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We So Seldom look on Love

Written by Barbara Gowdy

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ORIGINAL

BARBARA GOWDY

We So Seldom Look on Love



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Body and Soul

for Annie Dillard and Marius von Senden

IN THE APARTMENT building across from theirs, six storeys above the ground, a cat walks along a balcony railing.

"Cat," Julie announces, then stretches open her mouth in a pantomime of her mother screaming when there was a cat in their toilet.

"What colour is it?" Terry asks.

"Black and white."

"Oh, black and *white.*" Terry's disdain is her second foster mother's disdain for black-and-white movies.

"Black and white and black and white and black and white," Julie shouts, hitting her doll on the window-ledge.

"I heard you," Terry says primly. As she turns from the window there is a sound from outside like a siren starting up. She is about to ask what was that? but instead she screams, "Aunt Bea!" because Julie has begun to make the sink-draining noise in her throat. "Aunt Bea!"

"I'm coming," Aunt Bea says, her sandals clicking into the room. Terry is bumped aside by her big hip, while Julie, who isn't having an epileptic seizure, pushes away Aunt Bea's arm.

"Now," Aunt Bea chides, but Julie slaps the pencil out of Aunt Bea's hand, then abruptly shuts up, providing a moment of dream-like silence that signals to Aunt Bea the presence of the Lord. She feels her blood pressure draining from her temples like mercury down a thermometer. She smiles into Julie's pearl-coloured eyes and says, "I guess we had a false alarm."

Julie's features contort into an expression of ugly, inconsolable, private and measureless grief.

"You're all right now?" Aunt Bea says. She can never be sure, but she assumes that Julie is smiling back at her.

"Penny—" Julie points her doll at the window.

"Yes?" Terry says. "Penny" is what Julie calls Terry, nobody knows why.

Julie forgets what she was going to say. She begins hitting her doll on the window-pane.

"Hold your horses, I'm looking," Aunt Bea says, inserting her hand between Julie's doll and the window. She clutches the knob of the doll's head. "Good heavens," she says.

"What?" Terry cries.

Aunt Bea dips her chin to see out the top of her bifocals. "Well," she says, "there seems to be a cat lying out there in the parking lot."

"Fell," Julie says in an anguished voice.

"Oh, did it," Aunt Bea says. "Oh, dear."

"Dead," Julie says.

"No, no, I don't think so," Aunt Bea says, although from the pool of blood and unnatural angle of the cat's head she's thinking, Dead as a doornail.

"Is it bleeding?" Terry cries.

Aunt Bea hears, "Is it *breathing*?" and her heart constricts. It never fails to constrict Aunt Bea's heart how eagle-eyed this little blind girl imagines everybody is. "Yes," she says slowly, as if she is

scrutinizing, "yes, you know, I think its chest is moving up and down."

"Is it *bleeding*?" Terry repeats. She holds her hand out.

"It is *not* moving up and down," Julie says in a severely reproachful voice.

Aunt Bea would swear that the only time Julie speaks in complete sentences is to catch her in a lie. "It's hard to tell, of course," she says.

"But is it *bleeding*?" Terry cries. The faint emanation of heat that she senses in her extended hand is Aunt Bea's blood pressure going back up.

"Nobody seems to be coming down," Aunt Bea observes to change the subject.

"You better phone the Humane's Society," Terry cries.

"I guess so," Aunt Bea says. She snatches Terry's hand and squeezes it to calm the child. "All right, I'll go call them," she says, and leaves the room.

"Is it bleeding?" Terry asks Julie. Blood concerns Terry. Eyes, she was disturbed to learn, can bleed.

"Dead," Julie says.

"*But is it bleeding, I asked.*" Terry is on the verge of tears. She wants an answer to this question even though she never relies on what Julie says. Whenever Julie answers the phone and it's a woman, she always says, "It's my mother."

"Black and white and black and white," Julie says.

Terry sighs. "I know *that*," she says, giving up.

Julie, however, is referring to the checkered dress of a woman who has run across the parking lot and is now kneeling over the cat. Mommy! Julie thinks, ecstatic, and then she knows that it is not her mother, and she chews thoughtfully on her doll's foot.

