

“ALL MY SONGS ARE IN THE PAST”
OLDER WOMEN LOOK BACK ON ROMANTIC LOVE:
NOSTALGIA, IMAGINATION, AND IDEALIZATION

By

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To my mother

*If there is something to desire,
there will be something to regret.
If there is something to regret,
there will be something to recall.
If there is something to recall,
there was nothing to regret.
If there was nothing to regret,
there was nothing to desire.*

- Vera Pavlova
*If There is Something to Desire*¹

¹ Pavlova, Vera. *If There is Something to Desire*. Translated from the Russian by Steven Seymour. New York: Knopf, 2010. 9.

Acknowledgments

When I set out on the journey that would become this thesis I was passionate about my idea, but I had no concept of the complexity that would be involved in actualizing it. Weaving together four threads - interviews, vignettes from my clinical practice, a literary analysis, and my own story – proved to be a greater challenge than I had envisioned, and at times my confidence faltered. Although many people expressed enthusiasm for my topic, there were those who said: “Choose something easier. Just get the degree and then you can write the book!” I was ready to abandon my original idea, and substitute a straightforward biographical oral history of someone with whom I had done a long series of interviews. I discussed this dilemma with my daughter, who gave me the following advice: “Write what you feel passionate about. You know you’re going to write the biography someday anyway.”

There are so many people who helped sustain me on this journey; there is not enough space on a page to thank them all. But there are a few whose support was paramount in the realization of this project:

My thesis advisor, Luisa Passerini, who encouraged me to think outside the box.

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Introduction

Il y a des moments dans la vie où la question de savoir si on peut penser autrement qu'on ne pense et percevoir autrement qu'on ne voit est indispensable pour continuer à regarder ou à réfléchir.

- Michel Foucault
*L'usage des plaisirs*²

There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all.

When I first conceptualized this thesis, it was narrower in scope. I had originally planned to focus only on older women's nostalgia for early romantic love - a topic that grew out of a recurrent theme in both my clinical work with older women and in my work as an oral historian. It is a theme that is at the core of my own story as well. But as I began interviewing and analyzing the women's narratives, I realized that this nostalgia was not a singular phenomenon but was, rather, deeply rooted in the women's internalization of received messages about what it means to be female - messages transmitted on both the familial and societal level. Many of the women lived, often out of necessity, what might from the outside look to be feminist lives; yet almost none would describe themselves as feminists. This phenomenon piqued my curiosity, and I began addressing it in the interviews. Additionally, as I explored

² Foucault, Michel. "L'usage des plaisirs." *Histoire de la sexualité*. Vol.2-3. Paris: Gallimard, 1984. 14.

the literature on nostalgia, I understood its complexity within the framework of imagination and idealization.

When I entered the Oral History Master of Arts program at Columbia University, I knew nothing of the methodology and theory of oral history. I quickly learned that oral history is more than just telling one's story. As in the therapeutic relationship, where the real work takes place in the meeting space between therapist and client³, a similar value must be given to the intersubjective relationship between interviewer and interviewee. However, listening as a therapist is not the same as listening as an oral historian, and this is a lesson I had to learn. I have included some reflections on the convergences and divergences of therapy and oral history, as I have drawn material from both sources.

Several years ago I had a transformative experience, which impacted my sense of identity, both physical and psychological. I developed a rare medical condition, which caused both relentless spasms on one side of my face, and frequent neurological "events" in my body. I suffered with this condition for six years before I had the courage to have brain surgery. My recovery was long and arduous, but emerging from this ordeal was both liberating and life-changing, and I was inspired to go back to school to become an oral historian. I had no intention of leaving behind

³ The word "client," rather than "patient," is being used with increasing frequency in mental health settings, in an effort to move away from a top-down model in the therapeutic relationship.

my career as a gerontological social worker but, rather, of enlarging and enriching my understanding of the role of narrative in the lives of older adults.

Becoming a student after a twenty-year hiatus was daunting, and I was particularly unnerved at the thought of taking a course with noted oral historian, Luisa Passerini, as I feared I was not up to the rigor of her scholarship. Her encouragement has been an ongoing and invaluable source of support. Shortly after I began studying with Luisa, she gave a university lecture based on her work on the love letters of Giorgina Levi and Heinz Arian.⁴ The next day I was to have a meeting with her to discuss a topic for the final paper for her course, *The Uses of Oral Sources*. Moved by the subject of her lecture, I brought her some vignettes I had written about women in my clinical practice, who had spoken about the emergence in later life of the nostalgia for a past love. I also brought her a copy of a letter I had written, when I was nineteen, to my then boyfriend, a French exchange student with whom I reconnected via email after a break in communication of over forty years. He had saved the letter, which he scanned and sent to me. It written in French, English, and Italian, and addressed a range of topics, from music to the death of President Kennedy. Luisa asked me if I could leave her the material to read before our next appointment. I had been thinking long and hard about the topic for the paper, wishing I could find a way to incorporate into it both the vignettes and some of my

⁴ Passerini, Luisa. "Notre mère l'Europe: Giorgina Levi and Heinz Arian." *Love and the Idea of Europe*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2009. Chapter 6.

own story. In my mind, however, I had already dismissed the idea. I thought the material would be too far from the course content, and the notion of writing about myself seemed too egocentric. At our next meeting, when I sat down in Luisa's office, she asked me if I would be willing to do something a little different from what she had assigned in the syllabus. "How would you feel about writing something autobiographical?" she asked. I had tears in my eyes, as I felt I finally had the "permission" I needed to write my story.

Just as the process of telling a story is a process of inclusion and exclusion, so then, is the process of writing about narrative. Although I spoke with dozens of women - some in formal interviews, some in the course of my work as a therapist, and some in casual conversations - I was unable to include all the rich material I gathered.⁵ In the process, I couldn't help but be reminded of an expression, attributed to several well-known writers: "Kill your darlings."⁶

⁵ My decision to limit the focus of this thesis to the narratives of heterosexual women was not a political choice, but rather one of expediency.

⁶ A "darling" is a piece of writing, highly prized by its author, but which does not necessarily enhance the text. William Faulkner is rumored to have used the literary expression "kill your darlings," as is Mark Twain, but the expression comes originally from British author Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, who wrote: "Whenever you feel an impulse to perpetrate a piece of exceptionally fine writing, obey it—whole-heartedly—and delete it before sending your manuscript to press. *Murder your darlings.*" Quiller-Couch, Sir Arthur Thomas. *On the Art of Writing*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1916. 281.

Convergences and Divergences: Oral History and Psychotherapy

Each time I tell my story, I remove one small bit of hurt from inside me. I ease my wound.

- Carol Staudacher
*A Time to Grieve*⁷

When I was very young, long before the age of computers, I had an educational toy which consisted of a piece of cardboard with two electrodes and a red light on the top. A simple circuit board was attached to the back. On the front a list of states was printed on the left side, and on the right, in random order, a list of capitals. There was a little metal hole next to each word. The idea was to put one electrode into the hole next to a state, and the other into the hole next to the correct capital. If I succeeded, the red light was illuminated and I earned a point.

I had not thought about that toy until many years later, when I first went into the field as social work student. There were certain phrases I heard over and over again in my clinical practice classes: “That must have been very hard for you,” or “It must have taken a lot of courage to overcome that.” These phrases were used to illustrate the strengths-based practice principal: “Start where the client is.” Each time I used one of these with my clients, I got a positive response. It was like plugging the

⁷ Staudacher, Carol. *A Time to Grieve: Meditations for Healing after the Death of a Loved One*. London: Souvenir Press, 1995. 61.

electrode into the right hole and watching that red light go on. Clients felt understood. Only once did this backfire. This client, a retired social worker, snapped back at me: “Don’t give me that social worker talk!”

Much of the clinical work I have done in my chosen field of gerontology involves listening to life stories. A clinician must keep these stories confidential, sharing in writing only what can be disguised to protect an individual’s privacy. Although there has been much evidence-based literature on the therapeutic value of life review for older adults, listening as a therapist is not the same as listening as an interviewer. Therapy is a dialogue involving a vast array of interventions, such as reframing and interpretation. The therapist may reflect on body language that suggests emotional content. When Mrs.W, a woman in her eighties who has had a life full of tragedy, tells with me with a big smile on her face that her husband abused her, I can ask her what is behind the mask. When Ms. G clenches her fists while talking about how his father constantly criticized her, I can help her get in touch with her anger. And there is always the possibility of asking the classic therapy question: “How does that make you feel?” As an oral historian I might ask for clarification, but it would not be to probe the deeper psychological underpinnings of the narrative.

