

Family Dynamics in *Housekeeping*

Families in which nothing is ever discussed usually have a lot not to discuss.

—Mason Cooley

Families edit their histories. They tell some stories, but not others. And within stories they select certain details to include and others to avoid. In *Housekeeping*, the Foster family becomes a matriarchy by spectacular accident, but we soon learn that a certain ambivalence toward men is more than accidental. As readers, we have to wonder about Edmund and Sylvia's marriage when she views his death as an extension of his habit of disappearing. We wonder still more when Ruth describes how her grandfather once helped her grandmother over a puddle "with a wordless and impersonal courtesy that she did not resent because she had never really wished to feel married to anyone." After Edmund, no man occupies a place in the Foster family for long.

The serene and ordered life that follows for widowed Sylvia and her three daughters is missing something. Family silence surrounds the difficult subjects of abandonment and loss. Ruth describes an unspoken anxiety in the Foster girls, telling us that Molly, Helen, and Sylvie "hovered" and watched their mother; they "pressed her and touched her as if she had just returned after an absence." Yet these anxieties, along with grief for their father, are never voiced. "The disaster," Ruth says, "had fallen out of sight, like the train itself."

Sylvia's silence on the "big subjects" may be what hastens the departures of her grown daughters, which seem less like rites of passage and more like escapes. Or, could it be that the girls have inherited their father's tendency to disappear? Molly vanishes

into "the Orient," Helen and Sylvie into marriages that don't last. (If Edmund is a ghost in the novel, then the estranged husbands of Helen and Sylvie are mere vapors.) "Our grandmother never spoke of any of her daughters," Ruth observes, "and when they were mentioned to her, she winced with irritation."

There is a family connection between Edmund's death and Helen's when she drives off a cliff into the same lake that took his life. But no one ever blurts out this astonishing association. It remains submerged, like the train, and Helen's borrowed car.

In Sylvie, the drifter, we see the family silence reveal itself in a new generation. Lucille, the youngest and angriest of her nieces, questions her insistently for family details, but her answers are vague, even impersonal. When Lucille asks why Sylvie never had children, she scolds: "You must know, Lucille . . . that some questions aren't polite. I'm sure that my mother must have told you that."

Could it be that Ruth's story is her response to family silence? In one sense, the novel is Ruth's piecing together the scattered scraps of memory and history into a real story at last, filling in the blanks with water and wind, the elements of her ancestral Fingerbone. As the Foster family may have known when they chose silence, there is sorrow in the telling. However, as Ruth observes, "What are all these fragments for, if not to be knit up finally?"