

**ONE
CITY
ONE
STORY**

Sublimation

Jennifer Haigh

2014



Dear Reader,

As I've put together the City of Boston's new administration, celebrating the role of arts and culture in the lives of our residents has been a top priority. Boston is a city with a strong and vibrant literary and cultural tradition, thanks in part to established programs like One City One Story (now in its fifth year) and exciting new initiatives like Boston's proposed Literary Cultural District.

I am pleased to support the efforts of the Boston Book Festival and encourage reading for pleasure among the adults of our city. One City One Story brings literature to our residents where they live, work and play, and it encourages us all to engage not only with a great story, but also with each other. As always the story is freely available in print in English and Spanish as well as online in several additional languages (including, for the first time, Russian and Vietnamese).

I hope that you enjoy this thoughtful story about family, identity, and connection by local author Jennifer Haigh, and I encourage you to participate in the conversation.

Happy reading!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Martin J. Walsh".

Martin J. Walsh
Mayor of Boston

Introduction

The Boston Book Festival presents the fifth annual One City One Story program, a project that aims to promote literature among the teens and adults of our city and to create community around a shared reading experience.

Our goal is to make a short story available to all free of charge. By distributing 30,000 printed copies of Jennifer Haigh's "Sublimation" in both English and Spanish, and by providing downloads and additional translations on our website, we aim to ignite discussions that reveal the many perspectives and viewpoints of Boston residents.

Again this year, we are pleased to partner with Dunkin' Donuts. Thanks to their support, copies of the story are available at many Dunkin' locations in Greater Boston.

We hope you will read, enjoy, and discuss "Sublimation" at local meet-ups, library events, and on our website. If you are inspired by this story to discuss it or even write your own, check out the One City One Story discussion questions and writing contest on our website.

Visit www.bostonbookfest.org/1c1s to learn more.

We hope you will join us at the Boston Book Festival on October 25th to meet Jennifer Haigh and take part in a Town Hall-style discussion of the story.

ONE CITY ONE STORY: READ. THINK. SHARE.

Sublimation

Every evening after the network news, Dolly and her son watch *Jeopardy!* The habit dates back thirty years, to Bruce's moody adolescence. Naturally shy, he was prone even then to sudden, awkward displays of confidence. *Jeopardy!* let him show off his worldly knowledge, which for a boy who'd seldom left the state of Maryland—who wouldn't leave the house, if he could help it—was vast indeed.

Now that Bruce has moved back home, they tune in as though nothing has changed, though of course everything has. He is forty-six now, marginally employed; Dolly a year shy of eighty and in questionable health. In three decades, they and the world have transformed unrecognizably. *Jeopardy!* is exactly the same.

He sits in his old spot, cross-legged on the divan, Dolly in the plaid armchair once reserved for her husband. Ten years widowed, she no longer considers it Tony's chair, no longer—it's terrible—considers Tony much at all, though he's right there on top of the piano, Dolly and Tony dressed in the usual way, a larger version of the couple on the cake. The wedding photo is flanked on either side by high school graduation portraits of Bruce and Andrew. Both boys resemble their father but, oddly, look nothing alike.

"What is mitosis?" Bruce asks the television.

The familiar rhythm is comforting, each clue answered with a question. Dolly's memory is sluggish since the stroke, her mind like an old car that needs warming up. Bruce answers aloud before she can even process the clues.

“Who is Evel Knievel?”

“What was Biafra?”

“What is ‘Rock Around the Clock?’”

Occasionally he gets an answer wrong—answering *mitosis*, for example, instead of *meiosis*. Dolly pretends not to notice. At school the nuns called him gifted, praised his careful penmanship, his quick arithmetic, his memory for names and dates. Who knew, then, that the world was about to change in unsettling ways, the whole human race plugged into computers morning, noon, and night? That handwriting and arithmetic would become obsolete and knowledge itself would lose its value, once any half-bright teenager could, with a few keystrokes, conjure it from the air.