When I first conducted oral history interviews I struggled with their difference from clinical interviews. Although I never presumed them to be clinical work, I wondered

about “plugging in” some of the framing comments so basic to psychotherapy. I wondered if it would be presumptive to help an interviewee feel understood by saying: “That must have been very hard for you.” Perhaps not, but unlike that of the clinician, the role of oral historian is not to help the interviewee interpret and process the narrative.

In her comparison of oral history and psychotherapy, Rickard addresses the question of “what vital areas of emotional vulnerability the method of pursuing knowledge through oral history can obscure, leave uncontained, or, at worst, damaged.”⁸ Oral historian Samuel talks about the “secret, unofficial ambition” of oral history” which is to “break down the divisions between history and anthropology, and psychoanalysis...between past and present, between outward history and inner thought...”⁹ At the same time, Minuchin wrote about “the oral history of family therapy.”¹⁰ In discussing his views on the significance of personal and family history in psychotherapy, he makes a case for the social construction of history that could easily have been articulated by an oral historian:

History, or “the past,” is by definition a construction. There are the facts, which are more or less objective; but their grouping, the way they are highlighted,

⁸ Rickard, Wendy. “Oral History – ‘More Dangerous than Therapy’?: Interviewees’ Reflections on Recording Traumatic or Taboo Issues.” *Oral History*. Vol. 26, No. 2 (Autumn 1998). 34.

⁹ Samuel, Raphael. “Myth and History: A First Reading.” *Oral History*. Vol. 16, no. 1, 1988. 15-18.

¹⁰ Minuchin, Salvador. « My Many Voices » in Zeig, Jeffery K. *The Evolution of Psychotherapy*. New York: Routledge, 1987. 5.

and the shadows that are left are the product of the historian's present position. The mores of his time, the ideologies fashionable at the moment, and current constraints all contribute to the "proper" interpretation of recorded events – "proper" meaning, in this context, "correct at this historical juncture."¹¹

Interestingly, the emergent recognition of intersubjectivity in oral history parallels a similar phenomenon in psychotherapy. Miller, a psychiatrist and a founder of the Stone Center for Research on Women, developed the reciprocal *Relational-Cultural model*¹² of psychotherapy in response to traditional unidirectional models of therapeutic authority. Miller posits that isolation is one of the most damaging human experiences, and that the therapist must foster connection with a client, even at the expense of the therapist's own neutrality. Miller refers to this as "therapist authenticity," but she makes a distinction between relational responsiveness and reactivity:

Reactivity is impulsive, entirely spontaneous, and based only on the internal experience of one person...Relational response involves a consideration of context and concern about the possible impact of our actions and words on the other person and the relationship.¹³

¹¹ Minuchin. 5.

¹² For a description of the Relational-Cultural model see: Eds. Walker, Maureen and Wendy Rosen. *How Connections Heal: Stories from Relational-Cultural Therapy*. New York: Guilford Press, 2004.4. The goal of the Relational-Cultural model is to foster mutually growth-enhancing relationships, in which both parties feel they have an important role.

¹³ Jordan, Judith V. et al. *The Complexity of Connection: Writings from the Stone Center's Jean Baker Miller Institute*. New York: Guilford, 2004. 68.

Intersubjectivity is at the core of both the oral history interview and the psychotherapeutic relationship. As Summerfield has written: “The process of the production of memory stories is always dialogic or inter-subjective in the sense that it is the predictor of a relationship between a narrator and a recipient subject, an audience.”¹⁴

That the therapeutic relationship, or alliance, is “the single most potent predictor of psychotherapy outcome regardless of modality,”¹⁵ appears as well to be the single most robustly evidenced-based finding in psychotherapy research. Oral history and psychotherapy share this core organizer. How does the oral historian know when he or she is slipping into therapy? By the same token, how do clinicians recognize when a patient’s construction of a narrative may be a diversion from therapeutic dialogue? And yet, intersubjectivity shapes the outcome in both disciplines. Walker describes this process as “empathic attunement to emergent experience and openness to movement through mutual influence.”¹⁶As the poet Audre Lorde wrote, in a letter to her therapist: “Some part of my journey is yours too.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Summerfield, Penny. *Reconstructing Women’s Lives: Discourse and Subjectivity in Oral Histories of the Second World War*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998, 20.

¹⁵ Gabbard, Glen. O., J.S. Beck, & J. Holmes. *Oxford Textbook of Psychotherapy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. 467.

¹⁶ Walker, Maureen. “How Relationships Heal.” In Walker, M. and Rosen, W.B. (Eds.) *How Connections Heal*. New York: Guilford Press, 2004. 20.

¹⁷ Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Speeches and Essays*. Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1984. 162.

“All my songs are in the past.”

From girlhood on, we learn to be more enchanted with love. Since the business of loving came to be identified as women’s work, females have risen to the occasion and claimed love as our topic. Females sit with one another every day and talk about love.

- bell hooks

*Communion: The Female Search for Love*¹⁸

Women. At some point in my life this word came to signify community. For years I resisted becoming part of it. I didn’t learn about the community of women from my mother; I would even say that, as I was growing up, she taught me to scorn it. I was raised with the notion that the only real way to feel valued as a woman was through the adoring eyes of a man. I can’t blame my mother; she grew up at a time when this was the prevalent view of womanhood. The feminist writer bell hooks contextualizes this perspective within the framework of the 1950’s:

*The prevailing psychological mores of the fifties sanctioned our innocent belief that we would find ourselves in and through love. We were willing to give all to love because we believed love would return all that...It was the only hope of salvation.*¹⁹

Despite my resistance, I did become a part of a community of women. My earliest glimpse of this world came unexpectedly in the middle of the night, while as a new

¹⁸ hooks, bell. *Communion: The Female Search for Love*. New York: Harper Collins, 2002. 75.

¹⁹ hooks. 23.

mother I sat rocking my firstborn child to sleep. I began to sing a lullaby and found myself weeping, overwhelmed by the feeling that I was part of a continuum of generations of women who had done this before me. A portal opened, but I was not ready to enter. In my twenties I was still searching for communion through romantic love, and it would be many years before I understood that I had missed an opportunity to find my strength in a community of women. Fortunately, there would be other opportunities.

As long as I can remember I have had poignant and powerful feelings of yearning inspired by certain women older than myself. This yearning was never romantic or erotic, but rather an intense desire to learn from these women another way of being in the world. Often they were women who had lived more adventurously, more spontaneously, more independently than I, especially when they were young. Some had lived difficult lives. They were not glamorous women, but women who had a certain *élan* - women whose physical beauty would only have been appreciated by some, especially as they aged. They were creative women, and did interesting work. One knew intuitively there had been great passion in their lives. Jean Baker Miller identifies “zest” as one of the “Five Good Things”²⁰ that foster a sense of connection in relationships, of engagement with the world. More than any other quality, it is this intangible thing called “zest” for which I have yearned.

²⁰ Miller, Jean Baker and Irene P. Stiver (Eds.). *The Healing Connection*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1997.

According to Minister, women encounter one another for the purpose of “searching and collaboratively constructing both personal and female cultural identity.”²¹ In the course of my work as a clinician, and more recently as an oral historian, I have heard dozens of life stories. Most of my patients and interview subjects have been older women, so these narratives are most often the stories of women’s lives. Over the years I began to discern a recurrent theme: nostalgia and yearning for a long-lost love. In some cases it was love that was never consummated, idealized love that was never to be; in others it was love that could not endure, because of personal, familial, circumstantial, and historical factors. For each of these women love was internalized through the lens of growing up female in a particular time and place, and now that love is also remembered through the lens of aging. Their narratives touched something fundamental in me, deeply connected to my own life.

