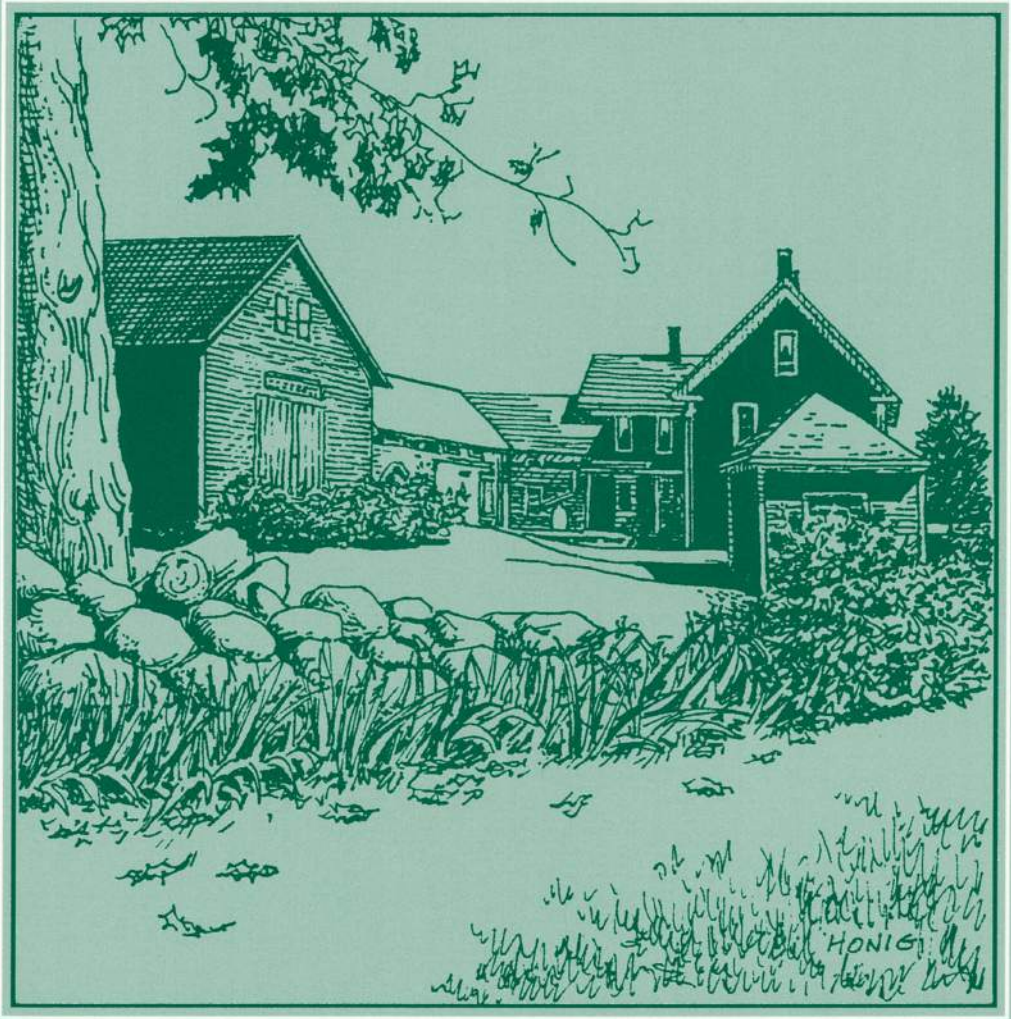
THE BERKSHIRE REVIEW



ELIZABETH ENGLAND

Milk

NO ONE heard Mrs. Gilson roll the family's 1967 Buick down the pebbled driveway and out onto Route 117, but the way her husband Freddie told it later, his wife went out for milk and never came back. There she was, a fixture at the bus stop, wiping snot from her daughter's nose and clipping mittens to her son's sleeves, and then, overnight, she was gone, no note, no reason why.

While waiting for this explanation, Mr. Gilson threw china animals out the window, crushed wreaths of dried flowers, punched holes in the kitchen and dining room walls, smashed light bulbs in the vanity, broke eyeliner pencils, cut in half dresses, hats, silk nighties; for this explanation, Freddie Gilson made sure that if his wife did return, everything of hers would be useless.

