Cafeteria Lady

My nephew settled me at the desk he uses for work, adjusting the well-cushioned chair to my height. Situated in a cavernous room that he calls his home office, the desk was a modern expanse of dark wood with a leather inset, a coil of gilt wound along its margin. I wondered if he had ever written anything at this desk. With pen and paper, I mean.

He wrote plenty, jabbing at keys and producing tightly wrought, introspective pieces. My nephew, Elisha Tabb, is an important writer—or so I'm told. I never thought much about what made a life important or what made one's vocation valuable.

My lifelong friend Dorothy West has grown fond of keeping me informed of Elisha's literary ascent. She can ferret out unimaginable details on her cellular phone, a device she calls her "on-the-go encyclopedia." If I want to know anything about Elisha, I tell her, I flip open my phone and call him.

Occasionally, she has thrust her cellular phone in front of me to tell me she had read this story in *The New Yorker* or that story in an anthology of O. Henry prizewinners. I had no idea O. Henry was a literary honor; I thought it was a candy bar. Apparently, that's Oh Henry! Homonyms can be tricky.

At the end of one of those articles, he described his hometown, the place where I have lived my whole life, as "out of the way," though I couldn't tell if he meant it kindly. He will read this and tell me he meant no harm.

Elisha dabbles in fiction but primarily composes searing biographical portraits of famous and everyday people. To be fair, the famous far outnumber the everyday. I'd be hard-pressed to call Condoleezza Rice a run-of-the-mill subject.

I set out to read Elisha's pieces earnestly, but so often I find myself skimming them. Reading becomes a tug-of-war between consciousness and surrender. I sit with the article in one hand, a

mug of Maxwell House in the other, and a beaten-up Webster's dictionary, its red linen cover fraying, on my lap.

A few weeks ago, Elisha asked me to sit at this desk, at this keyboard, to "get down" a brief history of Geraldine Tabb, sister to Joseph Tabb, his father. A brief history of me.

Before I agreed to this, I had to know what piqued this interest in family studies. Elisha told me he had talked to his father extensively about his life and now wished to explore a different perspective. Curiosity or assignment, I wondered.

Dorothy encouraged me to help Elisha. She told me about a woman who turned to science to learn more about her family and regretted it. DNA tests had unearthed a knot of related strangers she hadn't known existed. Dorothy had learned this on YouTube. I let her believe I knew what a YouTube was.

In the end, I agreed. Not because I had anything remarkable to tell but because Elisha asked sincerely.

My name is Geraldine Tabb. I carry the same last name as my brother Joseph to this day because I've never married. No "née" in either my past or my future.

I shared an unremarkable childhood with Joseph. Everyone called him that, except Mother, who called him Joe Michael when she was furious with him. You'd think it would be the other way, wouldn't you?

I was always Geri, shortened from Geraldine. Mother paid homage to my grandfather Gerald by retooling his name into the familiar feminine form. When I was a teenager, some of my friends griped about their given names. They wanted to be Sylvia or Linda. I never did. Geraldine or Geri, both felt right for me.

Childhood transitioned uneventfully into adolescence at Queen Anne's County High School. I was neither bullied for my occasional eccentricity in dress nor overpraised for my work ethic.

My classmates, the girls anyway, peeled off into one of two tracks, secretarial or homemaking. Those girls thought to be more intelligent were seated in front of Smith-Corona typewriters, and ones of more middling intelligence placed in front of stoves. Dorothy named her typewriter Mildred after a long-dead great-aunt. I named my stove G-man after the brand emblem near the range controls: GE.

Dorothy perfected business correspondence under the tutelage of Mrs. Kimmel, while I mastered meal planning under the stern German gaze of Ms. Pincher. "The kitchen is a dangerous place," she warned us one day in a heavy accent, her lips set rigidly. I wondered if Dorothy worried about paper cuts.

High school graduation yielded no special awards for me. The Patricia Pincher Excellence in Homemaking Award went home with Anna May Cole. What was I going to do with a new set of paring knives, anyway? Thanks to Ms. Pincher, I could distinguish a paring knife from a filet knife. I didn't walk away empty-handed from graduation, though. I had a diploma, and that sheet of sheepskin would be the ticket to my future.

Not long after the Queen Anne's County High School class of 1968 threw its caps into the humid June air, I found myself circling help-wanted ads in the local newspaper. The girls on the secretarial track would find work easily, I thought, as I perused the paper. Two doctors and a dentist in town needed secretarial help, a local advertising firm sought an office manager, and several companies appealed for typists. Tucked between pleas for a machinist and a vacuum cleaner salesman ("Our Hoovers are the best!"), was an advertisement:

> *The Queen Anne's County School District seeks cafeteria worker. Must have high school diploma, provide three references, and like schoolchildren. No experience necessary; preference for local graduates. Apply Monday, June 12.*

The walk to Dorothy's house took no more than five minutes, even in my too-tight espadrilles. When I arrived, her new Super Sterling typewriter, a graduation gift from her Aunt Marjorie, sat on the dining room table. She handed me a glass of Lipton iced tea, and I told her what I needed: a typewritten list of three references.