"Bleeding doesn't mean you die, though," Terry says, making her way over to her dresser. With the palm of her hand she taps the

bristles of her hairbrush for the tingling sensation that reminds her of drinking Coke. Terry believes that Coke *looks* bristly. Milk, being smooth, she thinks of as round. The only thing she cannot imagine, the only thing she is prepared to be surprised by, is colour.

Terry was born nine years ago to an eighteen-year-old migrant corn detassler who left the abortion too late, mostly out of curiosity as to who the father might be. By the colour of the baby's hair, she'd know. But Terry came into the world bald and blind and with a birthmark covering most of the left side of her face, and Terry's mother walked out of the hospital that same evening. To the nurse who tried to stop her, she hollered, "I coulda had her at home and thrown her in a dumpster, ya know!"

The nurses adored Terry. She hardly ever cried; in fact, she smiled most of the time. (Some of the nurses held this up as proof that a baby's smile indicated gas; others said it proved that smiling was innate and not learned.) During the day they kept her in a bassinet at their station, on a table next to the photocopier, where it was discovered that the rhythm of the cartridge moving back and forth sent her to sleep. When she was teething, the head nurse left written orders that the copier was to be kept going for as long as Terry fretted. The head nurse, a collector and exhibitor of ethnically dressed dolls, made outfits for Terry in her spare time. Crocheted gowns, elaborately frilled, embroidered and aproned dresses, matching bows backed with tape so they could be stuck to her bald head. The other nurses bought her toys and sleepers. If an adoption agency was coming by to take her picture, they dressed her up and dabbed make-up on her birthmark to give her a fighting chance.

No couples wanted her, though. It took two years for Children's Aid to come through with just a foster mother, and even *she* was

obviously reluctant. Her name was Mrs. Stubbs. "Terry won't be getting any special treatment," she informed the nurses. "My own son's asthmatic, and I treat him exactly like my daughter." She refused to take the dresses because they had to be washed by hand and ironed. "I've got better things to do than that," she said.

Such as housecleaning. In Mrs. Stubbs's house the plastic was still on the lampshades, and Terry was taught to eat cookies with a hand cupped under her chin to catch the crumbs. There were two other children—the woman's daughter, who eloped when Terry was six, and the asthmatic son, who was devoted to goldfish. Once, he let Terry put her hand in the tank to feel fish swim by. She was startled by how soft and slimy they were; she had expected the cold hardness of her foster mother's wedding band. Her foster mother admired the glass-cleaning snails but was disgusted by the goldfish going to the bathroom in the very water that passed through their gills. The bathroom in her house smelled like pine cones. Terry was slapped for leaving the top off the toothpaste, for wearing her shoes in the house, for spilling anything—those were the worst offences. Living with this foster mother, she became a high-strung child with fingers like antennae. She could extend her hand and sense if another person was in the room. By the air currents passing through her fingers, she could tell if somebody was breathing in her direction.

Terry cried her heart out when she had to leave that home for a home closer to the school for the blind, but within a few days she loved her second foster mother to death. They spent most of their time together on the couch in front of the TV, one of the foster mother's arms around Terry, the other holding the channel changer, which she used every two minutes because she wouldn't watch commercials and because "Andy of Mayberry" was the only program that didn't drive her crazy.

"Oh, right, give us a break," she'd say to the newscaster, then

eliminate him. "Christ," she'd say, tapping her long nails on the wooden armrest next to Terry, "who comes *up* with this shit?"

Terry squirmed at the bad language, but the "us" flattered and enthralled her.

Her second foster mother's husband was a jolly, long-distance truck driver. He came home once a week, then left early the next morning before Terry woke up. Terry's foster mother groaned at the sound of his rig pulling into the driveway. She made him pork and beans and sat smoking and sighing at the dinner table while he relayed with his mouth full the hilarious things that he and his buddies had said to each other over their short-wave radios. Terry rarely understood the joke, but she laughed because of his infectious laugh, and then he would mess her hair and say, "You liked that, eh, Orphan Annie?" When he stopped coming home at all, she wasn't surprised. If he'd been a man on their TV, he wouldn't have lasted five seconds.

