

My very first memory of a place with me in it was in our New York apartment. I was three or four years old and sitting on a hassock, trying to sit still for three minutes—a feat for which my father would give me a penny. No indication of future greatness or financial success. The year must have been 1934 or 1935. I remember this apartment astonishingly well. The living room started at the end of a rather long (or it seemed so to me at that time) hall. From this room there was a wide doorway into the dining room and beyond, then a large bedroom.

My sister and I, sleeping in two full-size beds, shared the large bedroom, My parents slept in the smaller bedroom in a bunk bed, which had been designed and constructed by my father. This bed was very large and sturdy and my father slept on top and my mother on bottom. This was my first knowledge of family sleeping arrangements and I accepted it: parents having a small back room with bunk beds, and children having a large sunny room with twin beds. There was also a full-sized kitchen and a bathroom with a huge tub, which at my size brought the water right up to my chin. My sister and I routinely bathed together and there was plenty of room for us both.

The kitchen was Mary's domain, and fortunately for us, she welcomed us into it. Mary was what we called in those days a maid. She did everything in the house as well as take care of us. She cooked, cleaned, did the marketing and the laundry and usually saw that we were bathed each night and got us into bed. She had a room just by the door of the apartment front ourselves; like taking a bath and washing when all we by the front door of the apartment, but shared the family bathroom. She was wonderful to us and taught us all the rudimentaries of taking care of ourselves.

I loved Mary. She was big and soft and liked to hug and be hugged and she never raised her voice. She clearly expected us to obey her, and we did.

Mary told us many tales about starving children in Ireland. Add that to my parents having been affected financially by the Depression, and they formed a solid phalanx when it came to food. We were expected to eat everything on our plates. We were allowed to ask for "small portions please," but what we got, we ate. We always had dessert. Our usual desserts were fresh and canned fruit or puddings, which Mary would prepare in the afternoon when it tended to be quiet in the apartment. She always made puddings from scratch.

We loved

them all except, in my case, one. That was tapioca. The first time we had tapioca I didn't like the look of it. But I took an optimistic mouthful and had a mouth full of gelatinous stuff with lumps and I didn't know what to do with it. I couldn't swallow it, I just couldn't. It would have been disastrous to spit it into the linen napkins we used in those days. So I finally spit it out into the bowl. Mary was so shocked she was speechless, a situation never witnessed before. When she started to say in her firm quiet voice that Miss Ruth was expected to eat every bit of her dessert, I started to cry. Mary, never having met with problems with me and my crying being so unusual, took the dish away and said she would talk to my mother. I didn't think ahead to what would happen, I was just happy that the hateful mess was removed. I was probably sent straight to my bed for being disobedient.

This situation could have gotten out of hand except for my mother's basic sense of fairness and Mary's gentleness, and the next time we had tapioca pudding, I was about to say "I can't eat that" as tears started to form in my eyes. Mary said, "It was decided that Ruthie would be excused from eating tapioca pudding." Please don't think that I was given anything else or that tapioca wasn't there in its usual rotation. Everything went on as usual, I just didn't have dessert on tapioca nights.