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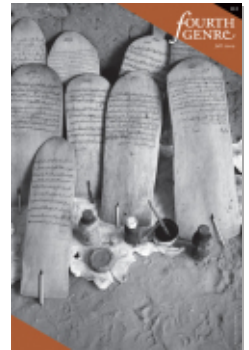
## Privy Council: Revelations in an Outdoor Toilet

Gladys Haunton

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# Privy Council: Revelations in an Outdoor Toilet

GLADYS HAUNTON

It took me years to realize that most people are seriously put off by the smell of human feces. Conditioning determines your response—early associations, the story you absorb along with your sensory impressions. So much depends on the names people apply, or not, to those impressions: “stench,” for instance, versus wordless acceptance. Nobody named that sharp, assertive odor for me, any more than they named the racket of wren song or sunlight slicing between wallboards that accompanied it in one of my life’s first best places.

The larger setting was “up home,” the South Dakota farm where my mother grew up and where her unmarried siblings George and Anna remained, first to care for an aging father, then to live out their own long lives. From before my birth until I reached adolescence, my family vacationed there the way today’s families vacation at theme parks. For me, the theme was my mother’s childhood, as magical to me as Laura Ingalls Wilder’s and every bit as rich in tales of making do and eking out and delighting in the ordinary.

In my mother’s stories, as in Wilder’s, the tension lay in the discrepancy between life’s simplicity and its richness, between the mundane course of an episode’s events and Mother’s vividly conveyed emotional responses. Mother’s tales drew additional power from the circumstances of their telling—usually a dark bedroom, my mother beside me on the bed, mine or hers, fireflies lifting past the window screen, or their winter counterpart, snow swirling beneath the neighbor’s garage light. Issues of identity and psychic heritage attached to the sound of my mother’s voice and the web her brief questions wove between the story’s setting and my experience: “You know the rise in the road where you can first see Sorenson’s barn?”

I smell dust on goldenrod as Mother tells of emerging into the sunlight from the one-room schoolhouse. With her parents, sister, and three bothers, she has attended a Sunday-morning church service here, but her mind was not on the sermon. She is old enough to have a breath-catching crush on a boy who also attends the service with his family. She is young enough to feel clueless about initiating contact. The boy stuns her, thrills her, by coming directly over and asking if instead of riding home with her family she will let him walk her home. Flushed with excitement, she confronts a dilemma. She wears her Sunday shoes, patent leather Mary Janes handed down from her older sister, Anna. The soles are so nearly worn through that Mother knows they could not survive the long walk home. She finds admitting the truth impossibly humiliating, so she can only decline the offer without explanation.

Each of Mother's narratives honored the clean, sharp emotional dimension of an ordinary childhood. I heard loss and frustration echo through the final lines of her Sunday-shoes story. Her Christmas Eve story glorified anticipation and made a virtue of relishing the moment.

After cleaning up the Christmas Eve dinner dishes, Mother and her four siblings rejoin their parents at the round table. Their father tilts a large paper sack over the first of five soup bowls arrayed before him. Hard candies the color of jewels spill into the bowl, clattering like marbles against the glass. As he repeats this gesture four more times, Mother battles a kind of agony in her pleasure. Because the moment is rare and precious, she wants to savor it; but because she knows what follows, her mind keeps leaping beyond it.

When he has passed a filled bowl to each child, their father sets their only Christmas gift on the table—not one for each of them, but one to share, which they unwrap together. They know before the paper is off that the box contains a mechanical toy, because that is their family's tradition. And a twist in the tradition ensures that the toy will never lose the charm and fascination it holds for them tonight: they will play with it only on Christmas Eve. The rest of the year it will lie packed away in the attic with the paper garlands and tiny tree candles and all the toys from previous years.