At the commercial she goes into the kitchen to mix their highballs. One drink a day is good for her cholesterol, according to *Prevention* magazine. Married to an industrious drinker, she'd been, not coincidentally, a teetotaler until her seventies. Now she looks forward to the reliable festivity of her nightly cocktail—a fair reward, at her age, for getting through another day.

On a pretty tray she arranges the drinks—hers mostly ginger ale, a stronger one for Bruce—and brings them out to the living room. “That one's yours, dear.”

She always calls him *dear* in the evenings. It's easier, somehow, than addressing him by name.

“Thanks, hon.” Bruce drinks deeply, leaving a bloom of lipstick on the rim of his glass. The new wig is an improvement over his old one, closer to his natural color. She never had the heart to tell him he was unconvincing as a blonde.

“Who was Pericles?” he asks the television. “What is the Knesset?”

Bruce and *Dolly* are the names the world calls them, names they have always called each other. At home in the evening, behind closed doors, they are *dear* and *hon*.

She imagines Tony watching them from atop the piano, young Tony staring out from the photo at what they've become.

Bruce sleeps in his boyhood room, unchanged all these years: the Hardy Boys and science fair trophies, the plaid curtains and matching

counterpane. A temporary arrangement, they told each other at first, until Dolly got back on her feet. The stroke was, knock wood, a mild one; her doctor prescribed blood thinners, and in a week she felt perfectly herself. When Bruce showed no sign of leaving, Dolly understood that her recovery wasn't the point; that her son, too, had been stricken: laid off after many years at the post office, the good government job that once seemed so sure.

His life hasn't turned out as expected. Nobody's does. Even Dolly, who got exactly what she'd aimed for—the handsome husband, the home and children—was unprepared for the deep loneliness of marriage, the heartbreak of motherhood. How briefly her boys would need her, how quickly they'd disappear into lives totally separate from hers and become like all the other people in the world.

The exact husband she'd wanted, tall and handsome. During their courtship and early marriage he carried her around like a doll. Her given name—Barbara Jean—didn't, in his opinion, suit her. When they married, Dolly Tobin was who she became.

Their son's habit isn't news to her, not really, though she always imagined he'd outgrow it. Children left everything behind, eventually. Her attic is full of board games and sports equipment and Boy Scout uniforms, a veritable zoo of stuffed animals she can't bear to throw away.

She'd been an indulgent mother, no question, happiest when the boys were babies, helplessly lovestruck at their round cheeks and silky hair. Almost from birth, their differences were apparent. Andrew was all boy—boisterous and competitive, fond of rough-housing. Bruce, three years younger, preferred indoor play. On summer afternoons he and Dolly watched the stories. Bruce knew the plots better than she did: the secret affairs and paternity scandals, the amnesias and kidnappings, the flamboyant villains who came back from the dead.

In those years she earned pin money selling Avon cosmetics, spent happy hours browsing the catalogs with Bruce at her side. They had a grand time sampling the products together—on the Q.T., always. The secrecy was part of the fun.

Now Avon, if it still exists, is sold over the computer like everything else; and housewives, if they still exist, have better things to do with their time. Andrew's wife is a podiatrist who raises two children on the side, when she isn't looking at strangers' feet.

The sparkly eye shadows and trial-sized lipsticks, in white plastic cases the size of bullets. It all seemed harmless when Bruce was eight or nine.

Not to his father, of course. Even then, Tony wouldn't have understood. Little Bruce seemed to grasp this intuitively. When Tony came home from the mill at four-thirty, Bruce's face was already scrubbed clean.

Later that evening, Andrew calls. He does this more often since Bruce moved in, as though the particulars of their mother's life, the doctor's appointments and geriatric social engagements, have suddenly become interesting to him. The calls are brief, five minutes of terse questions that make Dolly nervous for no reason, since Andrew never remembers anything she tells him. She doesn't blame him, really. Why should he keep track of her colonoscopies and Legion of Mary luncheons, when she can barely remember them herself?

Andrew is a fast talker. He is a type of lawyer that never appears in court, just goes to meetings and makes phone calls. He ignores her question about the weather in Atlanta. "Ma, this will have to be quick. Let me talk to Bruce."