I have often been told I should write my story. When I thought about this at an earlier time in my life, it seemed an idea unmoored in any broader meaning. Inspiration comes unexpectedly and in unlikely ways. The value of telling my own story became clear only in relationship to the stories of older women; but I pondered how to connect my story with theirs. The answer came one day when I was in a public restroom, “hovering” over the toilet seat as girls are taught to do. I

²¹ Minister, Kristina. “A Feminist Frame for the Oral History Interview.” *Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*. Gluck, Sherma Berger and Daphne Patai (Eds.). New York: Routledge, 1991. 43.

found myself wondering what happens when one becomes too old to hover. I am fortunate to have had the opportunity, in my clinical practice, to run a number of women's groups. The women in these groups taught me, through their stories, invaluable lessons about the importance of connection with other women as we age. A woman in one of my groups came to mind, as she once talked with humor about this issue of "hovering." It suddenly it occurred to me that a common thread ran between her story and mine – and the stories of all the women in the groups. I realized that were it not for my own story, I would never have come to know these extraordinary women:

I thought about Maria this morning. She made me smile. The discussion was about incontinence. Everyone in the group had some way of coping with it – more or less. Maria is the expert, extolling the virtues of a particular brand of adult diapers. Purple blouse and matching pants, grey-white hair, for so long cropped close to her head, now curling softly over her collar. Yesterday the doctor asked her for a "sample" and "for once I didn't have to go." She thought she would turn on the faucet to make it come – you know, the way our mothers did when we were little. Damned if that doctor didn't have one of those "magic" sinks – the kind where you have to keep your hands under the faucet to get the water going. "You should have seen me," she said," rising out of her chair the way women do when they hover over the bowl, "doing the sample dance." She put her hand under an imaginary faucet while swaying back and forth, trying

to catch the urine in a cup but having difficulty because the sink was just a little too far away. Three drops in the cup – the rest on her hand. “You’re a riffer” said Millie. “You got to keep it funny, Ladies.”

We met once a week, these women and I, a psychiatric social worker in an outpatient mental health clinic for older adults. The group had begun several years earlier and had gone through many changes. At first there were nine women. Some only stayed a short time. Ellen really didn’t want to be in a women’s group – especially not a group of old women like herself. When someone mentioned her, long after she had left, she was referred to as “face lift.” Once, when the group was discussing the best period of their lives, Thelma, then eighty-six, said “my seventies.” Ellen asked “You mean the 1970s?” Thelma said, emphatically, “No, my seventies!” Ellen was incredulous. How could anyone want to be the age she was trying so hard not to be? Then there was Goldie. She didn’t get it – the point of all this reminiscing. After a few sessions she said to the group: “I’m not really interested in all your stories.” She never came back.

Others came and went, but none left a legacy like Linda. “What was the name of that woman who talked so much?” “Did she leave voluntarily, or was she asked to leave?” Maria was convinced that it was the discussion about sex that drove her away. “Remember the discussion about sex? The one where Natasha

shocked everyone (or so she thought) by telling the group she still watches the "blue channel." "Imagine that! Eighty years old." Millie said: "Sex? What's that? It's been so long I wouldn't remember."

The conversation shifted and one of the women reminded me that we had agreed that this session they would try singing together. Millie had been a cabaret singer when she was young, so someone suggested she choose a song. Usually quick to make a joke, this time Millie thought a moment and said wistfully: "All my songs are in the past."

Insatiable Yearning

*Io mi senti' svegliar dentro a lo core
Dicendo: "Or pensa pur di farmi onore";
E 'n ciascuna parola sua ridia.
Un spirito amoroso che dormia:
E poi vidi venir da lungi Amore
Allegro sì, che appena il conoscia,*

*I felt a loving spirit suddenly,
past a long slumber, in my heart arise;
from far away then Love I seemed to see,
so glad, I could his face ill recognize.
He told me "Do your best to honor me",
and laughter in each word I did surmise.*

- Dante Alighieri
*La Vita Nuova XXIV*²²

The phrase came to me half a lifetime ago as I lay in bed one night, awake beside my sleeping husband. "Insatiable yearning." It was good to have a name for the disturbing feeling that had plagued me for so many years, but naming it only served to underscore its disquieting effect. Was it like chronic illness, from which I might suffer all my life? Yearning for what? Yearning to find a container for that surge of sensation we have come to call romantic love? Not just to be desired and adored by another, but like a seedpod that is about to burst, feeling as though one were exploding with love, unable to find a proper receptacle for its contents. I was weary

²² Dante Alighieri. *La vita nuova*. XXIV. In Tusiani, Joseph and Di Scipio, Giuseppe (Eds.). *Dante's Lyric Poems*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010. 51.

from living out the drama in fantasy. It would take many years before I would break free. But what I initially mistook for freedom only led me into another, more painful, illusory existence.

Magnetic Poles

The electromagnetic field extends infinitely in space. It is one of the four fundamental forces of nature, the others being gravitation and the weak and strong interactions. In classical physics the field is regarded as a smooth, continuous, flow; whereas quantum mechanics perceives it as composed of individual particles. From the moment I entered the museum I felt myself to be a particle in an undulating electromagnetic field.

I was eleven years old when the Guggenheim Museum opened its doors in 1959. I remember how excited I was the first time I ran up and down the helical corridor. As a young child my only exposure to museums had been in the somber halls of the Museum of Natural History, and in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where my grandmother often tried my childish patience by spending what I considered much too long in front of each painting. But by the time the Guggenheim opened I had become interested in modern art. My dance teacher introduced his students to the work of Picasso and Paul Klee, and asked us to choose two contrasting works from

which to draw inspiration for our own choreography. Prior to this my experience of art had stopped with the Impressionists.

Enter the museum, lobby bustling with visitors. I am with a colleague, L. Our eyes are drawn to the couple making love on the floor of the rotunda - dancers, clothed, in the perpetually flowing movement of an exquisitely tender exchange. I am magnetized, and yet I avert my gaze. *Insatiable yearning*. The words I found so many years ago to describe the feeling of wanting to desire and be utterly and totally desired. Yeats' verse resonates in my head: *How can we know the dancer from the dance?*²³ L seems able to look with a certain objectivity, as one might look at a painting in an exhibit. Self-consciously, I look; self-consciously, I look away. I feel the weight of a lifetime of inhibition on my shoulders. My mother's voice.

As we start up the ramp, a young boy approaches us. "What is progress?" he asks. "Do you mind if I walk with you?" His smile enchants us. We are now three ascending. We do our best to define progress. It's not so easy. L asks if we may pose this question to him as well. He says we may, but then, seamlessly, he disappears and is replaced by a young man. We continue upward with him. The conversation becomes more complex, as he poses questions about our perceptions of life and death. I am aware of a shift in depth in the conversation. Fleeting regrets about

²³ Yeats, William Butler. "Among School Children." *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*, Vol. 1. Finner, Richard, J. (Ed.). New York: Scribner: 1996. 217.

missed opportunities of my youth pass through my thoughts, but at the moment they are not compelling. I would like to spend more time with this young man, but as soon as we are immersed in the conversation he is replaced by another person. We are beginning to understand how this works.

Our next encounter is with a woman who tells us how her life was changed by a week at a silent retreat. She asks us if there is too much talk in the world today. I am not drawn to her as I was to the others. Perhaps it is her appearance, perhaps her manner. It seems as though she was born "middle-aged." She tells us she is thirty-nine. I am not sorry to see her go. There is no one waiting to take her place, so we continue to ascend.

It is impossible not to look over the edge from time to time at the couple making love below. As we go higher the perspective changes, and my feelings of self-consciousness increase. They are still there; I am somewhere else. I am still here; they are somewhere else. I want to be there, where they are, in that timeless embrace. In my head I shake myself like an animal awakening from a nap, and return to now. I look at L observing them and wonder what she is feeling. She seems curious and curiously at ease. Perhaps she does not suffer from insatiable yearning. Perhaps she has been able to shake this from her psyche. I wonder if I will ever be able to shake it from mine.