The rattle of candy falling into soup bowls has unleashed this anguish of anticipation in Mother because it ushers in not just the new gift, but the annual joy of reuniting with the whole collection. Dizzy with excitement, she participates in a holiday ceremony of winding up each toy in turn and

releasing it to its clockwork animation. A monkey bobs from side to side on ice skates. A loose-jointed man in spats and top hat dances. A metal bear walks with a lumbering gait. A cat sits in a rocking chair and plies knitting needles. Mother's favorite, which she saves until the last, is a tin woman in a long dress holding a basin in one hand and a wire loop in the other. When you fill her basin with soapy water, wind her up, and flip a tiny lever, she dips the loop into the water, lifts it to her mouth, and blows a real bubble. Mother wills the bubble to stay whole and afloat, because for as long as it hangs in the air, Christmas Eve cannot end.

That image always triggered in me a warm, reassuring conviction that I, too, was capable of such conscious savoring. If perhaps I had not yet quite experienced it, such engagement with the moment *could* be mine. Mother's voice directed me toward it. Even when the emotion she conveyed in a story troubled me, I craved its intensity.

A long August heat wave pushes everyone toward the limits of endurance. Mother copes, on this afternoon, by stretching her body out on a strip of moist earth where the hog pond seeps into the cedar grove. She lies on her stomach with a book spread open before her. The two family dogs, mouse-gray hounds with ears like folds of chamois, follow her everywhere, and now they spread their length along the ground on either side of her. Perhaps out of boredom, the more playful of the dogs eventually rolls over to face Mother and plops his forepaws on the page she is reading. Mother pushes the paws away. Moments later, they plop back. The hound feigns a "who, me?" kind of innocence, but this is clearly no accident. Mother sweeps the feet away a second time.

Tension builds in the stillness that follows. The determined reader tries to wrest her attention back to the page. The humor-loving dog watches her face while gauging the timing of his next move. The serious dog remains inert but shifts his gaze back and forth between the two players. Inevitably, after a long delay, the paws flop onto the book a third time. Heat and annoyance are too much for Mother. She shoves the feet off, delivers a sharp verbal reprimand, and smacks the dog's flank with the palm of her hand.

Both dogs register shock, take a few seconds to assess the altered atmosphere, then rise with slow, deliberate dignity and stride away. Before they disappear into the grove's depths, the serious dog stops and looks over his shoulder at Mother, delivering his own wordless but unmistakable reprimand.

Remorse floods my mother. She tries to call them back, tries to convince them of her willingness to play, to make up. They will have none of that. They move on, taking the high ground with them.

Mother always ends the story with a prolonged silence that means she's drifted inward, away from me. Then she adds, "I still regret that."

These stories reached out of Mother's past and grabbed hold of my present. They introduced me to the concept of interior richness in the daily life of a child, and I set out to find it on my own. No place offered greater potential for this than up home.

Mother filled her narratives with visual images. Summer-scorched grass like sisal carpet spread beneath the little schoolhouse. Bedtime shadows encroached on the oak surface of the round table after the tin lady's last bubble burst. Dark, precise reflections of cedars made the hog pond appear as deep as the trees were tall. Up home, when I walked over that crisp grass, ate mulberries from a green bowl at that table, or stuck a stick into that pond to disturb the reflections, I entered physically into Mother's setting and opened myself to its influence. The bedtime stories made a literary romance of emotions, and my body's contact with solid elements of the tales fused language, object, and self. I embodied the narratives and the emotions; I knew them in my bones. Later I would see that the stories went with me into *every* landscape and told me what to feel about it.

By the time of our visits, much had changed on the home place, but nearly as much remained the same. During my childhood, the woodshed sheltered my aunt's car rather than firewood, but if you walked past the barn and into the old machine shed, with its powerful smell of trapped summer heat and nesting mice, you would still find a horse-drawn sleigh with graceful runners and a seat of tufted leather. And that barn we passed to get here? If you looked up at its high peak where the hayloft door opened into darkness and imagined it against a moonlit sky, you would see just what my mother saw in the moment before the injured owl she'd nursed for weeks lifted out of the darkness on healed wings and soared into the night.