Dolly glances into the living room. Bruce is playing solitaire on the coffee table, his wig slightly askew. "He's in the shower."

From the living room Bruce blows her a kiss.

"He was in the shower the last time I called." A tapping on the line, Andrew fidgeting with something. He is incapable of sitting still. "What does he do all day, anyway?"

Dolly lowers her voice. "Now, Andrew. He works."

"At Radio Shack? Give me a break."

She takes the cordless phone down to the basement. "Twenty hours a week. Plus, he's a big help around the house." In defending one son against the other, she sometimes makes statements that aren't precisely true. For example: in the last ten months, Bruce hasn't cooked a meal or washed a dish, though he does sometimes drive her to the Food Circus, or some other place she used to travel by bus.

She tries a new subject. "Did Zoe get my graduation card?" Andrew's stepdaughter is a rich source of material: overweight, rebellious, an

erratic student. Dolly wonders, but hasn't asked, if the girl is on drugs.

"Oh, yeah. Thanks, Mom." Unusually, Andrew hesitates. "I might as well tell you, Zoe's had some trouble. Drinking and—other things."

Aha, Dolly thinks.

"She's in a program now. We're hoping she's out of the woods."

At that moment the music starts, softly at first. The call has gone longer than usual; Bruce must have assumed she was off the phone.

Andrew, luckily, seems not to hear it. "Actually, that's why I called. Janet"—the podiatrist—"is worried, we both are, about what's going to happen when she gets home."

Bruce has a heavy touch. The old piano vibrates the floor. The song is one Dolly and Tony danced to years ago; what on earth is it called? As usual she remembers all the words, except the two or three critical ones.

"Her friends are a bunch of burnouts. If she's hanging around with them, she doesn't stand a chance." Another pause. "Maybe she could spend the summer with you."

"Here?" It is a startling notion. Dolly has never quite grasped her exact relationship to this girl, who was already twelve years old when Andrew married the podiatrist and seemed uninterested in acquiring an additional grandmother. Still Dolly sends, at Christmas and birthdays, Hallmark cards with twenty-dollar bills tucked inside. That these gifts are never acknowledged is perhaps not Zoe's fault. Children aren't born with manners. Dolly blames the podiatrist.

"She could, I don't know, take a class at Hopkins. Is that the piano?"

Oh, dear.

"I suppose so," Dolly says.

"So Big Bruce is out of the shower. Put him on, will you?"

Dolly takes the phone upstairs. Bruce, too vain for glasses, leans back slightly on the piano bench, his neck craned at an odd angle so he can read the music. Dolly lays a hand on his silky shoulder. "Sorry to bother you, dear. Andrew wants to say hello."

His eyes, rimmed with black liner, go wide like Charlie Chaplin's. His shoulder tenses beneath her hand.

"He heard the piano," she whispers.

Bruce takes the phone. He turns away from Dolly and speaks in his gruff daytime voice. “Hey, man. How you been?”

The song is called “Begin the Beguine.”

There were clues, she sees in retrospect. Soon after Bruce moved in, her mailbox was flooded with junk mail, catalogs for ladies’ jewelry and lingerie and once, large-sized shoes. The mailing labels read B TOBIN—B for Barbara, she assumed.

Once, after she’d already washed everything in his hamper, she caught him doing a load of laundry. The machine was set to the delicate cycle, though her son lived in jeans and old sweatshirts, store-brand, from Ross’s Big and Tall.

Still, she’d never have made the connection, would never have learned the truth at all, if not for her own forgetfulness. Every Wednesday afternoon, while Bruce is at Radio Shack, she takes the #12 bus across town for her wash and set. Afterwards she plays cards at Pine Grove, where a number of her old friends have been parked by their children. It’s not bad, for one of those places. On nice days she takes a slow walk in the garden with Ida Binder, who has early Alzheimer’s but can still get around.