A man is waiting for us on the landing. Gaunt, with closely cropped hair, he has the appearance of an ascetic. I don't remember his first question, but we are drawn into a conversation existential in nature. He suggests we step aside to continue the discussion, although he says he is not supposed to do this. When he mentions divine intervention, L and I cannot agree with him, but he does not make an issue of it. As though he has just noticed L's accent (an inflection, really), he asks her where she is from. When she says "Italy," he speaks fluently in Italian. It turns out he was born there. Several times he refers to his students, and we are curious to know where he teaches. He teaches at the university where we teach. Suddenly we three are part of the same community. We exchange email addresses and promise to get together. I am moved by the human connection. There is something almost otherworldly about this encounter.

We look over the edge as we begin our descent, just in time to see the lovers rise to leave. Another couple comes to take their place. The entrance and exit is part of the dance. The second couple does not possess the same exquisite magnetism, and does not evoke the same tension in me. I am able to watch them almost casually. I am both disappointed and relieved. We are almost at ground level now, and notice an older woman sitting on a bench in the rotunda, impatiently trying to persuade her husband to leave. They appear to be European. He is putting on his scarf and coat rather mindlessly, but he watches the lovers intently. It is rather comical. I am

wondering what is going on in his head. Is he yearning for a time when he, too, was enlaced in a timeless embrace? In the words of Emerson:

*We say love is blind and the figure of Cupid is drawn with a bandage round his eyes, Blind: yes, because he does not see what he does not like: but, the sharpest-sighted hunter in the universe is Love...finding what he seeks, and only that.*²⁴

²⁴ Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Vol 3*. Boston: Houghton Osgood and Co., 1880. 227.

The Way I Heard the Story

Bundled up in my blue snowsuit with the red trim, I was sound asleep on the back seat of the car. After what seemed an eternity to my child's sense of time, we had finally arrived at Yonnonadio, the Adirondack home of my friend Martha and her family. I heard my mother's voice calling my name, as she picked me up and set me upright on the ground. I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and looked around. I had never seen so much snow; it came up to my chin. There was a corridor cut into the ice so one could go from the car to the house. It's ironic that the car would become the repository of so much of my anxiety, symbolic of the fear of dying or losing control, as it had once been the place where I felt the most secure. I loved to run errands with my mother, or to look out the window at night at the bright lights, after visiting my grandparents in "The City." My mother tells me I read my first word - "bar" - while my parents were driving across 125th Street, on the way to the bridge that connects Manhattan with Long Island. She loves to recall the time we were driving along Park Avenue and I excitedly pointed to a "bird tree" - a bare-branched tree, covered with pigeons. I was a fearful child, and most of all I loved to be in the car during a thunder storm, because my mother told me lightening couldn't strike us there.

When we arrived at Yonnonadio, Cinder, the family collie, ran out to greet us. I was still wary of dogs, after an earlier incident in which two German shepherds had run

across the stoop of my house where I sat playing, knocking me onto the cement. I sustained only a minor scrape on the knee, but it left me frightened by dogs for many years. Martha led me upstairs to her room, where she and I would be sleeping. It was a rustic house, with knotty pine floors. One of the knots in Martha's room was missing, and you could see through the hole to the big wooden dining table on the floor below.

It was on Valentine's Day that I found the little present from my father on my breakfast plate. This is the only time I can remember my father giving me a present that I am sure he had chosen himself, especially for me. There was a card with hearts on it, and inside the wrapping paper, a little Iroquois doll, hand-made entirely from beads – red, blue, and yellow. I called her "Beady."

Although I never played much with dolls as a child, I loved Beady and imbued her with a personality of her own. I discovered she would fit nicely through the knothole in the floor of Martha's bedroom, and I delighted in annoying the grownups as they sat around the dining table after meals chatting and drinking coffee, by dropping Beady through the hole and onto the table.

I don't remember much else about the trip, except that when my parents tried to put me on skis, I cried and they took me inside the lodge. For several years Beady sat on

the yellow painted bookshelf in my bedroom. But when I was ten we moved to another house and Beady vanished.

Several decades later, the memory of Beady resurfaced with intense force. I was overtaken with a yearning to find her again. It was during a particularly stressful period of my life, my marriage, and my neurological nightmare. For months I searched the Internet, as though looking for a lost child, but couldn't find another doll that even remotely resembled her. Until one day, quite by chance, I happened on a small, beaded Iroquois doll, exactly like Beady but all in white. She was up for auction for only six dollars, and there were no other bidders. When she arrived, she came with an old, yellowed index card, on which someone had written:

Indian – White Bead Doll – 1941

I wish I could remember the name of the tribe who visited the Rye, NY public school in 1941. During the talk they gave, an old Indian squaw sat in a corner making "something." Later on I went over to see and discovered this lovely little doll made entirely of beads.

At the time, my youngest child was entranced by a children's book called *Higgelty Piggelty Pop! Or There Must Be More to Life*. We read it together often. At one point in the story, Jennie, the dog-protagonist, looks up and thinks she sees the moon. It is not the moon, but a lady with a gentle smile:

*Jennie looked up and saw the moon coming closer and closer. It was not the moon at all. It was a lady, round on top, middle, and bottom, and dressed in shabby white.*²⁵

²⁵ Sendak, Maurice. *Higgelty Piggelty Pop! Or There Must Be More to Life*. New York: Harper & Row, 1967. 46.

This kindly presence, floating in the air above Jennie, became one with Beady. She was the one who would open her arms to comfort me in my distress. I called on her often, and she was always there, floating above me.

My grandmother was probably the only person in my life who ever loved me unconditionally, as she loved all her grandchildren. She often used the expression “no *schnecks*” to describe someone who was not pretentious. *Schnecke* means “snail” in German, so someone who has no *schnecks* is someone without the spirals which embellish a snail’s shell. One could have used this expression to describe my grandmother. She always dressed appropriately for the time and place, but she never embellished herself. There were a few tasteful pieces of jewelry, most having been inherited from relatives, and always a hat secured with a hatpin, but I never saw her show off. Although she was not bad-looking woman, she had been conditioned to believe she was not beautiful. She used being smarter than men as her defense.

When I was first married, my grandmother told me that the secret to a happy marriage was to manage your husband but not let him know it. She didn’t do a very good job of hiding her managerial skills. I can still hear her calling my grandfather in increasingly shrill tones. Jerry! Jer-ry! Je-rr-y!!! My grandfather became selectively hard of hearing in his later years. My grandmother had two brothers, who, typical of

the era in which they were born, got to do whatever they wanted. My grandmother had won a scholarship to art school, but “nice” girls didn’t become painters. Instead, she became a teacher. She was a very dedicated teacher, but I suspect there was some unfulfilled need, and more than a little resentment, which she took out on my grandfather. On the surface, he put up with it, but when he was in his early fifties he had a stroke – in the arms of another woman.

My grandmother grew up under the influence of her maternal grandfather, my great-great-grandfather, Lewis Lewingood. He had thirteen children, many of whom lived well into their eighties and nineties. My grandmother adored him and, indeed, idealized him. He was mythologized as the “patron saint” of the family. A pacifist, he had been a university student in Germany, but came to the US in 1841 to avoid conscription. Like many immigrants he started out as a peddler; by the time my grandmother was born he owned a brownstone. Lewis Lewingood’s female progeny were strong-minded and outspoken women, who have come to be known to subsequent generations as “the Lewingood women.”

My grandmother was the family historian. I wish I had listened more carefully to her stories, but fortunately my cousin recorded her oral history before she died. She lived to be ninety-eight, and traveled alone until she had a mild stroke at the age of ninety-six. She never lost her sharp tongue, but her body betrayed her in bits and pieces. I wish I had learned from her what it really means to grow old, but her

German upbringing made her a stoic as far as her own problems were concerned, and she never talked about it. I wish I had asked.

I decided to ask my own mother about her experiences of aging:

Lefferts: Who likes that? Nobody likes that.

Taylor: When did you first begin to feel like it was happening?