The farm's outbuildings remained in place, though the functions of some had evolved. The wash house served as a storage shed. The smithy was now merely the workshop, though its workbench hadn't changed since the day my

uncles George and Jim, ages seven and eight, stood there making a gift for their little sister. They transformed a short length of wooden fence post into a crude doll, with nails for eyes and tin ears positioned like a monkey's. As I write this, the doll stands on my bookshelf, rust streaking downward from its eyes like tears.

For a surprising number of years into my girlhood, the outdoor toilet retained its original purpose. Long after electricity replaced the oil lamps, my aunt Anna still drew water from a pump and the outhouse continued to serve. That's what I've been leading up to—the unquestioned rightness of that weathered shelter at the heart of my up-home experience.

Your narratives, too, have taught you what to feel in any given setting. It's likely that the language you apply to the idea of "bathroom" will interfere with what I'm hoping to convey. Shining tile embedded in scrubbed grout, porcelain surfaces gleaming like china teacups, toilet-bowl brush disguised in a sleek cylinder, and antibacterial soap in a frosted-glass globe with push-pump dispenser. A lock on the door, circuit breakers on the electrical outlets, a concealed exhaust fan humming overhead. The outhouse up home wasn't an alternative to that. It was something entirely other, the thinking that made it so emanating from a different story.

We called a visit to the outhouse a "trip to Mrs. Jones's." I've never understood why the name Mrs. Jones, but going there *was* something of a trip, involving, as it did, distance, a certain amount of scheduling, and an announcement of departure. Traditionally, every responsible rural citizen moved the latrine periodically, filling in the existing hole with dirt, digging a new one, and placing the little building over it. But all locations maintained a discrete distance from the house, and once that criterion was met, shade and visual screening factored into the placement. While I was growing up, Mrs. Jones's hut nestled between the wash house (the farm's northernmost building) and a dip in the landscape where burdock and nettles scabbed over the scar of an old silage pit. Just beyond its door, a gnarled box-elder tree spread pools of shade.

The scheduling element of a trip to Mrs. Jones's had less to do with physical needs than with the rhythm of rural days. Anna inherited a regimented life from my grandmother. In addition to that roster of chores that you would imagine—nurturing laying hens, gathering eggs, tending garden, preserving

everything from raspberries to rhubarb—she orchestrated five meals a day. Besides the usual breakfast, dinner, and supper, long hours of field work required a mid-morning and late-afternoon picnic, wrapped, packed, iced, and delivered to George and a hired hand in whatever field was currently under the planter or cultivator or harvester. In our small town, Mother and her friends stepped briefly away from their work by sharing an iced tea at the kitchen table of a next-door neighbor. Less social or more remotely located homemakers took their breaks in front of a television tuned to *The Guiding Light* or *The Young and the Restless*. Anna found a similar separate peace with Mrs. Jones.

Or so I believed at the time, because during our visits I saw the outhouse as a place of female refuge. I knew from the way it recurred in Mother's stories that she and Anna had always sought privacy together there the way some children seek it in a tree house or in the crawl space beneath a porch. With three brothers in a small home and a work-burdened mother sure to press them into service whenever they were within view, the sisters learned to escape together to Mrs. Jones's. It developed a long history as the site of their most sheltered conversations. That's where announcing departure enters in. During our visits, with noon dishes washed and back in the cupboard, while the men lazed briefly on couch and recliner before returning to the field, or in that same suspension of tasks that followed the evening meal, Anna might say without irony, "I'm going down to Mrs. Jones's."

The men heard and accepted the phrase as a message to stay away from the area behind the wash house until Anna reappeared, because in summer, Mrs. Jones's door remained open to the flow of fresh air and a view of the box elder no matter who was paying the call. Mother heard in the phrase, as she had throughout her girlhood, an invitation to share confidences. I picked up on Anna's comment the way a dog picks out the word "walk." And like that suddenly alert dog, I was at Mother's and Anna's heels before the kitchen screen door banged shut behind them. If I kept a low profile, I gained access to the only scene of Mother's childhood that I could reenter and find it still occupied by the original players in their original roles.

