

# What I Didn't Know

by Jewel Beth Davis

The psychic led me into the back room of a shop in Portsmouth, New Hampshire that sells essential oils, artsy cards, and Indian prints. The room was empty except for an amber-colored, oblong wooden table and two chairs. Several boxes of merchandise stood piled up against one wall. The clairvoyant was a perfectly normal looking middle-aged woman with no outstanding features and a mundane name, Jean Parsons. If I was paying for kitsch, I wasn't getting it. I told her there was a missing relative in my family that no one will discuss, a family member I just learned about recently.

Sometimes I believe in psychics and sometimes I don't. I don't know how I feel about this particular seer. I was just so desperate to discover something about my Aunt Celia, my father's sister, whom I'd never heard about until I was in my forties. The psychic was the only person who would speak with me about the subject. I was enraged with my father and my Aunt Pauline for keeping someone from me who was my family member. I was frustrated with my brothers for their lack of interest in this unknown family member, and from my point of view, their seeming insensitivity to my needs and feelings about it. If they didn't care about it, then apparently it wasn't important. To whom else could I turn but a stranger?

Jean shuffled the cards and laid them out on the scratched wooden table. "I see someone standing beside you who says she's your family member. She's just behind your shoulder. She's tall and slender with long auburn hair and dressed in outlandish clothing from a long time ago. She looks very dramatic. Is that anyone you know?" she said, pointing to one of the cards.

"No."

She went on, tapping another card, "I don't know if she's the family member you're asking about but she's laying out photographs of family members all around you. She says soon you'll be surrounded by photos of family members."

I felt a deep chill seep into my bones. I could imagine the photographs everywhere around me, but I couldn't see what they depicted. I

didn't know why there were so many photos around me but it didn't feel like a good omen. I felt oppressed by them.

"Have you been looking at old family albums or do you have a lot of family photos displayed around your home?" Jean asked.

I hadn't.

"I don't believe she's the missing family member. She's shaking her head no," Jean seemed to be in the room with me and yet not. She shook her head as if mimicking the relative she was seeing, or perhaps she was trying to clear away the ectoplasm so she could see more clearly. "I don't know if your missing relative is alive but I'm getting Southern California for some reason. Does that make any sense to you?"

It didn't. It didn't make sense that if Celia were alive, that a seventy-five year old Jewish woman, whose only connections were in Brooklyn, would have migrated to California. I thanked her and left the back room feeling terribly uneasy.

There were such big holes in my family's stories. There were photos of Dad with his brother Willy and others with his sister, Pauline. There were pictures of my grandfather sitting in a chair with a curled-handled cane looking lonely and enervated. There were no photos of everyone together and only one photo of Dad's mother when she was young, about sixteen, and one at her wedding. The only pictures of my parents' wedding show the outside of an apartment building and they were both dressed in suits. No gown, no flowers, no tux. No parents of either one. No joy. I never thought to ask about it. There were things like those photos that never made sense, beginnings and endings that never matched up; middles that didn't exist or refused to come into focus. I felt as if I never had firm ground to stand on. People behaved in ways that were incomprehensible. As it turns out, there were reasons, good reasons, for many of the attitudes and actions that seemed irrational.

Eve in the Garden of Eden was trying to tell us something very important. Ignorance is not bliss; it is ignorance. The word has as its root, to ignore. To look away from. Not to know. Secrets are insidious; you can't quite put your finger on what effects they have. They're more qualitative than quantitative. Even if you don't know your family has a secret, it is present in your home and in your life, stealing your sense of well being like a worm in the bowel.

My father died when I was seventeen and we mainly lost contact with his side of the family from that point on. My mother carried a grudge towards my father's family, specifically my Aunt Pauline, Dad's sister. Neither



Aunt Pauline nor my grandfather attended Mom and Dad's wedding. No one ever said whether Uncle Willy or any of Dad's cousins came. According to my mother, Pauline did not want my father to marry my mother. Mom would never say why. There had to be more to it. About ten years ago at my Auntie Yetta's funeral, after both my parents were gone, my Auntie Sylvia told me that my mother, Fran, was pregnant with the twins before she and my father Bernie married. One secret unearthed. Now it all begins to fall into place. Dominoes all click-clacking perfectly in a row as they fall. Aunt Pauline likely disapproved that my mother had premarital sex and may have thought Dad shouldn't buy into a shotgun marriage.