Lefferts: Oh, my God. Years ago. [Laughter.] I don't know. You know, you see things – your boobs sag, your – you get shorter so your stomach sticks out. You get wrinkles, you get waddles. You get all kinds of things you don't like. I don't like them. I sometimes fantasize I will find some way to get rid of it all. But I know when I look in the mirror that I'm not twelve years old, or twenty years old, or fifty years old, or sixty years – whatever. I'm occasionally flattered when somebody thinks I was ...But I don't like it; I wish it weren't there. I don't like it when I don't have the energy I want. I don't like it when I go up stairs. But it's a fact of life. And the one thing I would mind, desperately, is getting like those people in that home who sit there like that. You know, with their –

Perhaps because I spend so much of my work life talking to older women, I have been acutely aware, since my early forties, of myself getting older. But I had never considered what it must be like for a mother to watch her own daughter's aging. In *La touche étoile*²⁶, French feminist writer Benoîte Groult, reflecting on her own long life, imagines with sadness what it will be like to watch her own daughters grow old. Groult's question sparked my interest in asking my mother how she feels considering her own daughters' aging:

Taylor: What's it like watching your daughters getting old?

Lefferts: It's got its amusements. [Laughter.]

²⁶ Groult, Benoîte. *La touche étoile*. Paris: Grasset, 2006.

Taylor: Sweet revenge maybe?

Lefferts: No. I don't feel sweet revenge at all. I – no, I don't feel sweet revenge. But I see things in them that I have seen happen to me. And particularly you because you are the older, I see it more. I –

Taylor: These things in the back.

Lefferts: Absolutely. I see that in the back of you – how the back of you looks like the back of me.

Taylor: It does. Believe me, I am aware of it.

“Amusing” was not the word I wanted to hear. Friday, in *The Power of Beauty*, writes:

I think of the side of me that wants to abandon looks as the Good Nancy, the sweet child who for many years buried her rage at not catching her mother's eye, in the way the Christ Child is adored by the Madonna the gold beam of light like some adorable feeding tube between mother and babe.²⁷

She goes on to say:

Until girls are raised from the beginning to feel there is great regard in becoming a unique individual, someone who is her mother's daughter but not her clone, we will go through life seeking other women's approval fearing their disapproval.²⁸

hooks realized that it was her mother, not her father, who held the standard for the feminine ideal:

It took me a while to see her as she really was, to recognize both ways in which she was victimized by a more powerful man and ways in which she colluded with that victimization because she also believed in patriarchy. It was Mom, not Dad, who held all her girls in contempt if we did not embody her notions of the feminine idea, her assumptions about beauty. She set the standards, defined the ideals of how we would be punished if we did not measure up.²⁹

In the end, this is what I wanted: I wanted Beady to embrace me; I wanted words of

²⁷ Friday, Nancy. *The Power of Beauty*. New York: HarperCollins, 1996. 4.

²⁸ Friday, 145.

²⁹ hooks, 100.

wisdom; I wanted my mother to welcome me into the community of older women. But I also understood that in order to do that, she would have to shed a lifetime of prejudices and socially ingrained notions of womanhood. I think of Friday's question:

*Could I actually turn my back on external reflections and live with what is inside? Is there enough?*³⁰

In order to understand this I will have to go back – back into that childhood morass of what I was told, about myself, and about what it meant to be female. So as not to lay the entire blame on my parents, I must also consider the society in which my family was embedded.

³⁰ Friday. 4.

The Box

In a graduate course I teach called Social Work with Women, I give my students the following assignment:

Imagine you have a plain white box, and all kinds of materials for decorating it. Describe how you would decorate the interior of the box to represent the way you feel about yourself inside. Then describe how you would decorate the outside of the box to represent how you think others see you. If you like, design an actual box.

Self-awareness is critical if one is to become a good therapist, and goal of this assignment is to help students become aware of the disconnect many women feel between their inner and outer selves. The students find this exercise personally challenging. One of my students gave me permission to use the poem she wrote for the assignment

IN THE BOX

*You expected me to fail you
So I did
As planned.
It didn't matter that your eyes were spellbound
Each time you were allowed as a guest of honor
In shrines whose gates dissolved upon your presence
Letting you into my flow
The vision of who and how I had been
A thousand-petal rose
And a mythic diamond
Were in that box
Lined in soft black velvet
Tender, gleaming and unseen
The flower, the stone, the velvet?
The black stone flower?
The velvet rose in the black diamond?
The black rose made of diamond in the softness of velvet?*

*You wanted me to be yours
And I wanted to be yours
Yet you were never mine
It was a conspiracy
Since both you and I
Made it easy for you to be far
Beyond, behind and outside
Visible, untouchable
Detached
Encircled by stone
Enclosed by glass and an assortment of labels
-Hard material-
I'm no good in braking things
So you had to do it
Conspiracy, I thought
Our team effort to unveil our love
Our perfect endeavor
To destroy it.*

*But wait,
So now comes the dance
My dervish intoxication
Ecstatic, delirious
Alone
On the kitchen floor
While cooking the solitary dinner
Of impartial memories
-As ancient as the dance-
When no one is looking
So close to life
So near death.*

- Liana Sideri

Anna's Story

She was a tiny little woman, maybe four-foot ten, with a face unmistakably eastern European. I had been working with her for a couple of years, making

weekly visits to her well-appointed Upper-West Side apartment. The apartment was impeccably clean, with paintings and sculptures from her many travels with her late husband artfully displayed. Our clinic psychiatrist, who also visited her from time to time, once remarked that it made him think of someone waiting to die. He was right. She had already made one suicide attempt. It would not be her last. Ever since the death of her husband, some eight years earlier, depression had been her constant companion. She once said to me:

Being depressed is like wanting to get away from this world; wanting to lose oneself in sleep; waiting for the end of the day when you know you are going to sleep and don't have to think about it anymore; missing the things that you're used to and not really enjoying whatever is left; just pushing through.

Anna, as I will call her to protect her confidentiality, was born in the Ukraine, the youngest of four daughters of middle-class Jewish parents. Religious and political persecution forced her family to flee, first to Romania and then to the United States. Unlike her older sisters, who maintained their European customs until they died, Anna quickly assimilated into American culture in the Bronx. By the age of eleven, under the tutelage of one of her aunts, she had become involved in leftist politics. At fourteen she left school and went to live in a mining town in Pennsylvania to help organize a union. Although she became deathly ill because of the harsh living conditions, she threw herself into the

politics of the Left, and at age seventeen was sent to Russia to work for the Party. There she fell in love with a Russian soldier, but when the Party got wind of this forbidden romance, she was forced to leave Russia and go to California. She never got over him. Anna came back to New York to help a friend start a leftist publishing house. There she met her future husband, who shared her political views and had gone to Spain with the Lincoln Brigade. They married and had two daughters. Anna's husband became a successful accountant, which eventually enabled the couple to purchase a large apartment, build a vacation home, and travel extensively. Their older daughter, who never married, became a lawyer. The younger daughter became a teacher, married, and had two children. Anna and her husband were very close to their grandchildren. After the first suicide attempt Anna promised her grandchildren that she would not try again. Several years later she broke her promise.

During one of my visits, Anna asked me to help her pull down a box from the top shelf of the closet in her bedroom. It was an old hat box, made of round cardboard and covered with paper decorated with cabbage roses. It reminded me of the hat boxes on the shelf in my grandmother's bedroom. Only my grandmother's hatboxes were filled with hats, in shades of blue and aquamarine (my grandmother's favorite colors) which she wore stuck through with a hatpin. When Anna opened the box there was no hat under the wads of newspaper she removed. Instead, there was another box, a small square box

that must, long ago, have contained a piece of jewelry. She carefully removed it and motioned to me to follow her back into the living room. Inside this box was some tissue paper, yellowed by the passage of time, which concealed two small photos. The first was a smiling young man in an army uniform. The second was eighteen-year-old Anna in his arms. As she handed me the photos she told me that she had never shown them to anyone before. As we shared this most intimate moment, I could feel her yearning. Like the physics of a sympathetic vibration, I could also feel my own resonating.

I have always kept a box of memories in my closet. Mine looks like a small valise covered in dark green plaid fabric, with gold-colored clasps and a dark green handle. There is a place to lock it, but I never had the key. It's something women used to use when they traveled, long before the days of miniature plastic bottles, to store their cosmetics and perfumes. I know it has a specific name, but I can't remember it. I call my mother. She is in her office. What a luxury to be able to do this at my age. So many of my friends have already lost their mothers. My mother is eighty-nine and still working. She thinks for an instant, and says: "Oh yeah. I think it's called an *etui*." That rings a bell, but I feel compelled to look it up. I call her back to let her know she is right. I don't know where my *etui* came from. Perhaps it belonged to my grandmother.