Mrs. Jones was designed as a communal space. The builder of the outhouse understood and accommodated its social function by carving three holes into its bench-like seat. And here is the magic: one hole—that on the far right as you entered—he sized for a child. The third hole was not just smaller; it was

also lower and closer to the front edge, centered in its own little niche built into the larger bench like a single stair step.

*I sit in the step-like niche, cotton panties around my ankles. Because I am so much lower than Mother and Anna, because my body fits into the little alcove like an almond in its shell, I nearly disappear. The two women have talked almost constantly since our family's arrival up home, but the intimacy of the outhouse shifts the tenor of their conversation. Gossip and reminiscence drop away, and something rarer replaces them. When this happens anywhere else—when I feel that slide toward intensity—within seconds one or the other of them gestures toward me with a glance, and their language switches from English to Danish, shutting me out like a closed door: “Husk, at et barn lytter.” But Mrs. Jones's history as confessional fosters vulnerability and exposure. Here, hopes and disillusionments manifest in the language we share, though often with vocabulary that leaves me confused and curious. Because I can tell that I've slipped from their consciousness, I don't ask questions. I don't break the spell. Understanding the conversation ranks second to absorbing that atmosphere of shared adult confidences.*

Again, the stories are hard to extract from their charged context: the initial gesture of stripping down my jeans and panties beside two women whose bared bottoms are a startling pink presence in this dove-gray hovel. The weathered softness of all surfaces—bench, floor, walls, roof—unpainted and scoured by history like driftwood. A dazzle of July light filling the door frame and cutting through crevices in slender planes. Faded prints of mildly threatening birds cut from an Audubon calendar and tacked to the walls with nails, which I now see weeping rust like the doll's eyes, though I think that's a trick of memory.

And that smell. Not of a bathroom, nor even a barnyard, though that comes to mind when I look for comparisons. It's earthier, transformed by the quick-lime each user scoops from a box and tosses into the hole before leaving. And by earthy, I mean something so basic to decay and decomposition, so infused with the dark side of regeneration, that it draws you to the edge of endings and beginnings. It plucks at the primal, repels and attracts, catches your breath like the sudden sight of a cardinal spread dead on the lawn, ablaze in the leaf litter that already claims it.

Though I kept silent, listening to the conversations that arose in this charged atmosphere was no passive act. My mind raced to keep up with what



I was hearing. Sometimes the challenge lay in recognizing that patterns I saw as permanent were not necessarily so.

Anna, the only member of our extended Lutheran family to convert to Catholicism, has formed bonds of friendship with nuns at the Catholic college where she takes courses as an adult student. She admires their commitment and describes the rewards she imagines them finding in their focused lives. I feel a little tingle of shock trace my hairline as it occurs to me that she is confiding in Mother her desire to *be* a nun. But then I grab hold of the hope that I am mistaken, because Mother responds with excitement in her voice, supportive-sounding excitement. Laughter enters into this, and Anna uses the deprecatory term “black ghosts”—to downplay her earnestness a bit, maybe. The term does, in fact, reflect my sense that nuns are a separate species, of a different substance, unknowable, like angels or apostles.

I can feel tension in Anna’s laughter, too, though, and then she is talking about an obstacle to her plan: the care of their dependent father. So she *does* want to become a nun, and she is willing to consider leaving Grandpa in order to do it. Even more difficult for me to take in is the world-altering fact that she could—had the physical agency, let alone the will to—separate herself from up home. Then Mother urges on Anna the solution that Grandpa come live with us, and the idea of that much change becomes too much for me to process. I just can’t see it, so I calm down. Nor does the profound shift ever actually occur.