It was at night that we heard him. He howled; he swore at his kids; he finished pints of whiskey and cracked them like rock candy in the sink; he moaned her name, Irene, Irene, like he was dying, like he thought she was dead and he would never see her again, not ever. My mother told us to pay no attention and get some rest. For nothing would my brother or I close our eyes. We had to keep watch; we had to make sure our parents stayed put.

The Gilson children, Alice and Joe Jr., wouldn't let their father out of their sight either. One afternoon at the corner store, right before dinnertime, Mr. Gilson cried in front of a line of people at the checkout. He was buying bread and mayonnaise and a slab of Mr. McClutchey's bacon, and he got down on all fours like a dog and sobbed while Alice and Joe Jr. stood next to him and watched. Alice held her brother's hand and looked down at the square linoleum tiles, counting first the blacks then the whites, hoping this would be a short one, this crying fit of her father's. When he was through, he got up, wiped his face on his sleeve, took his food and pushed the kids gently out the door and into the pickup truck. We were told not to stare, but we did anyway; we couldn't stop ourselves. We gawked like drivers at a car wreck, hoping for a glimpse of human frailty, blood, a dead person, teeth on the road, something to make our own survival more significant, even miraculous. My brother and I stared at Mr. Gilson, Alice and Joe Jr. and realized that this time we were lucky, but if Mrs. Gilson left, what was stopping our mother?

At breakfast the next day, my mother said, what courage, as if chucking it all in and leaving us was something she would've done had she been braver. My father just said, not in front of the kids, and shook his head at her. Any time we would ask a question about the Gilsons, my father would put a finger

to his lips as if we had said a swear word. We knew Mrs. Gilson was gone, but we needed to know if anyone had found her or if she had just died overnight and was now buried under the willow out back like Lee Everett's dog Heidi. Our imaginings were more gory than any truths. We could tell that Alice and Joe Jr. were worried, too; was their mother under that willow? Then weeks later, with no prompting, my father casually acknowledged Mrs. Gilson's absence, as if someone had misplaced her and aha, she was found, say, out west, on the California coast in a rental with a view of Alcatraz. He had no details, of course, only stories of how she had gone to India and was now living in a tent near the clouds. All of a sudden, we could talk about her, the way she laughed, soft at first and then loud until she finally had to ask someone to help her stop. We talked about the way the street smelled whenever she baked cinnamon buns. We talked about her as if she was still next door, three pine trees away, in the house with the loose aluminum siding that flapped against the wood frame whenever the wind fussed too much.

It was Addie who knew the truth, people claimed. Addie knew something private about Mrs. Gilson and she almost talked when the Sheriff knocked on her door at 6 a.m. one morning with Mr. Gilson standing next to him. Alice and Joe Jr., shivering in their pajamas and snow boots, their lips purple from the cold and the door-to-door inquiries, almost made Addie confess, but ultimately she decided to say nothing. That's what Mr. Gilson told my father later on. That women form bonds, have secrets, conspire, plot; be careful, he warned my father. After all, this was the late 60s. Mothers were no longer so happy in the kitchen, tethered to the hearth, kneading their knuckles raw in ground round to shape a meatloaf; watching the wash cycle, spin, rinse and spew clean underwear for a family of five; sharing a cup of coffee, and two uppers and downers, with their girlfriends, fellow mothers who suddenly found themselves trapped at age 26 with no escape valve except alcohol and suicide. But Mrs. Gilson escaped. She saw her out in a half-gallon of milk and even though it was after midnight, when no store would be open for an alibi, she took a chance. Who could blame her?

Her children didn't. They just waited, but waiting was driving them mad. Joe Jr. made everything serious a joke. He would scream, there she is, and point to a dead tree near the river bend, and if he got us to walk over, he would laugh, until we walked away feeling stupid and ashamed. But Alice kept looking for real. She even got me to help her.

We would sit on the railroad tracks and wait for a rumble. The metal got hot and noisy when a train was coming and each time we felt the warmth, Alice would stop picking at her face and fingernails and get expectant. We'd move off the tracks and let the train come, and when it sped past us, no slowing down, no Mrs. Gilson waving and shouting, you see, I would never leave you, Alice understood that her mother had left for good. But she still looked. It was superstition, she finally told me. If she stopped watching for cars, stopped longing for her mother to sort the laundry, make dinner, help her father, help Joe Jr., who was spending too much time alone in the woods,

if she stopped the hunt, it would then be her fault if we all missed Irene Gilson's Second Coming. So, that's what Alice did. She kept watch. And we kept watch, too, because hope is contagious.