The items inside this box are carefully arranged. They must be in order to fit. There is no room in there for large memories. Those live in another, larger box, elsewhere in the closet. Within the *etui*, amid my great-grandmother's recipe cards, handwritten in sepia ink in German, amid the trinkets belonging to my ancestors, is a small, gray velvet box, with the words *Galleria Frilli Ponte Vecchio*, embossed on the top. Inside is a ring – a gold band coated with lapis-colored enamel. Embedded in the enamel are tiny gold leaves and flowers, strung together on a vine. There are large chips in the enamel, revealing the gold band underneath. The third time I sent the ring back to Florence to be repaired, I received a curt letter stating that this was the last time this service would be provided. The flawed ring has been resting in its little gray bed since 1966. But if today, more than forty years later, I look through that circle of gold, I can see not only the panoramic hills of Florence from where it came, but the story I am about to write.

My childhood was both happy and unhappy. The first child of upwardly mobile, secular Jewish parents, I was born three years after the end of "The War." Although my family did not lose relatives in the Holocaust (at least none that we knew of), my early life was colored by anti-German sentiment. The words "Made in Germany" were anathema in my home, which was confusing given my maternal grandmother's pride in her German heritage. When she spoke of "Our People," she did not mean "Jews," but, rather "German Jews." Although her grandfather had come to the United States in 1840, she had grown up speaking German with "Grossmutter" and

“Grossvater.” My mother’s first words were uttered in German and there was always a German maid in the house.

My grandmother often said that during the Depression she went to work, unlike the other housewives in the neighborhood, in order keep her housekeeper. My maternal grandparents did not exactly put out a welcome mat for my father and his Eastern European relatives. Unfortunately, my paternal grandparents’ behavior often reinforced the stereotype of the low-class Jew. My grandfather a gambler, consorted with the New Jersey Mafia, and my father came home, on more than one occasion, to find his mother, a demanding, impulsive woman, in bed with the milkman.

Eventually she committed suicide by taking an overdose of pain medication which my grandfather smuggled into the hospital, when she was hospitalized for yet another imagined (or so goes the family mythology) ailment. Somehow, my mother believed that by marrying my father she would free herself from the fetters of her Victorian upbringing. It didn’t work. My parents’ marriage alternated between long periods of emotional strife, and brief reconciliations. My mother used to say that when my father came home, she never knew who was coming in the door. Her self-righteousness in the face of his emotional abuse left me with the determination never to subject myself to the demands of a man. But this was the 1950s, and the message to young girls did not foster this kind of self-assertion.

I grew up in the days before SPF and skin cancer had become part of our everyday awareness. If you were over the age of twelve, the idea was to *get* a tan. If you were younger and you didn't burn, your parents probably didn't pay much attention one way or the other. My mother was blond and blue-eyed, with pale freckled skin and a perfect straight nose. Her ancestors came from the part of Europe that was sometimes Germany and sometimes Poland. She certainly didn't look Jewish. All the relatives on my mother's side of the family have fair skin. Even my sister, genetically closer to me than even my own children, is fair-skinned with blue eyes. Not one of my four children has the dark coloring and Asiatic eyes I inherited from my father's Mongolian ancestors.

As a child, I spent my summers at the beach. By the middle of July I was so tan that people often stopped my mother to ask if I was really her child. My best friend's father called me "Little Coffee Bean." My mother didn't find out she was Jewish until she was five years old. The daughter of third generation German Jewish parents, she grew up in a secular Jewish household in an upwardly mobile community in Westchester. One day an older boy in the neighborhood started chasing the younger kids calling them "big bad Jews." My mother, frightened, ran home and asked her mother what that meant. When my mother was in junior high school, the kids who had freely invited her and her Jewish friends into their homes suddenly stopped socializing with them. My mother was hurt and confused.

Because of her “waspy” appearance, there were many times when my mother was privy to anti-semitic remarks directed at others. When she was in college, she decided to speak out, and identified herself as a Jew. She decided then and there that when she had children she would instill in them a strong sense of Jewish cultural identification. When she married my father, the son of a Russian Jewish father and a second-generation Latvian mother, she hoped to free herself from the constraints of her Victorian/German- Jewish upbringing. The marriage wasn’t made in heaven, but it did produce two strikingly differently-colored children. My mother told me there was a Japanese baby in the bassinet next to mine when I was born. Even the nurses thought we were twins. “Where your father from? You look like Chinese people?” This question, asked of me once by a young Chinese woman new to the US, has become a stock line in my family for affectionately highlighting the differentness of my appearance from so much of the rest of my family. However, I spent the first ten years of my life in a town where anti-semitism was alive and well, and differentness was not affectionate. I learned early on to figure out who was Jewish and who was not. My mother could “pass.” I could not. I thought that my only hope was to relish my difference. For Halloween, when other girls were dressing up as ballerinas and fairies, I went as a toreador or Indian chief.

My mother is upstairs folding laundry. I am a small child, dressed in corduroy overalls with a zipper up the front, indistinguishable from the ones worn by the boys in my class at that time. I am standing in front of the television, watching

ballerinas in long tutus moving gracefully in black-and-white across the screen. I try to imitate them, pretending that I, too, am a ballerina. I hear my mother's footsteps on the stairs, and, embarrassed, I abruptly stop dancing, as though I have done something wrong. Where did I get this idea?

I remember, as a young girl, sitting on my parents' bed, watching my mother get dressed up to go out for the evening. Her straight blond hair was still in curlers as she put on her makeup - bright red lipstick which she blotted with a tissue. Nylons held up by a garter belt, a slip, taffeta cocktail dress and high-heeled shoes. When I was twelve I got my first pair of nylons. My friend Dana was going to synagogue for Rosh Hashanah and she invited me to come along. I had never been inside a synagogue, as my parents had no use for organized religion. I wanted a pair of stockings for the occasion. Throughout the service the metal buttons from the garter belt dug into deeper into my thighs and the belt unforgivingly squeezed my abdomen. I couldn't wait to get home and take it off. I never wanted to go to synagogue again, and I realized I did not want to force myself into the uncomfortable mold that I believed would allow me define myself as truly feminine in the 1950s. This dilemma, for a young girl who would never be chosen for the role of princess in a school play, has been a formative theme in my life.

By the time I was twelve I had developed a passion for learning languages. From the age of three until I was almost thirteen I had been a student at a Rudolph Steiner

school, where French and German were taught beginning in nursery school.

Although I excelled in both languages, I was drawn to French, perhaps because of the anti-German sentiment in my home, perhaps because the German teacher was a harsh and critical woman. We put on plays in French and German, but semitic-looking girls with dark hair and olive skin like my own, never got starring roles no matter how well they spoke the language. At sixty-three my hair is still dark; no one believes I don't color it. I no longer care about being blond. Maybe I still care about being the princess. As age overtakes me the battle is getting fiercer.

Eva's Story

Most people would look at her and think: "She must have been beautiful when she was young." Perhaps because I spend so much of my working life sitting in the room with old people, I don't think that way. I look at the frail body sitting across from me, often wracked with pain, and I think: "My god, she is so beautiful. How does she do it?"

Eva left the Women's Group this summer, shortly after I went on medical leave. She had had enough of another group member's sugarcoated rage towards her, and she felt unsupported by the substitute group leader, the "step-mother" of the group. Eva stood up and threatened to leave. We had had scenes like this before over the years, but I had always been able to calm her down. This time I

wasn't there. When Fran tried to do it, Eva raised her cane as though to strike, and Fran asked her to go.

Eva was the group historian. She never forgot anything that had happened. Her mind was razor-sharp, and she was searching for answers to existential questions. I always felt a special connection to her. Although on the surface her questions were about the meaning of life and death, I knew there was something else – something she was not telling the group. A couple of times, when I had met with her individually, she had hinted at it, but she had never said it straight out...until today. I knew instinctively that my connection to her was through this mystery.