One day last September, Dolly skipped the visit to Pine Grove. Waiting for the bus she felt flushed, lightheaded. The afternoon was unseasonably hot, the air heavy with summer smells: ripe trash, melting tar, the harbor simmering like a stew of spoiled fish. She arrived at the beauty parlor feeling queasy. An hour later, sitting under the hair dryer, she understood that she’d forgotten her morning pills. Panic washed over her: what stood between her and another, more crippling stroke, but her Coumadin and Lopressor? She took the first bus home, counting off miles and minutes. Salvation was waiting in the amber plastic bottles, lined up neatly in the cabinet above the kitchen sink.

To her surprise, the house was unlocked, Bruce’s van parked at the curb, though he’d told her (had he?) that he was scheduled to work.

Once again, she’d gotten her wires crossed.

She went in through the front door and headed straight for the kitchen, where a strange woman sat at the table, eating a meatball sandwich.

I'm in the wrong house, Dolly thought.

The woman stood. She was very tall, her blonde hair teased into a little pouf. She looked as stunned as Dolly felt. "Ma, for God's sake! What are you doing here?"

For one terrible moment Dolly felt the room spin. Alzheimer's, she thought. Like poor Ida Binder, she was losing her mind.

She said, "I forgot my pills."

The strange woman took her arm. "You look flushed. Sit down, hon."

Dolly did.

If she'd had her wits about her, she might have asked more questions. Instead she held tightly to Bruce's hand. She drank a glass of water and swallowed the two pills he gave her, her heart still fluttering. And when she finally spoke, it was her heart talking:

"It's all right, dear. I don't mind."

Zoe lands on a Tuesday. Bruce and Dolly, ten minutes early, consult the monitors and follow the signs to Baggage Claim. In the long corridor she catches their reflection in the plate glass window: the big shambling man in a ball cap, the frail old lady in a canary-yellow suit. More and more, Bruce looks strange to her in male clothing, dressed in some elaborate disguise. Less frequently, she feels a tender pang of recognition. In his sloppy sweatshirts he could be the older brother—the father, even—of the sullen boy he used to be.

Last night he had lingered at the piano, playing a number of Dolly's favorites. Afterwards, unusually, they watched the late news together, and she mixed them each a second drink.

The terminal seems busy for a weekday. A crowd mills around the conveyor belt: a sunburned family in flip-flops; several impatient men in suits; two baby-faced soldiers in desert camouflage; a woman shouting Spanish into a cell phone. Where, Dolly wonders, is everyone going? Years ago people stayed put: you found a job and kept it, bought a house and kept it. There were meals to cook and children to raise, and in this way, years passed. Those who did otherwise—the unsavory characters, the criminals and misfits—were easy to spot,

back when men got regular haircuts and shaved daily. Now they seem to be everywhere.

She picks out several dark-haired young women traveling alone, any one of whom might be Zoe—who, she now realizes, likely won't recognize them either. They have met just once before, six years ago at Andrew's wedding. Too old to be a flower girl, Zoe was something called a junior bridesmaid, a chubby little thing in a puffy lavender dress.

"Uncle Bruce?"

They turn to see a big sturdy girl, nearly Bruce's height, though slightly stooped under the weight of a massive canvas rucksack. She wears a tattered denim jacket and rumpled pants with many pockets and, incredibly, a tiny silver ring in one nostril. Her hair is dyed red and cut into very short bangs, giving her a monkeyish look. Despite having received, in each year's Christmas card, a wallet-sized school picture, Dolly would never have recognized her.

"Welcome to Baltimore," Bruce mumbles.

There is a moment of confusion in which Bruce offers his hand and Zoe leans in for a kiss. They end up doing both, awkwardly. Zoe's hand is covered with what looks like a bad case of psoriasis.

"Oh, dear," says Dolly. "What happened to your hand?"

Zoe holds out the hand, spreading her thick fingers. Dolly sees, then, that it is covered with an intricate design in red ink.

"Mehndi," says Zoe. "It's sort of a temporary tattoo. In India brides get them for their wedding day."

Heartened by the word *temporary*, Dolly rises on tiptoe to kiss her cheek.

Bruce plucks Zoe's bags from the carousel, two hefty suitcases with wheels on the bottom. Together with the rucksack, it seems like a lot of luggage for a seven-week visit.