But she *was* surprised—and so distressed she began pulling out her baby-fine hair in her sleep; nests of it in her clenched fist every morning—when she learned that his disappearance meant she would have to leave.

Her third foster mother lived two blocks away. In a voice very familiar to Terry she said, "Mrs. Brodie is too formal. I don't want you calling me that. How about if you just call me Aunt Joyce."

"How about if I call you Aunt Bea?" Terry said.

"Aunt Bea?" Mrs. Brodie's dead sister was named Bea, so she was taken aback.

"From 'Andy of Mayberry.'"

Mrs. Brodie smiled. "Well, you know, I have to admit there's a resemblance. She's got a bun, though, as I recall. And I've got glasses, which I don't think she has. Plus I'm about fifty pounds fatter. But our faces are kind of the same, you know, kind of..." She touched her face.

"Old," Terry offered. She took it for granted that everybody had the same face.

"Old!" Mrs. Brodie laughed. "That's right! Old! How would you like to help me bake a pie?"

The only bad thing about living with Aunt Bea was when her granddaughter, Marcy, came to visit. The first time she came she didn't speak until she and Terry were outside in the playground, and then she said, "Everybody hates you" and pinched Terry's arm.

Until then Terry had thought Marcy was a mute. There was a mute who used to play with her first foster mother's son. Despite the fact that Marcy's breath hit Terry at face level, Terry had pictured a soft, little mute you could hold in your hand. The pinch burst Marcy into the spiky shape of a scream. "Go home!" Terry cried.

"She's *my* grandmother!" Marcy shouted. "You're the one that better go home before I kill you!"

Terry began to run. But since she had a poor sense of direction and no concept of space, "far away" meaning simply that it took longer to get there than "nearby" did, she ran in a large circle and didn't realize until a split second before Marcy shrieked in her ear that she had ended up back where she started.

"They're getting along like a house on fire," Aunt Bea said.

She and her daughter, who was Marcy's mother, were keeping watch from the apartment. The daughter was trying to unlatch the window. She glanced over at Aunt Bea and thought, Jesus Christ, she's as deaf as a post. When she got the window open, she stuck her head out and yelled, "Marcy! Don't chase her out onto the road! Marcy! Do you hear me?"

"Yes!" Marcy hollered without looking up. She was racing to

get a stick she had spotted in the sandbox. Terry stood very still and oblivious, like somebody waiting for a bus.

Sighing, Aunt Bea's daughter closed the window. She could hardly blame Marcy. Suddenly there was this stray living in her granny's apartment, sleeping in the bed that used to be reserved for *her*, playing with her Barbie doll. "I wish you'd talked this over with me first," she said.

"You don't have to shout," Aunt Bea said gently.

Marcy speared the stick straight at Terry, missing her by inches. "Oh, God," Aunt Bea's daughter said. She glanced at Aunt Bea's placid face. "They say you shouldn't make any big decisions for at least a year," she said. "Now you're tied down again."

Thank the Lord, Aunt Bea thought.

"Just don't get too attached to her," her daughter said. "She could be taken away at any time."

Aunt Bea crossed her arms over the ledge of her bosom and said, "Yesterday I made meringues, and when I gave her one, you know what she said?"

"I have no idea."

Aunt Bea chuckled. "She said, 'This is good styrofoam.'"

"I can't get it out of my mind that time I came here and you'd left the burner on," her daughter said. "I'm going to worry myself sick when we're living in Saskatoon."

The idea was to get somebody full of beans like Marcy but a little older, eleven or twelve, maybe, somebody who could play with Terry and walk her to and from the school for the blind. That walk was the hardest part for Aunt Bea. The school wasn't far, just a couple of blocks, but in the mornings, until she'd been up and around for a while, her ankles were so swollen they hardly fit into her shoes.

Out of some mixup, however, the social worker brought over Julie. It was a weekday afternoon, and Terry was at school. At the social worker's recommendation Aunt Bea was waiting until she and the new girl—Esther, she had been told her name was—had met each other before she said anything to Terry. The visit was a trial. If Esther took a strong dislike to Aunt Bea (or vice versa, although Aunt Bea couldn't imagine disliking a child), then Children's Aid would come up with somebody else.