"Bernie," I can imagine Aunt Pauline saying, "She's a tsatsky, a tramp. She's older than you and desperate. She lied to you about her age and now she's tricked you into marriage by getting pregnant."

"But she is pregnant. With twins," my father says, "And they're my children."

"You owe your family more than you owe that woman. I can't afford to care for both Pop and Willie without you."

"I'm not backing out of this wedding. Are you coming or not?"

It was not. Nobody came from my father's side. My mother watered and fed that grudge over a lifetime and so, for most of our lives, we remained disconnected from my father's family.

When we went to college, and out of my mother's watchful presence, Pauline contacted my brothers and me. All three of us began to spend time with her. It angered my mother. She said we were betraying her by having contact with her enemy. I couldn't help it; I hungered for the last possible contacts with my dead father. I wanted to spend time with people who knew him before we entered his world. Pauline never said much about Dad or Willie. She preferred to talk about the present. Just as my mother did. She and Pauline had more in common than either suspected.

In the early 1990s, I was on the phone

with Aunt Pauline, who'd lived in Brooklyn all her life. Both her brothers died many years earlier. I expressed interest in our family tree and she mailed me her version of it. So many names. Families of sixteen and twelve. Where are they and all their descendants now?

Pauline began the story of my grandparents living in Columbus, Ohio with their children in a large mansion. Yes, a mansion... really. She sent me an old black and white photo of it. The photo was hazy but it looked white with black shutters, two to three stories high and spread out from one end to the other, with an enormous green expanse blanketing the front. Someone had to mow that. I pictured my father who was a teenager doing it. My grandfather, Mayer Davis, was a developer of tall buildings. Bernie, my dad, always told us that there were still structures in Columbus with the Davis name on them. I'd never seen them. When we were older (I was ten or eleven), he told us that our Zayde Davis (Yiddish for grandfather) and his partner lost their entire fortune and their business in one day, the day the stock market crashed in 1929. Not an unusual story for that era. I asked very few questions of either parent about their personal histories because when I did ask, I received terse, vague answers. My father said that Zayde's partner jumped off one of their buildings. I often wonder why I never asked him for more details. I was not the kind of child who hung back, afraid to open my mouth. Still, this was the one and only secret my father ever shared with his children. As it turned out, he had many more.

It never occurred to me until this moment what that must have been like for my father. I never knew my father or his family to be anything but dirt poor. I didn't know anything about Mayer, my grandfather, other than he was "unwell" and never worked again from that time until his death. Dad must have been about sixteen at the time. Did his father tell him and the other family members the terrible news directly? Were there hushed discussions behind closed doors that my father listened to with his ear pressed against the wall? Did he panic when he discovered the truth? Did he become numb? The family was extremely well off, living in this monstrous house. They had servants. Now, after the crash, they were penniless. All their resources had been in banks and in investments. All of this was now gone. Evaporated into thin air. They would have to move. Where would they go? Where else could they go? Brooklyn, NY, where most of my grandmother's sisters lived. Where the concentration of Jews living together was so dense, it must have been like returning to the shtetl in Russia. Where Yiddish was the ubiquitous language. Where women wore thick scarves to cover their heads. Where the ragman drove a wagon pulled by his swayback horse and

the iceman brought ice in blocks.

"So," Pauline says, "we packed up a few belongings that didn't have to be sold to pay my father's business debts and my parents traveled with all four of us children across the country to New York."

Wait.

"But there were only three of you," I said. "You, Dad, and Uncle Willy."

Silence.

"Did I say four? I meant three." Pauline's words rushed out like a whooshing wind through the phone lines.

"No, no, you didn't," I said. "You said four and I think you meant four."

More silence.

"I didn't mean for you to know. I never wanted you to know," Pauline said. I could hear the anxiety building in her voice, her tone the verbal form of hand wringing. I think she did mean for me to know. Maybe she couldn't bear not to tell someone in the family.

"Tell me. Who was this other child? What happened to him? Or her?"

Daddy never mentioned having another brother or sister. Why wouldn't he tell us? Why didn't you?" All the questions poured out of me, cold water out of a pitcher. I tried to absorb the shifting of who and what my family was.

