of his nameless tunes to waken her but he stopped in the first breath. Something was special about today. What was it?