While she sat at the dining-room window keeping an eye out for the social worker's old blue Chevy, Aunt Bea busied herself with knitting a skating sweater that was gradually, in her mind, changing from Terry's to Esther's. When she saw the car, she quickly folded the knitting up and put it in the sideboard drawer, then turned to the window again. The social worker was striding around as if to open the passenger door, but it opened before she got there. Aunt Bea adjusted her bifocals to get a good look.

"Oh, my," she said out loud.

It was the name, Esther, that had misled her. She had pictured a Jewish girl—dark, undernourished...haunted Anne Frank eyes. She had pictured a cardigan sweater several sizes too small. The girl who climbed out of the car was fat—Lord, as fat as Aunt Bea herself—and she had short white-blond hair in some kind of crazy brushcut. She headed in a beeline for the wrong apartment building. When the social worker called her back, she turned on her heel and took up a new beeline. Like a remote-control car, Aunt Bea thought. There was something else funny about that walk, though...a looseness in the legs and torso, a struggle for co-ordination that didn't seem at all right.

"Poor thing," Aunt Bea said to herself. This was not so much sympathy as a resolute summoning of sympathy. "Poor little motherless thing."

She scarcely had the door open when the girl said, "Hi." She

said it suddenly and loudly, as if to frighten Aunt Bea. Then she rolled her eyes as if she were about to black out.

"Hi! Come in! Come in!" Aunt Bea said enthusiastically, but she was thinking, "A retard," and now she really was thrown for a bit of a loop. "Don't sweat the petty things!" she said, reading the girl's sweatshirt.

"Believe me," the social worker said. "It was not *my* idea that she wear that." She took the girl's arm and turned her around.

"Pet the sweaty things," Aunt Bea read. She didn't get it.

"It belonged to her mother," the social worker said, giving Aunt Bea a confidential look.

"Oh?" Aunt Bea said.

"Come on, Julie, don't do that," the social worker said. The girl was bunching up the shirt with her fists, revealing a belly like a mound of virgin snow.

Julie? Aunt Bea thought.

"Should we take off our shoes?" the social worker asked.

"No, no," Aunt Bea said, blinking herself back into action. "Sit down anywhere. I've got shortbreads and chocolate milk, and coffee's made. Would you like some chocolate milk?" she asked. She looked at the girl and added, "Julie?"

"Coffee," Julie said loudly.

"Julie's been drinking coffee for years," the social worker said, falling into a chair. "*And* beer, *and* I shudder to thing what else." The social worker was a homely, frizzy-haired woman in dungarees and work boots. "Actually *I* wouldn't mind a glass of chocolate milk," she said.

Don't sweat the petty things, Aunt Bea said to herself as she poured the coffee. Pet the sweaty things. Speaking of sweat, her body was soaked in it. "Everything's fine," she told herself. "Everything's just fine and dandy." She hummed a hymn:

"A charge to keep I have,
A God to glorify,
A never-dying soul to save
And fit it for the sky."

The first thing she would do was give that crazy jailbird hair a perm.

Coming out of the kitchen, she asked Julie how old she was. Fifteen was her guess.

"Five," Julie answered.

"Five?" Aunt Bea looked at the social worker.

"Eleven," the social worker said with mild exasperation.

Aunt Bea nodded. At least Children's Aid had got *that* right. She handed Julie her coffee, and Julie immediately gulped half of it down.

"There isn't sugar in here," Julie said, holding up her mug.

Aunt Bea was startled. She cast back to a moment ago. "No, there's sugar."

"It's *not* sugar," Julie said. She looked infuriated.

"Oh!" Aunt Bea laughed. "Yes, you're right! It's Sweet'n Low!" She beamed at the social worker. "I can't tell the difference."

"Just drink it," the social worker said.

"No, no. I've got sugar." Aunt Bea hurried over to retrieve Julie's mug. She smiled into Julie's suddenly blank eyes. Pale, pale pupils, almost white. Aunt Bea had never seen eyes like that.

The social worker seemed to assume that everything was settled. "I'll bring her back Monday morning," she said after Aunt Bea had given Julie a tour of the apartment, showing her the bed she'd

share with Terry, the empty dresser drawers where her clothes would go, the chair that would be hers at the dining-room table. Julie exposed her belly and rolled her eyes.