Pauline began to cry. "I can't talk about this."

"Please Aunt Pauline, you started."

"Alright already. Your father had another sister besides me."

Can this be true?

A long pause. "Her name was Celia."

"Celia," I said, trying the name out. "Celia Davis. Where is she now? Is she still alive?"

"No, of course not." Pauline sounded as if I'd accused her of something. "She died. Many years ago. I don't remember when. Soon after we'd arrived in New York."

You don't remember when your own sister died?

"She was the third child. Before Willy. There was an accident."

I couldn't imagine myself not remembering the details of the death of one of my siblings, no matter how long ago it was.

Again a pause. "She was ice skating. In Rockefeller Center. She fell and hit her head."

"How old was she when she died?" I asked.

"I don't remember...about twenty-one."

You're too sharp not to remember.

I knew I still wasn't getting the whole megillah. "How long was it from when she hit her head to when she died?"

"A couple days," Pauline said. "Now, I don't want to talk about this anymore."

"But..."

"I told you. It was very painful for us all. She was young when it happened. We didn't want to talk about it. It hurt us too much. Now please no more."

I never got anything else out of Aunt Pauline about Celia. I brought it up in our phone calls hoping she'd soften and open up. I wanted so badly to know the truth. She refused to discuss it, repeating that it was too painful to talk about.

I was frustrated and spoke about it to my friends.

"Do you think she was mentally retarded?" Sue said as we sat having tea in her kitchen. "People didn't talk about that openly back then."

On the phone, from the Berkshires, Jackie offered her thoughts. "Maybe Celia was mentally ill and they had to put her away in an institution. People in those days were always covering stuff like that up."

BJ, another friend, offered this: "Maybe she married someone out of the religion or someone of a different color. You said your grandfather was fairly religious, even though he wasn't Orthodox." My grandfather might have, but I absolutely could not see my dad, Aunt Pauline and Uncle Willy turning their backs on a sister for that reason.

When I broached the topic with my brothers, I thought they'd be as outraged, as curious as I was. In separate conversations, they both said essentially the same thing.

"No, don't be ridiculous, Jewel," my brother Buzz said. "That never happened."

"I'm telling you, it's true. Aunt Pauline admitted it."

"I don't believe it. She's making it up. She's f'blungit" (mixed-up).

I held my ground.

He said, "What difference does it make even if it's true? We didn't know about her. She wasn't a part of our life. Dad didn't want her to be. It's ancient history. It's over. How does it affect us?"

But of course it does affect us. In ways we already know if we look. Years of family depression and anxiety on both sides of the family. Passed

down to the next generation. Hospitalizations. Serious neuroses. High cholesterol and high blood pressure. Early deaths from heart attacks and cancer. Bad backs in the women. Things that would have been helpful to know in treating some of these painful conditions. Something to prepare for.

I couldn't believe his response. This wasn't some long lost fourth cousin from the old country. This was Dad's sister. Like I'm his sister. I could never imagine him not speaking of me to his wife and kids.

Then there was my brother Mike who said, "Mom had a first cousin named Celia. Maybe that's what you're thinking of. There's no Celia on Dad's side of the family."

At this point, I just wanted to murder everyone in my family—Aunt Pauline, my brothers, even Celia, who was supposedly already dead. Why was everyone acting like I was some crazy person making all this up? Why wouldn't anyone discuss it rationally? Wherever I went to talk about it, the discussion snapped shut like a trap.

At this time, my mother was already in her early eighties and in a downhill slide. I spoke with her about it casually because I didn't want to upset her if her own husband had chosen not to share something so important. She had no idea what I was talking about. She said she'd never heard of another sister and didn't recognize the name Celia as anyone in the Davis family. I decided not to push it. Maybe she knew, maybe she didn't. Either way, with my mother's propensity for cover-ups, she would not have admitted it.

And that was it for a very long time. No one in my family would talk with me, and as far as I knew, there was no one else on Dad's side of the family still living that I knew how to get in touch with. What could have been so terrible? Had I the financial resources, I would have hired a private detective. I didn't. Instead, I went to a psychic.

And that was that for several years. I felt angry with my parents and my aunt for withholding. My frustration about this situation never abated.