I felt a particular thrill whenever I realized that the significance of a conversation was eluding me because it referred to things beyond my experience. That put me at the very threshold of mystery—a physical place, I thought, accessible only through Mrs. Jones.

The conversation centers on some fear that haunts Anna as she does her daily work. First I get the sense of something large and prowling, a wild animal maybe. Eventually, though, I understand that it somehow involves Jake, the friend and neighbor whose wife died last winter. I am confused by my sense that his involvement is menacingly physical.

Mother and Anna seem to attribute some dark change in Jake to his grief, but that doesn’t make them forgiving, as I think it should. While I listen and puzzle, I come to believe that sorrow has some sort of sickness attached to it, a dangerously contagious sickness. I draw that conclusion because this much is

clear to me: After George leaves for the field each day, Anna listens constantly for the distant sound of Jake's car starting up, leaving his lane, and turning into theirs. She keeps her keys in her pocket at all times so that whenever this sound reaches her from across the cedar grove, she can leap into her own car and drive out of the farmstead in the opposite direction.

Rarely, as I grappled with the complexity of the confidences Mother and Anna shared, the pieces suddenly shifted into place, and I confronted some stark clarity for which I felt cruelly unprepared. This was the danger of the outhouse that somehow justified its scent and isolation, but also defined its irresistible draw.

Mother's and her siblings' beloved cousin Johnny has died of a gunshot wound, the result of some momentary loss of caution in the handling of his own gun. George found him dead in Johnny's kitchen with gun oil and cleaning rags beside him on the table. I don't learn this in the outhouse; we receive the news by telephone and come to help prepare for and attend the funeral. After the burial, Mother and Anna serve homemade sandwiches and cakes to the flood of relatives and neighbors who gravitate up the lane and into the little house up home to share their stunned wonder at the way things go.

When everyone leaves, Mother and Anna seek their ritual solitude, and I slip onto the low seat next to them. In the first real stillness she's known since George opened the door on Johnny's death, Anna confides to Mother the horrors that confronted George. Before I quite comprehend the subject, the images of blood and carnage burn themselves into my mind, and I know I will never be rid of them. I feel a space open up between who I was before these images reached me and the person I will be from now on.

The comments that follow would, I think, have passed over the head of the former me, but the new, initiated me cannot escape their burden: Johnny's "history of extreme caution" with his gun; "never stored it loaded"; "always removed the shells before entering the house"; "expert with firearms even when we were teens"; "those cleaning rags a ruse, Johnny's gift to us." A gift intended to keep us all from thinking the thoughts that Anna and Mother—and I a-crouch in my corner—are thinking now.

While Mother's childhood stories reached from her past into my present, the outhouse conversations tumbled out of the present and stretched toward my

future. If the stories explored the mystery that my mother was once a child, the conversations illuminated the no less mysterious truth that I would one day *not* be a child. Outhouse talk escaped the literary impulse that gave the bedtime tales their shapely openings, escalations, and resolutions. Bearing no concessions to child-as-audience, evoking nothing of the *Little House* books, those sheltered conversations were unmistakably unabridged renderings of that darkness that confers depth and dimension on experience—the territory all children know adults conceal. Bare-bottomed and baited-breathed, I glimpsed that forbidden place and knew, with both thrill and dread, that I would enter it one day.

Again, the combined effect of narrative and setting introduced and affirmed specific emotions. These are not so easily named as the churchyard disappointment and hog-pond regret. In the outhouse I felt, for one thing, that edge of wonder attached to things—to phenomena—that are both inevitable and unmentionable, like body functions and human frailty—things requiring sanitizing cover phrases like “a trip to Mrs. Jones’s.” I felt relief of a sort, too, at discovering that among intimates in places built for privacy, such things *are* mentioned. (I was nearly an adult before it occurred to me that the phrase “privy to” does not literally mean having access to information so secret that it is shared in a privy.) I felt confusion as I worked to connect what had been mentioned to the hollow awareness that haunts consciousness before a mystery is named. I found satisfaction, like personal achievement, at being party to an intimacy allowing for such naming; and with this came the weightiness of wondering where and when I might someday have use for the arcane language involved in the naming. And I knew the concern—or was it comfort—of suspecting that to honor the intimacy, I had to keep its secrets. No wonder the smell of quick-limed excrement still makes my heart race and my pupils dilate.