"Who do you want to list, Tabby?" she asked, using the nickname she came up with the summer between fifth and sixth grades, the summer between Barbie dolls and boys.

"I figured I'd put your mom because she's known me my entire life," I said. "Ms. Pincher, too. Even though Anna May won the paring knives, I know she thought I was a good student."

Dorothy fed a clean sheet of paper into the typewriter, and punched out four words: REFERENCES FOR GERALDINE TABB.

She typed her mother's name, address, and telephone number quickly, creating a block of black text, left-aligned. Dorothy rose from the kitchen chair, the skin of her thighs sticking to the plastic covering, and grabbed the telephone directory from the family's living room.

"I'll find Pincher's address and phone number," Dorothy said on her return. She flipped to the Ps.

"Do you think I should use Reverend Frost?"

Aptly named, Frost was the opposite of his predecessor, the fawning parson who fled town when the paternity of a local infant was revealed. Frost was chilly and distant.

The church's search committee chose wisely, however: the town needed a strong figure after the paternity debacle. Taciturn and strait-laced, with a terrific wave of gray hair, Frost was bland as bland could be. If Sherwin-Williams marketed the color of his hair, personality, and sermons, all rolled into one, it would be Burnt Gravy Gray.

"What's the downside?" Dorothy questioned as she fiddled with the spools under the hood of her typewriter, adjusting the ribbon's tension.

I thought for a moment. I knew I was in good stead with Reverend Frost, due in large part to the success of the church's rummage sale. My efforts raised enough money to buy twelve new choir robes, lined, not see-through. A dozen more to go, he said, desire in his eyes. In a community of over two thousand people, you'd think you could find more than a couple dozen to sing in the church choir.

"No downside. Do you know the address of Main Street Methodist?"

"100 Sycamore. I don't know his first name, though."

"Richard," Dorothy said without hesitation. "Reverend Richard Frost."

I started working in the cafeteria of the Queen Anne's County Elementary School on the Wednesday before Labor Day, 81 days after graduation. With every paycheck, I paid myself first, socking away as much as I could in my savings account at Society National Bank. With my parents still covering food and housing, and the school district providing uniforms, my spending was minimal.

Years later, with part of my savings, I took a few business classes at the community college two counties to the east. At 3:00, I'd leave the school through the service entrance, hop into my chipmunk-colored Chevy Nova, and roll past the pasturelands to class. Traffic was never an issue then.

I didn't get a diploma from the community college, but by 1974 I earned a certificate that was far more impressive than those secretarial-track credentials. I could type reasonably well, take shorthand, and work a calculator like no other, fingers flying over the keys. With that certificate in hand, I began looking for a better-paying job.

As it turns out, jobs were scarcer than they had been a few years earlier. I checked the daily paper often, sizing up potential employers by the ads they placed.

A Chevrolet dealership in Monroe County sought a "motivated office manager" to corral an "incorrigible sales team." I smiled at the humor. My Nova had always been reliable, so I liked Chevys.

I figured I could be a brand ambassador, before Florence Henderson peddled vegetable oil or Michael Jordan laced a sneaker.

I polished my resume, licked and affixed a stamp to a business envelope, and sent it to Barnes Chevrolet and Oldsmobile. No one ever called. I thought for sure that business certificate, which stood in an easel-back frame atop my chest of drawers, would get me noticed. I could still be proud of it, I reasoned, even if it didn't help me corral incorrigibles.

While I was waiting on a call from Barnes Chevrolet, I started thinking more about my work at the cafeteria. My coworkers were all older than me and content with their jobs. Mary Updike could be particularly prickly on Fridays, pizza day, because so many kids brought extra money for a second slice, complicating her job as chief till-watcher. Back then, we carried lots of coins.

For those of us standing and slinging tater tots, steak-ums, and syrupy peaches, we had little sympathy for Mary. Sue, Betty, Carol, Janet, Bette With An E, and I were a happy lot. Camaraderie ran deep; without a word, we knew when to pull a little harder for each other, when a personal tragedy struck or a child disappeared from the lunch line forever.

I thought a lot about students that had come and gone. I wondered about the Shaffer boys particularly. Whatever happened to Dennis and Gary, both tow-headed, introspective, occasionally bruised? Roughhousing between them, or between them and their father? Or the May sisters, Stephanie and Suzanne, who lit up the lunch line every day for a combined eight years. Their positivity, their light shone from within. I occasionally spotted Suzanne outside of Dollar General these days, her light much dimmer than before.

I considered the twins from Oldtown Road, the nervous ones with the runaway eyes, just as Elisha passed through the room.

"How's it coming?" He eyed the monitor with satisfaction. "You're getting down a lot."

I smiled at my nephew. Like his father at the same age, he was almost impossibly handsome with strong, dry features. No single feature pulled my focus—no dimple too deep, no scooped-out

cheekbones, no bouncing Adam's apple. His eyes, a vivid blue, didn't remind me of an impossibly brilliant sky, Virginia bluebells, or birds' eggs. They simply reminded me of Grandma Tabb.