But Mrs. Gilson never knew about the watching, the praying at night, our elbows wedged in a V on pillows, our knees dented from the uneven floorboards, our hope turned on HIGH for days and days. She never knew that Alice and Joe Jr. were both just getting by, skinny as flagpoles, eating when there was food in the fridge. When Mr. Gilson brought Alice to our house for dinner, he would often forget to pick her up, so my mother finally put an extra bed in my room. He would apologize and tell my mother that he needed some time to sort things out, but Bo Frederiks saw his car parked outside Addie Kane's house, Lizzy Bono's house, Mary Oslander's house. He had to find solace somewhere, Bo said.

Alice found it at our house. Whenever she stayed over and sobbed all night, my mother just told me to ignore the noise; put a pillow over your head and count stars outside the window, she told me. What no one realized is, that at that time, everyone else's mother was our mother, too. All mothers had the same antidote—the kiss—to make a bee sting or a scrape stop hurting, and all mothers had the same unforgiving voice for hitting, name-calling, spitting, and all mothers had the same Jackie O lipstick, Poppy Red mixed with Revlon's Pink Angel. If our mother wasn't around, then someone else's mother would do the job. So losing Mrs. Gilson was our loss, too. My brother and I believed it was an epidemic, a disease that was passed from house to house like chicken pox or incest with no symptoms, no warnings, no early stages, such as fighting, the silent treatment, room sentencings. Was it the water? The soil? Or was it the mountains and their black shadows that made the nights feel endless? As far as we could tell it was magic, bad magic; it was: Poof! One morning, you've got no mother.

If Mrs. Gilson could've heard Alice cry or if she could've seen Joe Jr.'s bloated arms and legs when they dredged the river and found him on the bottom, pinned by a fallen log so they said, though the rock tied around his ankle made it clear that this accident was on purpose, if she had known what her leaving had done to her kids, her family, would she ever have left? At Joe Jr.'s funeral, Reverend Stiles quietly said that he hoped Mrs. Gilson found whatever it was she was looking for and although he said it in his understanding voice, we all knew he was having difficulty understanding the situation. He wondered, as we all did, was it rational, thought out, pre-meditated, Mrs. Gilson's leaving? Or just impulsive, just I-can't-take-another-minute-of-this-life-of-mine?

Could this happen to me?

What if we ran out of milk and my husband got home early from work and I told him I was just going to step out and get a gallon? I'll be right back, I'd say. There'd be no reason to suspect; he didn't know about Mrs. Gilson. I had just gone to get milk, he'd reason. My husband would be in the moment, filling up my void, my absence with three little kids, at five-thirty,

the witching hour. Time would pass and the kids would be hungry and then my husband would start to worry. Did Mr. Gilson worry? Maybe after bedtime and storytime and brush-the-teethtime, when the kids were sleeping and the only thing left to unravel was: where is my wife?

Like Mr. Gilson, my husband would have little time to reflect and search. He would want to look for me, walk down streets, check stores. But then there would be the kids. He couldn't go anywhere with the kids. So, he'd stay still, look at the dim windows across the courtyard, imagine my profile, the earrings; were they the silver dangly ones or the gold studs? He'd remember the door closing, my voice saying something muffled. What did she say again, he'd ask himself. Was it milk she was going out for? Was that it; was that all? Or was it something else? Is our relationship okay, he'd ask himself, or did I miss something, did I miss her unhappiness, her desire to get the hell out of here?

No more questions, my husband would say to himself, I need time to think. He would try and make time. A strategy, a game plan. He's a researcher for a consumer think tank. He likes to process things, intellectualize, hunt for answers. While feeding the kids, bathing the kids, reading bedtime stories, reading the same stories just one more time, Daddy, and this time do it right, do it the way Mommy does it, Christopher, the baby, would say. While taking care of the kids, he'd be trying to think, trying to figure this one out. But he'd be too busy; children have questions, especially Christopher: why do elephants have bigger ears than llamas? The kids would be jumping on him; be a tiger, Daddy, scare us, chase us, wrestle with us, throw us up in the air, I'm not too big, Jack, the eldest would say. Desperate, my husband would find something in the freezer that I'd made weeks ago. He'd do this distractedly, wondering if I meant something else instead of milk, something that took longer, something farther away, in the next town, perhaps; did I take the highway?