Then I got a phone call from my brother Mike. My Aunt Pauline had had a massive heart attack on the searing summertime streets of Brooklyn. It was the end of August and my aunt, who had a generous pension, was comfortable financially, refused to spring for an air conditioner, and had walked in 98-degree heat to an air-conditioned movie theater. She keeled over on the sidewalk and wasn't breathing for about three or four minutes until the paramedics arrived. The doctors believed she was most likely brain dead. She was being kept alive by machines. They wanted to know who had

Power of Attorney and what we wanted to do. My brothers wanted me to go to New York to deal with this matter since I was the closest in proximity.

Pauline had no power of attorney, she had no living will, nor any will at all. So I made trips back and forth to NYC from New Hampshire. I wanted to do this because I'd spent more time with her than either of my brothers had. I wanted to make certain that everything would be handled with integrity and dignity; that I would try to do for her what she might have liked for herself, though if I were honest with myself, I had no real idea what that was. After three months on a respirator, Pauline passed away as soon as the doctors shut it off, without consulting us. Again, I felt powerless and frustrated. At least I'd spent time with her, holding her hand and letting her know that I was there, that she wasn't alone. Something I hadn't been able to do for my Dad.

The glorious outcome of all this angst was that I met my most marvelous family member. Florence, my father's first cousin. Her mother and Dad's mother had been very close sisters. Until now, I hadn't even known of her existence.

Florence was a woman of energy, color, style, tremendous strength, and independence. She was the first positive female role model I'd ever met in my family who didn't base her identity on her children and husband. She exuded a creative spark. At eighty, she was still working full time, running the office of a large synagogue in Manhattan. The Rabbi had a crush on her. Who could blame him? She personified pizzazz. I drank her in like lemonade on a summer's day. I saw her every chance I got considering the distance between New Hampshire and NYC, and I called her every week. She accepted me unconditionally and loved me. She never criticized me. For that, I'm grateful.

It was in spending time with Florence that I first learned the truth about Celia. One day, just after Pauline went into the hospital in Brooklyn, we were driving back from the hospital to Florence's apartment in Riverside. We drove across the Brooklyn Bridge towards Manhattan. The bridge was so high it felt like the atmospheric pressure changed. People were zipping by me so I couldn't take the time to gaze at the scenery. I felt a little dizzied moving over the top of this mammoth structure that wasn't grounded but floated over the land. Suspended in the air over the bay in our metal bubble, I began to talk about how frustrated I'd been about the subject of Celia Davis and the whys and hows of her passing. I asked Florence if she knew.

"Yes, of course. She was my first cousin. Our families were always together," she said. "I can't believe it. So, they kept it a secret all these years."

There was a short silence and Florence breathed out an audible breath and spoke. "She committed suicide." She let that sink in. "Right around the same time your grandmother, your father's mother did." She paused once more. "And my mother." She let that hang in the air.

Oh my God. Three, I thought, three close family members. Took their lives. All around the same time. Dad's mother too. That's why no one talked about it.

At least now I knew. The mystery was over. I didn't have to imagine possible scenarios anymore. Celia had killed herself. My grandmother had killed herself. My great aunt had as well. Somehow, the reality was nowhere near as threatening as my imaginings had been. Anything that is known is bearable.

I wondered whether it was connected to my grandfather losing all his money in the Crash. But that wouldn't have affected my great aunt. Florence didn't have many details for me. She knew her mother had used pills. She thought Celia and my grandmother had as well. She couldn't remember the exact time period or hiatus between the three deaths. It must have been so terrible for the whole family. My father must have been so sad for a long time. I can't imagine burying three family members unnecessarily within months of each other. I felt the shock as if it had happened recently. And Pauline had lied to me. That was confirmed.

"No, there was no ice skating accident," Florence told me. "They were very depressed. I don't know why. It ran in our family."

That I already knew. I remember Dad driving the family to a psychiatric hospital somewhere in New York State, so he could visit his brother Willy, who was deeply depressed, while we waited in the car. I remember Dad staying home from work for three weeks because he was so depressed, he wasn't able to function at all and Mom caring for him until it began to lift. She said he wouldn't go for help. I remember Mom saying to me, "It was that family; they all had it."

So I had my answer, and with it, a measure of peace. And in some small way, I had my Aunt Celia back. I could talk about her with Florence and I could establish her existence and demise with my brothers.