At the front door the social worker handed over a file, saying, "You might as well keep this."

"Oh, good," Aunt Bea said, as if the contents were familiar but she'd better have them just in case. When she was alone, she sat on the couch with a cup of coffee and the rest of the cookies and opened the file. How she would end up explaining Julie to people (to her daughter) was that she was floored by the coincidences, especially the coincidence of Julie's last name—Norman. "That was the clincher," Aunt Bea would say.

To see or hear her husband's name still threw weight on Aunt Bea's heart, but to see his name written next to that poor, forsaken girl's fogged up Aunt Bea's glasses. She touched under one eye, and she was crying all right. Before Norman died she wouldn't have believed it was possible to cry unbeknownst to yourself. Before Norman died she wouldn't have said that her glasses fogged from crying, although she didn't doubt that they had and she just couldn't remember. The most startling and depressing news in her life these days was what she was capable of forgetting. Well, she wouldn't forget the girl's last name, she could guarantee that. She removed her glasses, wiped them on her blouse and lifted her feet onto the coffee table.

The report was handwritten, hard to read. Under "Mother" it said either "Sally" or "Sandy" and then "38." Then there was a short, tragic biography. Sally or Sandy had an honours BA in English Literature but she also had a drug habit and a long history of arrests for possession and trafficking. She was currently serving a five- or an eight-year jail sentence. Her only other child had been born addicted to heroin and had lived just a day.

As she read, Aunt Bea shook her head in pity and amazement.

It so happened that she had a cousin named Sally, who used to teach school but who lost her husband and her job due to addiction to alcohol. She died at age forty, a broken old woman.

"Heaven help her," Aunt Bea prayed for Julie's mother.

Under "Father," all it said was "Michael, 111."

"Good heavens!" Aunt Bea said. He must be a stepfather, she thought. Or maybe he was the mother's father. But still...111. And then she let out a whoop of laughter as she realized that what it actually said was "Ill." She laughed and laughed and had to remove her glasses and wipe them again. When she settled down she got a little irritated. What did they mean by "Ill"? Crazy? Dying? Dying from AIDS which they didn't want to say in case people were afraid to take Julie? Aunt Bea clicked her tongue to imagine so much ignorance.

She turned the page, and there was another coincidence—Julie suffered from epileptic fits. Aunt Bea's younger sister, dead thirty-four years now, had suffered from epileptic fits. Aunt Bea was handy, therefore, with a pencil. Get the tongue out of the way first, tilt back the head. Nothing to be alarmed about, so long as there were unsharpened pencils all over the house.

"Prone to temper tantrums," Aunt Bea read. "Domineering." She thought of her daughter and felt herself well prepared. "Behavioural and intellectual age," she read, "five to six." "Well...," she said dubiously. She had been very impressed by Julie's detection of Sweet'n Low.

She told Terry the news that afternoon, on their walk home from school. It wasn't until she was actually describing Julie that she recognized what a burden she was asking Terry to share. This wasn't how she had planned it at all. The brain-damaged girl she found herself bracing Terry for was a far cry from the helpful and spirited

older sister she'd had in mind. She tried to brighten up the picture. "We'll have a whale of a time, though," she said, "the three of us."

"Doing what?" Terry asked.

"Oh, I don't know..." Aunt Bea thought back to when her daughter was small. "We'll take the ferry to the island," she said, although being on boats gave her heart palpitations.

Terry swept her white cane in scrupulous arcs.

"And we'll go to the zoo," Aunt Bea said, although the zoo was a good fifty miles away, and Aunt Bea no longer drove a car.

"Where will she sleep?" Terry asked.

"With you. If that's all right. It's a big enough bed."

"What if she wets her pants? A boy at school who is five, he wets his pants."

"In that department, I'm sure she's eleven," Aunt Bea said, although she thought, Good point, and wondered if she shouldn't lay some plastic garbage bags under the sheet.

"Will she go to school?"

"She already goes. That school on Bleeker. You know, where the sidewalk's all cracked?"

"Will she go by herself?"

"No, I don't think so. We'll both walk her there, and then I'll take you to school."