When Eva came to see me today I was again struck by her beauty, although she is not what one would call "a great beauty," She is small and thin, as am I, and she wears her honey-colored hair in a chin-length "page boy," with thick, straight bangs. Although her coloring is so different from my dark complexion and almost-black hair, her hair style is one that I wore for many years. It is different from so many of the older women I meet, who have cut their hair short. It gives Eva the look of a gamine. I am always admiring of her style of dress, which is casual yet artful. Eva has plenty of money, and she can afford expensive clothes. She doesn't flaunt it, but you know it's there.

How did the conversation turn to romantic love? Although it took place only a few hours ago, I don't even remember. Eva asked me if I thought one ever forgot a "great love." I knew she wanted to tell me something essential about

herself. I knew instantly that the mystery was solved. Eva's existential questions were not about life and death; they were about yearning. I know this yearning intimately. I have felt for most of my adult life.

It was rarely calm in my household. My parents' marriage was filled with strife, but certain peaceful scenes stand against the backdrop of my anxiety-ridden home. One was in summertime, when my father sat in the screened-in porch in the back of our house playing his guitar and singing *Hey Zhankoye*³¹. I had no idea at the time that it was a political song. I didn't understand the implication of the words "Who said the Jews could not be farmers? Spit in his eye who would so harm us," but I sensed from my father's voice that this was a song of significance. I knew it too when he sang *El quinto regimiento*³². Something was sparked in me.

When I was in high school I taught myself to play the guitar. Joan Baez was my idol. I spent hours listening to her records and learning the accompaniments to her songs. I sang out in a way I had never before allowed myself to do. I wore a peace button. With my long dark hair, olive skin, and not-too-straight nose, I had finally found a public figure with whom I could identify. Some of my friends and I went into "the

³¹ Zhankoye was the name of a Jewish farm collective which was established in the Crimea in the 1930s, and destroyed by the Nazis. It was the subject of a Yiddish song.

³² *El quinto regimiento* was a song of the Lincoln Brigade.

City”³³ to hear her sing in the old Madison Square Garden.³⁴ It was the mid-1960s, a period of intense political and social change. After the concert the many people gathered outside to catch a glimpse of her as she emerged from the arena. As she began to make her way through the crowd, to thunderous applause, she suddenly stopped only inches from where I was standing and raised her hand to signal silence. A hush came over the crowd. As she began to sing *We Shall Overcome*, everyone joined her and we all held hands. *I was overcome*. I held in the tears all the way back to Long Island, because I didn’t want to appear childish in front of my friends. When my mother opened the door for me I burst into uncontrollable sobs. She thought something terrible had happened. All I could say through my wails was: “It was so beautiful.”

Ellie’s Story

She greeted me at the door wearing a pale blue bathrobe. Her face was puffy and her complexion pasty, from months of inactivity and staying indoors. It had taken me several months to get her to agree to see me. Several therapists from the agency came to her apartment over the years, and she was not happy about starting over again. She finally agreed when director of our program gave her an ultimatum. She could not continue to receive home visits by our psychiatrist,

³³ We always referred to Manhattan as “the City.”

³⁴ The old Madison Square Garden was torn down in 1968.

who provided medication management, unless she agreed to see a social worker at least once a month. Agency regulations. She reluctantly agreed. I was not looking forward to this meeting.

Her apartment was in an ultra luxury building, but it was small and musty, and poorly lit. The floor in the living area had been torn up – the result of a flood in her apartment two years earlier. She was still battling with the management over getting it fixed. The apartment reeked of cigarette smoke. It was embedded in every fiber of her worn-out furniture. She motioned to me to sit in an old wooden chair, and painstakingly eased herself into the seat on her rolling walker. I was surprised at her face. It reminded me of the faces of some of the girls with whom I went to high school – daughters of Eastern European Jewish immigrants, who fled countries like Poland – broad features, blue eyes, and thick blond or light brown wavy hair. Not beautiful, but pretty enough, with bodies that would become thickened as they aged, belying their peasant roots. Most of these girls had been born in the outer boroughs of New York City, and had moved to the suburbs as their families became more affluent. There was something about her that intrigued me.

She crossed her arms over her chest and leaned back against the wall. Her body language spoke of resignation and boredom as she said: “I’m so tired of talking about myself.” I don’t know where this came from, but I replied: “So, if you weren’t talking about yourself what would you be talking about.” My question caught her off guard. She sat up straight and uncrossed her arms. “That’s a

really interesting question! I don't know if I can answer it." As we talked I could almost see the connection between us growing. She became more animated, as I shared my knowledge about some of the things that had been important to her, like her years at the High School of Music and Art. When I was in high school, I had harbored a dream of attending Music and Art. It had seemed like a much more interesting place than my own suburban high school, where everyone appeared hell-bent on getting into an Ivy League university. Unfortunately Music and Art was only open to kids who lived in Manhattan. At one point I even thought about using my grandparents' address. I desperately wanted to get away from the bourgeois materialism of my suburban school. What I didn't realize at the time was how privileged I was to have the academic education I received in that community. Those children of immigrants, who were my peers, had parents who valued education beyond all the ostentatious trappings of the nouveau-riche. This first session took place a week before Obama-McCain election. What was interesting to me was that this woman, who appeared to have given up any effort to be part of a larger society, and who almost never left her apartment, was making all sorts of preparations to go out and vote. She had even arranged to have Access-a-Ride³⁵ transport her the two blocks she needed to go to the polling place. She said she couldn't imagine not voting. I asked her if she could

³⁵ Access-a-Ride is a transportation service provided by New York City for the elderly and people with disabilities.

remember the first time she ever voted. She said: "You're too young to remember the Eisenhower-Stevenson campaign, but..."

My earliest awareness of politics was the Eisenhower-Stevenson campaign of 1956. There were a lot of children from Republican families in my predominantly Irish-Catholic neighborhood on the South Shore of Long Island, and there were some older kids in my school wearing "I Like Ike" buttons. My parents were campaigning for Stevenson, and I must have understood for the first time that we were outsiders. Eventually my parents moved away from this conservative community to a more liberal, predominantly Jewish community on the North Shore.

I turned fourteen just a few months before the Cuban Missile Crisis. My father, a television writer and producer, had taken job in California for six months, and my mother was supposed to go to Los Angeles to visit him for a couple of weeks. I later learned that my mother knew before she went, that my father was having an affair with an actress on the show. My younger sister and I were in school, so my grandmother was going to stay us while our mother was away. I didn't really understand what was going on in the world, but I knew enough to be frightened. My mother must have been frightened too, because she woke me up in the middle of the night to tell me she was taking us with her. I was sick with anxiety, and spent some of the trip in bed in the hotel, or sleeping in the back seat of the car while we went sightseeing. The following year we moved to Los Angeles. In those days you could just close up your house and leave it. We didn't know if the move would be

permanent. My father was writing scripts for a new show, but after less than a year it folded and we went home. During our stay in California, JFK was shot.

I recently discovered this essay, written when I was fifteen, shortly after JFK's assassination. I prefaced it by saying that, although I did not agree with all of JFK's politics, it was my first experience with the death of someone meaningful in my life.

During the days that followed the assassination of John F. Kennedy, I learned a great deal about emotions, justice, and many other factors related to this tragedy. The main thing I feel is that I just started to understand life, for this was the saddest event that ever occurred during my lifetime of fifteen years, which affected me directly.

The strongest emotions that shook me were first disbelief, then sadness and grief. I found people also felt disbelief at first, for we, as human beings, get accustomed to a certain pattern of living, and when this is pattern is broken, we tend to imagine it is not broken.

Many people displayed their emotions in different ways. In the beginning, I cried. Then I shrank with fear. After a few hours of this fear, I cried again. I became deep in thought – so deep that I couldn't sleep or eat. Then I cried again, in sheer grief. I discovered a great difference between the display of emotions of different age levels, for, my sister who is only eleven, told me that in

her class, people cried inwardly but were afraid to cry openly. This is the difference that only four years can make.

Many great acts are going on in the world now that the president is dead. Congress is passing many acts, people are praising every move this man made, names of places and organizations are being renamed. It is a shame it takes a death to make these things happen, but this is something which I have learned from this event.

I have seen real hate at work. I have seen men accuse a man of murder, whom they are not even sure is guilty. I have seen this accused man shot out of hate and insanity.