And what about me? Would I even go get the milk? Did Mrs. Gilson? How did Mr. Gilson know that she went to Hupert's Dairymart? Mr. Hupert never saw her early that morning. He claimed he was in the back doing inventory and the boy he had working the register couldn't remember anything. Even after the interrogation at the police station, the boy maintained his original statement: I can't remember. Did Mrs. Gilson tell her husband that she was going to Hupert's, or did he just assume that he knew her, where she shopped, how she bought? Was there nothing unpredictable, rash, impulsive, passionate, unreasonable, secretive about her; did he think he was as familiar with her mind as he was their dirt driveway with the five potholes gullied into its center like a spine?

As for me, would I have gone to the grocery store and the idea of never coming back just dawned on me in the dairy section, the cold sticks of butter, the chubby containers of yogurt, did I just see something and decide to split? Or was it planned, weeks of planning, for this one seemingly innocent and believable trip to the store? People now say that Mrs. Gilson's

trip was planned. Maybe it was just an idea and then, as the days passed, the roar of the Pacific got louder so that eventually she didn't even hear her children anymore, she didn't hear their crying, demanding, questioning, reasoning, laughing; even the good sounds, she no longer heard.

And what about that boy down at Hupert's? Was he Mrs. Gilson's lover? And what about money? Would I have brought money, a passport, keys? If it wasn't planned, would I have warm clothes, any clothes? And then, would I return? Would this just be a madcap overnight adventure or would it be, like Mrs. Gilson, desertion of family? And what about regret? Would I be on some Caribbean island with a new name, a new look and suddenly see a child that looked like mine, grown up now and independent, and think: what have I done?

My husband would never guess it was him. Anything but him: the carpooling, the egg-carton projects, the bickering between three children with very different ideas of fairness, the lack of sharing, the constant push and pull, the lessons: piano, swimming, ballet and then jazz, karate on Tuesdays, and Thursdays, macramé. She could've just told me she was cracking, my husband would think, she didn't need to be so extreme. Because it was probably just one little thing, he would reason. He would be sliding the toothbrush up and down Emma's front teeth, trying to remember the way I taught him, the way the dentist taught me, the perfect way, the way to prevent decay. "When's Mom coming back?" Emma would ask because she's our predator; she senses danger. And then she'd say, "I need my milk."

What about Emma, six-year-old Emma? Christopher, who's three, wouldn't get it. But Emma is all ears and eyes, even in her sleep. She would be in her pajamas, waiting for me to pick out her clothes for school the next day. There would be a field trip or a baking project, something special that I would know about, be involved in, have volunteered to chaperone. Emma would think: it's Mom who brings home the notes, reads them, saves plastic containers and magazines, makes Rice Krispies treats for bake sales. And where is Mom? Alice Gilson asked that all the time. My brother and I asked my parents that question almost daily: where is Mrs. Gilson? Somewhere better, I would tell my brother, and my parents would look at one another. Because, I reasoned, if this was the best place and the best job, cleaning our rooms, our toilets, our ears, our asses, our lunch boxes, if this was worth staying for, listening to our nightmares, our dreams, our bad luck, our adventures, then why would a mother leave? My mother let my father answer and he did, though not completely. Nor would my husband be able to answer Emma's plaintive: where is Mom? Emma would want me just then. But she would wait. She wouldn't be tired, she's never tired, and she'd notice that her dad's too busy bathing her baby brother and looking at clocks. Her father would make her start looking at clocks, too: the kitchen one, the one on the microwave, stereo, VCR, the old one on the wall by the front door. They're all a minute or so different so it would be hard to know how long it's been since she last saw me, her mother.

It wouldn't matter to Emma because she'd just go ahead and get started and then I'd come home and tell her if the clothes she'd chosen were warm enough for the field trip, old enough for art day, whether they matched or not. She'd pick some stuff out and then ask me to double check. If I come back. When I come back. Mom is coming back, Emma would ask my husband, isn't she?

Like my brother, Jack wouldn't worry until everyone else was crying. He would only fall apart if he saw Emma's tears. There are only two years between them, but it could be ten. Until he breaks down, Jack listens to music or makes things. He'd get into his pajamas and then sit at his desk and make a house out of paper clips. Occasionally, he would wander into the bathroom to ask my husband if I'd called yet. When my husband said no, Jack would say, "Let me know when she does."