At home, while Bruce carries the suitcases up to Andrew's old room and Dolly fries chicken for dinner, she hears, from the living room, a shriek of pain or delight. She finds Zoe standing in front of the piano, her shoulders shaking with laughter, a framed photo in her hand. "God, is this Andrew?"

He was a handsome man and had been a darling little boy but not, in truth, an attractive teenager. His high school graduation portrait featured an unfortunate haircut with a sort of tail in back—the style in those days, apparently, though it’s hard to imagine this ever seemed a good idea.

“What a tool,” Zoe says.

This from a girl with a ring in her nose!

At dinner she takes second helpings of chicken and coleslaw. “This is *so good*,” she says with her mouth full. The food at rehab is disgusting. Still, somehow, she gained six pounds.

Afterwards she excuses herself, leaving Dolly with the dishes. Bruce and Dolly watch *Jeopardy!*, ignoring the overhead noises: the thumping bass of Zoe’s radio, the unzipping of suitcases, the closing of bureau drawers.

This week’s contestants are college students. In his jeans and sweatshirt, Bruce reverts to his teenage self, sprawled morosely on the divan.

If she’d had her wits about her, she’d have asked more questions.

Are you happy? Are you lonely? Is it my fault?

She had married young, as people used to. Her knowledge of men was gleaned from the movies. Of the available boys she chose the handsomest, as the movies taught you to do. It took her years to understand that men and women were not the ideal companions for each other, the great, painful lesson of her long marriage. The sexes were simply too different, the distance between them too great. Her whole married life she pined for her mother, her sisters. During both pregnancies she prayed for a daughter, a fact that haunts her now.

Just once—years ago, when Tony was still living—Bruce brought a girl home for dinner. His route, then, was in Catonsville, where he shared a run-down house with a revolving cast of roommates. Veronica was one of them, a hunched, skinny thing with crooked teeth and massive quantities of curly blonde hair. The hair, her one attractive feature, was impossible to miss, since she fiddled with it

constantly—even at the table, which was unsanitary (though perhaps Dolly shouldn't have said so). Over the years, Andrew would bring home a string of girlfriends, and Dolly would get more comfortable with the idea, but at the time she'd been flummoxed by Bruce's attention to Veronica, the clumsy way he fell all over himself to pull out her chair. If she'd had a daughter of her own, Dolly might have taken it in stride, her home invaded by this ill-mannered young person. But she had been, always, the only lady in the house.

Women are not always kind to each other.

I'll do better next time, she told herself afterward. But there had been no next time.

"I'm sorry, dear," she told Bruce one night during *Jeopardy!* "I should have been nicer to your friend Veronica."

Bruce looked confused. He wore, that night, a cocktail dress in slimming black. "Veronica *Hamlin*?"

"I suppose so." Shamefully, she'd never bothered to learn the girl's last name.

There was a long silence in which Dolly invented an entirely different life for her son. She imagined a crowd at Christmas, a chorus of curly-haired grandchildren around her dinner table. Quietly she sipped her drink, mixed with Fresca since Bruce was on a diet.

When he finally spoke, it was to the television, "What is sublimation?"

At the commercial break, he took her hand. His was very soft, well-moisturized. "She wasn't important, hon. I just liked her hair."

The next day, a Wednesday, Zoe registers for classes. Dolly takes the bus to her hair appointment, grateful for her familiar routine. Afterward she stops at Pine Grove. The afternoon is balmy. She and Ida Binder walk arm in arm around the garden.

"Seven weeks is a long time," says Dolly. "I'm worried about Bruce."

Ida eyes her vacantly. In recent months her words have dried up, though occasionally her eyes seem full of something: Sympathy? Understanding? It's hard to say.

“Who’s it hurting?” Dolly demands. “He isn’t hurting anybody.”
Ida does not disagree.

“It makes him happy. Nothing else ever has.” As she says it, Dolly knows that this is true.

When she comes home from Pine Grove she hears voices upstairs. She finds Bruce leaning in the doorway of Andrew’s room. Zoe sits on the bed next to a heap of clothing, as though her two large suitcases have been turned upside down and emptied there.