The fencepost doll that looks over my shoulder and weeps rust while I write these pages is so sweetened by associations that I can’t see her stark, folk-art ugliness. Lifting her off the shelf and settling her into the crook of my arm to feel her satisfying weight against me is as close as I can come now to tangible contact with the narratives that structured my emotional framework. After Anna and George died, new owners bulldozed down the house and buildings up home. From the highway I still recognize a fragment of the cedar grove,

but in the changed landscape I can't determine where the house or barn stood, much less Mrs. Jones's tiny cottage. The embodied understanding and internalized values I absorbed up home are knee-jerk by definition, nearly beyond the reach of my rational awareness. The dark conversations, no less than the charming tales, infused me with assumptions and associations that settled into my psyche and colonized it. I assume the rightness of these effects as unthinkingly as one experiences uninterrupted good health. When I try to bring them to consciousness, I know doing so romanticizes them the way nostalgia beautifies the doll.

Finding the doll beautiful, though, means denying her monkey ears and the deep crack that splits her face—those identifying marks of her innocent origins and distant past. If I want to deny nothing of my outhouse experience, I'll have to set aside nostalgia long enough to recognize its monkey ears.

For a time in my childhood, I suffered a fear of *indoor* toilets, haunted by their potential to overflow. The one at our house did this sometimes, causing Mother to rush into the bathroom and force a rubber plunger up and down in the plumbing's throat with alarming ferocity. Mother was mostly unflappable, but those episodes released her Mrs. Hyde. Consequently, I was afraid to flush other people's toilets as well. Who knew what would come crashing through the door brandishing a plunger if at the crucial point in the flush cycle the water kept rising. When I went to a new school, those madly gushing institutional toilets were way too much for me. Mother eventually had to come to the school and stand in the stall with me, where she encouraged me to flush and flush until I could finally do it without hyperventilating. During that period, toilet dreams plagued my nights.

Years later when my sister died in early adulthood, during the months of my severest grief the toilet dreams returned. What am I to make of that regressive recurrence?

The plunging imagery creates about as graphic a view of repression as one could muster. I suppose those clustered emotions I discovered at Mrs. Jones's are key ingredients of repression. The female intimacy I found there was delicious, and writing this has been a celebration of the fusion of language, setting, and self allowing me to know it in my bones. My body seems to have absorbed just as deeply my early assumption that the price of intimacy is secrecy. Indoor fears and nighttime dreams suggest an internalized belief

that the subjects of such privileged, private exchanges threaten to rise up again, in spite of our best efforts, and splash over onto a polished world that responds with abhorrence.

I wonder how our lives might have differed if we had all spoken openly around the oak table, as we ate our mulberries, about Anna's options—women's options—to create nontraditional roles for themselves, rejecting the caregiver assignment, for instance, to find fulfillment in a community of females, whether that be for reasons of religious commitment or for the realization of personal identity and romantic love.

If we had addressed freely and dispassionately the risk of what we now call acquaintance rape, I might have been better prepared for the day in my adolescence when the kindly old man who lived next door to us thrust his hand into my blouse and gripped my breast as he said words so vastly inconsistent with the sweetness of his voice that confusion paralyzed me.

I don't believe that more open or more frequent conversations about suicide could have prevented my sister's self-inflicted death, but they might have shown our shattered family a route to recovery that my father never found.

I don't mean to convey regret—only to wonder at the entanglements of language and body, body and setting, setting and the sweet, sheltered language of our becoming. From the third seat of an outdoor toilet, I entered the world I inhabit today, privy to mysteries which, for good and ill, I carry in my bones.