

CURRERE CURSUS

A SHORT PLAY

CHARACTERS:

WOMAN - 30-50

PAULINE "LEENY" BARTLETT - 17-18

BESS BARTLETT - 40'S

"AUNTIE" MARGUERITE – 45-50

TIME:

PRESENT DAY AND 1901

PLACE:

ANYWHERE

SET: ANTIQUE CHAIR AND TABLE

As the lights come up, we see a projection of an antique store. The WOMAN is looking around at invisible objects. As she looks out at the audience, projections of old photos fade in and fade out – ending with a photo collage of athletic women in early 1900's. The WOMAN addresses the audience –

WOMAN:

Walking through an antique store, I came across a section devoted entirely to old photos.

Some were in ornate, gilded frames made of wood and plaster. Others were in desktop or easel frames; the size and shape of the photos were as varied as the frames. Round, square, oblong, rectangular; the standard sizes of eight by ten and five by seven were reserved for the more “recent” photos – those taken within the last seventy-plus years.

But what grabbed my attention were the bins and boxes full of loose photos. Every time I see these photos, the same feeling comes over me. A feeling of enigmatic precariousness. Who were these people? What is the story I’m seeing in this millisecond of a life?

And the biggest question of all – Why would anyone just dump photos off at an antique store? Are there no family connections to any of the people in these photos?

My eye was drawn immediately to a photograph glued on thick cardboard and an odd size – somewhere between five by seven and eight by ten. It depicted a

group of young women in long-sleeved blouses tucked into almost skirt-like culottes. Dark hose and high-topped leather shoes with no heel. The hair on each girl was long and pulled back into a large, dark bow. One of the girls was smiling demurely and holding an ornate cup.

The others behind her were showing various facial expressions – everything from the same shy smile as the cup holder to a rather vapid stare.

The date written on the back, in that gorgeous script that belongs only to bygone eras, read: 100 Yard Dash - Field Day – May 28, 1901. No names. No place noted. I started trying to fill in the blanks with speculations. The girl holding the cup became my focal point. I decided this photo was kept, at least for a while, by her family. She won the cup in the 100-yard dash. She was a champion in this race, on this day in May. She raced on a hot day, in an outfit that covered almost every part of her body except her head and her hands. She ran. She ran...

WOMAN turns abruptly and walks off just as AUNTIE and BESS are entering.

Projection changes to a 1900's kitchen. BESS goes to the table and begins to unload produce from a basket. AUNTIE goes to the chair with a needlepoint hoop and begins to sew.

AUNTIE: Bess, you mark me, now. You must get a handle on Pauline. You're letting her grow up like a weed. I know it's hard for you, with Paul off fighting the Spanish, but she's...she's just wild!

BESS: Oh, Margie, you're making a mountain of a molehill. Leeny's not wild, she's ...spirited. She's going to graduate as one of the best students in her class. Her poem won a prize, and she has a notebook full of poems and stories...her teacher says she should send them to a magazine and...

AUNTIE: (cutting her off) And? And what? Do you actually believe some magazine will print her adolescent scribbles? See? This is what I mean. You let Paul fill her head with those ridiculous stories about pirate treasures and crazy men fighting windmills! Such nonsense!

BESS: They're just stories, Margie. Paul saw no reason why he had to read one type of story to the boys and another to Leeny. She loves them. She and the boys act them out in the barn while doing chores. Makes the work lighter.

AUNTIE: Bess, she should leave the barnyard tending to the boys. That's man's work. Leeny should be learning about needlepoint, dressmaking and cooking. Those are the things that are important for a young girl. How will she ever find a young man to marry?

BESS: You learned all those things. Did it help you find a man, Margie?

AUNTIE: You know perfectly well I never married because Mama needed me after Papa passed. You were carrying Leeny and Paul was buying this farm, so it fell to me.

BESS: I know that, Margie. I know the sacrifice you made for the family. I also know that Jim Dawkins asked for your hand. But he wanted to take a job that meant a move to a big city, and I think that frightened you.

AUNTIE: Not all are meant set the world on fire, Bess. Per aspera ad astra. Mama taught us that.

BESS: "Through hardships to the stars." Mama's Latin lessons stay with us both. She was so proud of her Latin knowledge. I'm trying to teach Leeny, but I just find less and less time to sit down and work on it with her. Perhaps when Paul gets back...

AUNTIE: *IF* he gets back.

LEENY enters excited, disheveled and overhears the last exchange.

LEENY: *AUNTIE!!* How could you say that! Papa **will** come home! His last letter was from the Philippines, and he was leaving any day. His commander had to stay to help set up the new government. Then a fever broke out and so many got sick, including Papa. But he's doing better and is heading home. Never say that again, ever!

AUNTIE: See there? This is what I mean, Bess. This disrespect. It's out of control and out of the ordinary and thoroughly un-ladylike.

LEENY: You're being disrespectful to Papa! He is a soldier, serving his country. I wish I could serve my country like Papa.

AUNTIE: Good Lord! You wish you could be in the army? That's the most absurd thing I've ever heard! I can't listen to this nonsense anymore. I'm going to take my noon nap. Bess, wake me when it's time for tea. *(She exits)*

BESS: I will, Margie.

LEENY: *(flopping in the chair)* I'll apologize, Mama. I know I shouldn't have talked to her that way. She just frustrates me so. She expects me to be her, and I can't be. I must be who I am. Is that wrong?

BESS: No, Leeny. It is NOT wrong. You must be who you are. Who you are meant to be. Your Aunt Margie is who she is. She will never change. Check your anger at her and feel sorry for her. For Aunt Margie will never be more than she is.

Now, what brought you in here in such a whirlwind?

LEENY: Oh, MaMa! I'm going to run in the school race tomorrow. The 100-yard dash, they call it. I'm one of the fastest in my class. I'm even faster than most of the boys. Please say I can! We won't tell Auntie, but wouldn't Papa be proud if I won?

BESS: You're Papa would be proud of you just for entering. So would I. It's the twentieth century, Leeny. The world is changing, moving forward. The Ancient Romans had a saying, Leeny – "Currere cursus. Run the course." This country is running its own race to destiny. You be part of that run. *(Bess removes her apron)* And I will be there to cheer you on. Sempiterno, my sweet girl. Always.

BESS and LEENY walk off together as the WOMAN re-enters. The projection changes to the photo of the girl athletes.

WOMAN: How do I know all this? How do I know about a picture with no names? I know because there were many such mothers and daughters at the turn of the twentieth century. Mothers that saw the country changing and pushed their daughters to make changes for which they toiled, cleared the path and lay the gravel for the road ahead. I gave these women the names of mothers and daughters and aunties in my own family. Their story is our story. I know that Pauline Bartlett grew old and died in the late 1950's or early 1960's – judging by most actuarial tables. But in that photograph and on that day – she lived. She ran a race and won. She was still twenty years away from the right to vote, over thirty years away from any kind of legislation for equal pay, and long after her

child-bearing years had passed, would Pauline see legal methods to control how many, if any, children she would have.

I see her so clearly on the day of the race. Her mother cheering her on...

What happened to Pauline after that day and that race? Ah, that's another story.

This is about a photo in an antique shop. I bought the photo. I keep it on my desk at work. People ask who it is all the time. I say, "That's Pauline Bartlett. She ran a very important race." "Really?", they say, "Which one?"

My answer is always the same – "The one we're still running."

Currere cursus, sister.

THE END