"I'm nearly finished," I said, fingers floating above the keys. His eyebrows rose in mild surprise. Before replying, his cellular phone chirped, and he left the room.

A year or two later, just shy of my thirtieth birthday, I walked into the house and headed straight for my bedroom to pull off the grease-stained uniform. The tray-dumping station can be hard on work clothes. My mother called out to me, "Hold up, Geri. I have a message for you."

Her finger traced the scribbles on the back of an old church bulletin. "Yes, here it is. Minerva Perrin over at Barnes Chevy called earlier."

"What's the number?"

"I hope you're not having car trouble, Geri. You can always ask your father for help. He's sort of handy that way," Mother said.

Minerva Perrin didn't mince words. She told me she was packing up her desk next month and heading with her husband into blissful retirement, her words not mine. "I am done with car titles, Geri, and notarized signatures. I am done with plastic-egg pantyhose and Aqua-Net." Her voice was rife with relief.

"Anna Barnes found your resume in some old files in the back office and wants to interview you," she explained.

"To be free of those trays and milk cartons and ice cream paddles," I thought. "What a stroke of luck!"

Had I kept up my typing skills, Minerva asked. I told her I banged out letters every month to my church pen pals from Iceland and Switzerland, Helga and Ursula, respectively, and occasionally sent letters to former students.

I downplayed that last part. Truth is, I typed a lot of letters to former students. Some weeks I would send twenty, thirty, even forty letters to students. I rewound the typewriter ribbon every

other day, it seemed, and reused ribbons until the type was nearly too faint to read. Stamps went up from six cents to 13 cents since I started writing. The ribbons and postage added up, but the price was nothing compared to the letters I got back.

Even when I didn't get responses, I kept on writing. To Chuckie Smith, his sister Sonja; the Miller kids on Ioka Drive; the Gilliam girls who lived over the tobacco shop. I don't know how these kids burrowed their way into my heart but they did, little by little, so I gave them a way to stay in touch.

The following Friday afternoon, I met Anna Barnes at the dealership. She had no airs about her, despite being better coiffed and better dressed than any woman I'd ever met. By then, my list of personal and professional references no longer included Dorothy West's mother or Reverend Frost, so Ms. Pincher was in the top position. Anna perused that list.

"You know Patty Pincher?" She looked up with a wide smile, and I returned a smaller one and nodded my head. "And Bette Caldwell? Bette and I were theater kids at Queen Anne's County High!"

"I work with Bette, but I don't see Ms. Pincher often, as she works at the high school."

Again, I smiled at Anna. "Sit tight, Geri. I am going to make a couple calls."

Anna Barnes offered me $11,000 to work at the dealership, which was a lot more than the Queen Anne's County School District thought of me.

"You think about it for a day or two, Geri, and let us know. We'd love to have you," Anna Barnes said as she tucked me into my Nova. She stepped back, eyed my car, and added, "We'd give you a great deal on a new Chevelle!" She winked. I'd never see Anna Barnes again.

The excitement of the job offer petered out. That night, I lay in my bed thinking about my future, thinking about my colleagues, the hairnet harem that served breakfast and lunch each of the 180 school days. The same women in stained uniforms who divvied out portions into compartment trays were all yoked with the same passion as me: children.

Adult images of children from long ago materialized in my mind's eye. Tony Broadwater works for a Democratic senator at the Capitol; Gina Middleton bakes wedding cakes in Washington County; Laura Kahl and Benny Durbin both work at the Fruit of the Loom factory. Billy Copping is in a Kansas penitentiary, and we still correspond. His yard name is Rumpus!

I knew I wouldn't care where the next Chevelle ended up or the next Corvette or Camaro, but I could already tell Cara Malone, a fourth-grader at the time, would be a regular letter-writer. Her nose was always in a book.

My heart just wasn't in a ton of metal. I needed to love smaller.

When I called Dorothy to tell her I decided to stay on at the school, I could sense her impatience. "Tabby, you were never going to change jobs. You're right where you belong."

I stayed at Queen Anne's County Elementary School for 20 more years. I never again applied for a job; I never needed another list of references.

So that, Elisha, is the story of your Aunt Geri's plain life. No gilt, no gloss.

With that, I pushed myself away from the massive desk.

Nine weeks later, settled back in Queen Anne's County in the house I had lived my entire life, the screen door rattled in its jamb. Dorothy rapped her knuckles furiously. She said, "Have you seen this?" She thrust her cellular phone inches from my eyes.

I stepped back and perched my readers on my nose. On the tiny screen, under a banner that read *The Atlantic*, I saw this:

Portrait of a Plain Life by Elisha Tabb. My Aunt Geri believes she has lived a plain life, unembellished: small town, old maid, cafeteria lady. But her heart is huge.

I handed the phone back to Dorothy. With knitted brow, she queried, "Don't you want to read it, Tabby?"

"Dorothy, I've lived it."