Terry came to a stop and lifted her thin face in Aunt Bea's direction. "Your feet will kill you!" she cried, as if delivering the punch line.

"Lord," Aunt Bea said. "Lord, you're right."

Julie is holding Aunt Bea's left hand. Terry is holding Aunt Bea's right hand. The three of them take up the whole sidewalk, and oncoming people have to step out onto the road. Julie is thrilled by

this, believing, as she does, that it is happening because she does not smell afraid. "Bastards and dogs can smell it when you're afraid," her mother told her. So Julie is walking with her head lowered to butt. Whenever somebody veers off the sidewalk she murmurs, "Bastard."

Eventually Aunt Bea asks, "Where's the fire?" She thinks that Julie is saying, "Faster."

"Dog," Julie says quietly—this time it's a dog that has trotted onto the road. She laughs and pulls up her dress.

"No!" Aunt Bea says.

"No!" Terry echoes, recognizing the familiar sound of Aunt Bea slapping Julie's clothing down.

"Oh-kay, oh-kay," Julie says.

"Not now," Terry says. Sometimes Julie and Terry play a game that Julie made up, where Julie chants oh-kay, oh-kay while she and Terry hold hands and swing their arms back and forth, just a bit at first, and then higher and higher until they swing them right around over their heads. Terry isn't crazy about this game, but she plays it to calm Julie. She thinks that Julie is probably blue with lines. Aunt Bea is green. Blood is red.

Aunt Bea gives them each a Life Saver, then takes their hands. The sweeps of the white cane along the sidewalk strike Aunt Bea as a blessing, a continuous sanctification of their path. "I want you both to be angels in church," she says. "It's a special day."

"I know," Terry says importantly.

Julie sucks her Life Saver and rubs Aunt Bea's wrist against her cheek.

"Do you know what?" Terry says.

"What?" Aunt Bea says.

"Julie poked the eyes out of her doll." The hole in her Life Saver has reminded her.

"Yes, I saw that," Aunt Bea says.

Julie isn't paying attention. She is remembering her mother's phone call and is daydreaming about her mother singing "Six Little Ducklings." Julie smiles at her mother, which provokes Aunt Bea, who after a year still gets Julie's smiles and grimaces confused, to say, "Listen, *I* don't give a hoot. It's *your* doll. If you want to destroy it, that's up to you."

"Just don't expect a new one!" Terry cries.

"That's right," Aunt Bea says.

"My mother has left the jail," Julie says.

"What?" Aunt Bea comes to a stop.

"She phoned yesterday. She told Penny."

"No, she didn't!" Terry cries. Her shrill laugh shoots a pain through Aunt Bea's eyes.

"Yes, she did," Julie says slowly and murderously.

"It's so funny!" Terry cries. She yanks her hand from Aunt Bea's and pats the air in an excited manner. She is wearing white felt gloves. "You know how she always says it's her mother on the phone? Well, do you know what? Yesterday the phone rang when you were in the laundry room, and I answered it, and it was a woman, and she said, 'This is Sally, is Marge…' or somebody…yes, it was Marge. She said, 'This is Sally, is Marge there?' And I said she had the wrong number, and then I told Julie, and she said that her mother's name is Sally."

"That's right," Aunt Bea says. "It is."

"It is," Julie says, scowling at Terry.

"But it's so funny!" Terry cries. The strap of her white plastic purse falls down her shoulder. She reaches for it and drops her cane. "No!" she screams, imagining that the dog Julie mentioned a minute ago is racing to retrieve it.

Aunt Bea picks the cane up. "Honey, that was *another* woman named Sally," she says to Julie.

Julie bunches the skirt of her dress and rolls her eyes.

"I *told* her," Terry says.

"But your mother will be out of jail one day," Aunt Bea says, tugging down Julie's dress. "And until then Penny and I want you to live with us."

Julie's face empties. She has been dazed, suddenly, by a recollection of the woman who knelt over the cat that fell from the balcony, by a recollection of the woman's black-and-white dress, exactly like her mother's. She reasons that the woman was in jail before and is now out.

"Okie dokie?" Aunt Bea says.

Julie covers her mouth with both hands, the way the woman did.

"Okie dokie," Aunt Bea answers for her.