“Carbs are the enemy,” Bruce is saying as Dolly climbs the stairs.

At five o’clock, Dolly starts dinner. She has defrosted three filets of flounder and is dredging them in breadcrumbs when Zoe appears in the kitchen. “Can I help?”

The answer, it turns out, is *no*. Zoe has no kitchen skills whatsoever. Her only proficiency involves opening cans. At rehab, she explains, the menu never varies: chili on Monday, taco salad on Tuesday, though it’s really all the same meal, different combinations of corn chips, ground meat, tomatoes, and cheese. The tomatoes come from giant industrial-sized cans; Zoe has seen them. Each client has kitchen duty one week a month.

“I didn’t mind it,” she says, shrugging. “It was, you know, something to do.”

“Well, that’s good.” Dolly gropes for something more to say, but this proves unnecessary. Zoe, clearly, is a girl accustomed to an audience. She can hold a conversation all by herself.

“They were pretty good at keeping us busy. Every day you had individual counseling, then art therapy, then yoga. Every night after dinner we did sharing circles, and then Group.”

When Dolly shows her how to set the table—forks to the left of the plate, knives to the right—she seems a little dazzled. The podiatrist, apparently, serves dinner cafeteria style, each family member filling his own plate from a pot on the stove. Dolly refrains from asking what sort of woman Andrew has married. Chastened by the memory of Veronica Hamlin, she keeps her opinion to herself.

She and Zoe are folding the napkins—the podiatrist uses paper ones—when Bruce clomps down the stairs in a flowered sundress. For a moment, Dolly feels dizzy.

“I knew it would fit!” Zoe says.

“She’s a sweet girl. The sweetest,” Dolly tells Ida Binder. (Though the nose ring still throws her.)

The truth is that she does mind, a little. She minds all sorts of things. But minding is lonelier and harder and where does it get you? People are in a hurry, and they don’t listen. They love you in between the dog track and the beer garden, after baseball season when there’s nothing on TV. They forget to say thank you, to call or visit; they slouch at the table and play with their hair. Barbara Jean has made allowances. On the eve of her eightieth birthday, it’s far too late to stop.

About the Author

Jennifer Haigh is the author of the story collection *News From Heaven* and four critically-acclaimed novels: *Faith*, *The Condition*, *Baker Towers*, and *Mrs. Kimble*. Her books have won the PEN/Hemingway Award, the Massachusetts Book Award, and the PEN New England Award in Fiction. Her stories have appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Granta*, *The Best American Short Stories*, and numerous other publications.

Acknowledgements

“Sublimation” also appeared in the Spring 2014 issue of *Ploughshares*.

Our format was inspired by *One Story* (www.one-story.com), a nonprofit literary magazine that publishes one short story every three weeks.

The Boston Book Festival would like to thank Zipcar for their generous support of this year’s 1C1S distribution process, making it possible to spread copies of “Sublimation” over the Greater Boston area. For more information on Zipcar, visit them on the web at www.zipcar.com.

The Boston Book Festival

1100 Massachusetts Ave., Ste. 300B

Cambridge, MA 02138

617.945.9552

www.bostonbookfest.org

Founder and Executive Director: Deborah Z Porter

Deputy Director: Norah Piehl

Director of Operations: Sarah Howard Parker

One City One Story Project Manager: Niki Marion

1C1S Committee: Alicia Anstead, Callie Crossley, Nicole Lamy, Henriette Power, Ladette Randolph, and Christina Thompson.

Readers: Akshay Akshay Ahuja, Elisa Birdseye, Mark Krone, Nadine Frassetto, Katie Lynn Murphy, Santiago Nocera, and Sheila Scott.

For more information about discussion groups, meet-ups, translations, and our 1C1S writing contest, go to www.bostonbookfest.org/1c1s

Printed by Grossman Marketing Group with soy inks and using wind power.

WWW.BOSTONBOOKFEST.ORG



OCTOBER 23-25, 2014
COPLEY SQUARE