Christopher. He'd miss me physically. After Alice left, Joe Jr. used to cradle my mother's arm like a doll, stroking her forearm and rubbing his cheek against her skin; he couldn't get enough of her. Christopher's like that. He's all touch. His fingers would search through his stuffed animals, trying to find hair like mine, hair to twirl, pull gently, twist and then sniff. My husband would give him the horse with the long mane, the one that soothes, calms, absorbs the tears when I'm out for just the evening. Christopher would make do, though he would sense that I'm not coming back. It's all or nothing with him. He knows the truth no matter how artful the lies and distortions are. He would whimper, maybe give my husband the hardest time of the three, but finally, he'd fall asleep with the horse. That's the thing: everyone's replaceable. Prince William loses his mother and there he is on the cover of *Teen Beat*, looking bashful and well-adjusted and fully parented by his father and mistress. Does he blame his mother? Does he blame his father? Certainly on some level, but he's trying to move on. When amputees lose limbs, they say that the rest of their body picks up the slack. Fact is, everyone recovers to a certain degree.

And then there would be my phone call. I'd have to call. Mrs. Gilson did. Three years later, but still she called. I would have to know why I left before I could phone. Would it be the husband or the kids that made me want to leave? Mrs. Gilson never said why and to this day, Alice still thinks it was because of her: she wasn't helpful enough, she asked too many questions, she didn't like that dress with the lace collar that her mother bought her and begged her to wear on Easter Sunday. For me, it would be all of them. They're all take and no give. The milk would be the one little thing that pushed me over the edge, my husband would think. But it would have to be bigger: a slow building-up of deprivation. A continuous emptying of myself for them for years and now, there's nothing left. Mrs. Gilson had nothing left. She couldn't even get herself dressed. When the kids were dropped off at the corner in the afternoon, she'd meet the bus in her bathrobe. Would it be that subtle, that random? No fight with the toddler, no husband bitching for his dry cleaning, no toilet overflowing and the boiler

blowing up, no Eureka. Nothing that obvious. Because I would've been doing a good job. I would've made sure everyone's homework got to the teachers on time; and I would've filled the freezer, washed the clothes, fed the animals, arranged doctors' appointments, thrown birthday parties, baked Christmas cookies and dyed Easter eggs; I would've done it right so no one would be able to look back and say, she was slacking off, failing, letting her mind drift elsewhere, like Mrs. Gilson. There would be nothing for people to point a finger at and say I knew it. Just a constant drain, a sieve to my soul that had been going unplugged for days, weeks. It would have to be that severe. I would have to be able to say to myself: I don't remember being full.

Would that be what I want? To find the full feeling versus the empty one? Then, would it be a Wizard of Oz happiness-is-in-your-own-backyard kind of feeling that I would be seeking, where I would come back home and realize that although it's been a sacrifice, a huge giving of myself, it's also the biggest gift, this family? Or, like Mrs. Gilson, would I never come back? Would I realize that I'm happier away from them and think of my family nostalgically as a mistake I made and continue serving umbrellaed drinks to tourists in the sun?

It would be for selfish reasons that I would return. Just as Mrs.Gilson needed to stay away, I would need to come back. My husband, Jack, Emma, Christopher: they are my everything.

Freddie Gilson would never admit that his wife was never coming back, that he had been abandoned, left, ditched with two children. Whenever anyone asked him, he'd say, she'll be home any day now, as if he didn't know where she was, as if she was just taking care of a sick relative down South or running a complicated, time-consuming errand. Before Mr. Gilson moved in with Addie, we went trick-or-treating at the Gilsons' house, never once thinking that it wouldn't be the same as always. While walking up the pathway, I just assumed that Mrs. Gilson had left her husband the recipe for her caramel apples. She would have had to explain her secret, how they were always still warm from the dipping, yet the apple itself was cold and crunchy. I never thought for a moment that her leaving, like my own leaving, could forever change Halloween, the smell of sheets at night, lives. If I had the courage, I would write Mrs. Gilson and tell her how important those apples were for me and everyone in the neighborhood. I would tell her that although Mr. Gilson was trying his best, Alice and Joe Jr. never again got to the bus stop on time and their lunches never had anything any of us wanted to trade them for. I would tell her that after she left, her family's lives were destroyed like charred bits of meat on the grill, unrecognizable to any of us.