Despite Florence's corroboration, Mike and Gene continued to doubt.

"I think Florence must be mistaken, Jewel," my brother Mike said. "Or you misheard her."

"There's no point in talking about this," my brother Gene said. "What good have our relatives ever brought to us?" I was nonplussed by his

attitude. If he felt this way, there was nothing I could say to convince him otherwise.

Then came the moment that my brothers could no longer deny her.

It was the day after Pauline's funeral in a Jewish cemetery just over the line into Long Island. Pauline's landlord grudgingly let us into her apartment, tiny and dingy, cramped with boxes and bags, ancient junky furniture, dust and mildew, still-tagged never-used clothing, untold yards of sewing material piled to the ceiling. Thirty-five years of it, nothing thrown away. Horrifying because it was so unexpected; her person was immaculate. And so depressing. Like all the air and light had been sucked out of the place.

Gene missed it. He'd already flown home to California, having fulfilled his obligation, leaving Mike and me to cope. We had to pack the entire place up in one day and dispose of it all with only Florence's help, and she was eighty.

Mike and I came upon box after box of photos. We spread them on the bed, fanning them out like decks of cards. And then I remembered what the psychic had said. Here I was surrounded by hundreds of pictures. Members of my family, some of whom I'd never met, visiting me in photographs.

Mike and I came upon an aching beautiful 8 by 10 of my father when he might have been twenty. It took my breath away. All the feelings I'd stored away in some far corner of my emotional attic crashed like water through a dam. My brother choked up.

"Oh, Mike," I said, "Daddy was so handsome."

We both began to cry.

"Get back to work," Florence ordered, a drill sergeant. "We have no time for tears." She was right of course. Still we looked at the pictures like thirsty dogs lapping at a pond.

And then we saw them. Picture after picture of the four children together in homes and apartments, at different ages. Four children, not three. Dad, Willy, Pauline and Celia. Picture after picture of Celia. Celia who looked dreamy, staring off, and a little bit not of this world. She was slender and attractive, with very large eyes, a cross between Dad and Pauline.

There was no denying her existence now. My brothers would have to acknowledge she was a reality, though I doubted they'd ever talk about it again. We saw drawing after drawing and paintings signed by Celia; she was an artist. She had talent. It all fell into place for me. She was the missing piece. I'd never before fathomed where Gene and I received our artistic talents from, both acting and painting. Now I knew. And there we were, just

as the psychic predicted, surrounded by old photographs, and lovely women in old clothing from another time.

Looking at all the photos of Celia with my dad and others makes me think about images of my father. In my memories, he was only home to eat, sleep and watch TV. But that can't be right. He took us to my mother's sisters in Worcester and Fall River every other weekend or so. I remember him coming to most of my recitals and all of my plays. But I don't remember the two of us doing anything together, just on our own, except he brought me to work with him one day. Even more disturbing to me, past a certain age, I don't have any memories of our talking, except in anger. I do remember him threatening to send me away because I wouldn't stop crying one night. I was so frustrated I pushed everything into hysteria.

I know nothing of his father and mother, his growing up years, his siblings, or what happened to him in the army during the War. I don't know who he was as a person, other than what he looked like from the outside. It is all holes, vacuums, and empty spaces. I wanted that connection, to know him, to be close. To think of him in ways other than hostility and resentment. To be able to love him again the way I did when I was little and he was my hero. That's why it was important for me to investigate these secrets until I knew the truth. At least most of it.

You could have told us, Dad.

It would have explained so much about him. About why he was such a part-time father, often disconnected. Why he was in such pain. It would have been easier to love him and be less angry. I was so angry. Furious with him. And with my mother. For everything they didn't say. For everything they did.

Now we're not ignoring, looking away from. Now we're looking at. Now I know his secrets. I know my mother's. The hiding is so ugly. It is uglier than the secret. I feel the resentment still simmering in my heart. I never knew my parents. Not as people. I lost my father at seventeen but I don't think his living would have made a difference in what he revealed. I lost my mother as a grown woman. She tried to take the secret of her premarital pregnancy to her grave with her. It didn't work. Someone whispered the secret to me. Secrets are meant for whispering. They're ugly so they try to hide. The truth is meant for shouting. It is beautiful and it knows it.