At first I felt lost in the enormous sprawling California high school. There were thousands of kids, and I didn't know a soul. I can't remember how Jenny and I found each other, but I know that we felt the spark of connection right away. Although her family had moved to Los Angeles from South Africa a year before I arrived, we both felt like new kids on the block. Her anthropologist mother and sociologist father were outspokenly anti-apartheid, and feared for the safety of their young children. They moved to California to accept teaching positions at UCLA. Although she too was Jewish, Jenny was physically my opposite. With her long wavy blond hair and translucent fair skin, she looked like Botticelli's Venus. We spent much of our free

time together, and she introduced me to some of the girls she had met in the year she had already been in LA. By the time I left Los Angeles, I had a group of friends and I was ambivalent about going home. The school year was not quite over, and the transition back to my old school was challenging.

That spring I begged my mother to send me to Europe. I was about to turn sixteen and I wanted to see the world. My family traveled very little, spending summers in Fire Island, first in a series of rented houses, and eventually purchasing a house of their own. Fire Island remains to this day my favorite place on earth, but for several years prior to my sixteenth birthday I had been sent to summer camp. The first year was an adventure, but subsequent experiences felt like forced exile. My parents' marriage was deteriorating, and I knew on some level that they wanted me out of the picture. This only intensified my feelings of homesickness. I don't know when the idea of traveling to Europe became so compelling. At first my mother said they could not afford to send me, but she hung up the phone one day after talking to a friend and told me we could look into American Youth Hostel bicycle trips, as they were not expensive. I called Jenny in California to see if she wanted to come with me. Of course she had to ask her parents, but they agreed. There was only one small problem. Jenny didn't know how to ride a bicycle. We made arrangements to buy her a bicycle in New York and she would spend a couple of weeks with my family before the trip, learning to ride. Although still somewhat wobbly, by the time we left for Europe she had learned how to manage her bike. We packed our saddle bags

with the two pairs of jeans, two tee-shirts, one warm sweater, bathing suit, underwear and socks listed on the AHY instruction sheet. Our bikes were shipped in pieces, to be reassembled when we arrived. The flight to London on a prop plane took ten hours.

In those days anyone over the age of sixteen could join an AYH bike trip. The guide had to be at least eighteen, and was primarily just a navigator. This was very different from the AYH trip my oldest son took to Canada in the late 1980s, when the groups were designated by age (14-16), and the group leader had to be over twenty-one, college educated, and have extensive training. By contrast, our group was a hodge-podge of individuals ranging in age from not-quite sixteen (several of us were almost sixteen) to twenty-five. Our guide was only nineteen, and basically just mapped our route. The organized part of the trip was eight weeks long, with two weeks of individual travel at the end. We started in England and then on to France and Switzerland, ending in Rome. Jenny and I were to take the train from Rome to Nice to meet up with my grandparents, with whom we would spend the next two weeks traveling in France. All the group members flew over together, with the exception of one young man, who was to join us a few days after our arrival in England. Little did I know that his arrival would change the course of my life.

The second day into our trip the new boy joined us. I noticed him right away. He seemed different from the boys in my high school, many of whom bore the traces of

their Eastern European heritage. Tall and slender, with straight blond hair and perfect features, he had the air of the waspy prep-school boy that he was. He was aloof and reserved. I would later learn that he was the son of Telford Taylor, Chief Prosecutor at the Nuremberg Trials. I admired John from afar, because at that time I was too shy to approach boys, especially if I was attracted to them. I secretly hoped that one of them would notice me first. It never occurred to me that John's demeanor was a result of his own profound shyness. My friend Jenny was more assertive, and John was definitely paying attention to her. I became envious, homesick, and miserable. I briefly tried to muster up some enthusiasm for one or the other of two overtly nouveau-riche boys from Long Island who were part of the group, just to take my mind off of my misery, but I didn't really like them, and they cared only about their fancy bicycles.

After a couple of weeks in England, our group made its way to France. When we arrived in Paris we stayed in a *pension* called the Hotel California. It was really a fleabag hotel, with dormitory-style rooms. There was a young Irish woman in our group, Kathleen, a schoolteacher who became a sort of older sister to Jenny and me. One afternoon Kathleen took me aside and told me that John wanted to talk to me. He was in his dormitory room, and when I called his name he appeared wearing only a towel. He asked me if I wanted to go to the theater with him that night, to see two short plays by Ionesco – *La cantatrice chauve*, and *La leçon*. I was dumbfounded but I accepted. Kathleen insisted on pinning up my waist-length hair into a chignon

for the occasion. She must have used two dozen hairpins to hold it in place, and my head hurt through the entire evening. I remember the feeling of relief when I got back to the hotel and let my hair down – literally and figuratively. I was so tense I was practically holding my breath throughout the entire evening. The next night the group went out for ice cream and John put his arm around me. I didn't really know what to do, but I instinctively put mine around his waist. I felt terribly self-conscious, as though everyone could see how I was feeling.

After Paris we took a train to Strasbourg. It was late and the train was practically empty. Jenny and Kathleen and I sat in one car, and John in another with Frank, a man from South Africa. Someone came in and told me that John wanted me to join him. I did, and it was then, only a couple of weeks before my sixteenth birthday, that I experienced my first real kiss. After that, John and I were inseparable. When my grandparents sent me money for my sixteenth birthday, and instructed me to buy myself a present at jewelry shop on the Ponte Vecchio where they knew the owners, John helped me pick out the ring that now sits in the box in my closet. I fantasized that someday this would be my wedding ring – our wedding ring. Jenny was having a difficult time accepting my newfound romance, until she met someone at one of the youth hostels who tagged along with our group. She warned me that my relationship with John would not last past the summer. But it continued even after we returned from Europe. It was dramatic and intense, punctuated by tearful separations, as John's parents sent him away to boarding school in New England and

he came home only a few times during that year. Our relationship was sustained by daily letters and phone calls; this seemed more than a simple teenage romance. John came from an intellectual and academic world unlike anything I had ever known, and he opened up vast new horizons for me, introducing me to classical Greek and Latin, French poetry, and surrealist art. I did not realize at the time how profoundly he had suffered as a result of his parents' inability to nurture him, and John was emotionally demanding of me in a way I could not sustain indefinitely. He looked to me to fill the void that existed where there should have been parental love, and after almost a year I ended the relationship. I told myself that I wanted a "normal" teenage life. Yet, the loss of that relationship would leave a black hole in my own psyche, and I would spend the next two decades of my life searching for the love that I had voluntarily forsaken. More than twenty year later, John and I would be together again. Little did I know that the subsequent twenty years would bring more heartache than all those years of unfulfilled yearning.

"Ring My Bell"

*You must remember this
A kiss is still a kiss
A sigh is just a sigh
The fundamental things apply
As time goes by.*

- Herman Hupfeld
*As Time Goes By*³⁶

Bibi's Story

I rang the doorbell and the stern-looking Russian aide let me in. She nodded stiffly and silently gestured towards the bedroom. The door was open. When I first started coming to see Bibi, she could still sit up in a chair. Now, riddled with cancer, she could barely lift her head. The bed with the elegant French provincial headboard had been replaced by a hospital bed, and medical equipment crowded the family photos atop the bureau. There was Bibi, a young woman in her twenties, posing flirtatiously in her swimsuit; Bibi, a young mother, gazing lovingly at her infant daughter; Bibi, standing proudly next to her son at his high school graduation; Bibi, a middle-aged woman, glamorously dressed in a fur coat, out for an evening with her husband.

³⁶ Herman Hupfeld was an American songwriter, best known for his song, *As Time Goes By*, composed for the 1931 musical *Everybody's Welcome*.

Bibi's family had fled the pogroms when she was still a child. She brought with her vivid memories of violence and death. Looking out her bedroom window on a snowy evening, she remembers seeing two lovers locked in an embrace. In the morning they were lying dead in a pool of blood.

Bibi was not in love with the man she would marry, but her parents, observant Jews, pushed her to accept his proposal. He came from a religious family and, after all they had gone through, this was important. He was fifteen years older than Bibi, and they assumed he would be a good provider. At first he had difficulty holding a job, but quite by chance he became involved in a real estate venture that would eventually make him a very wealthy man. When I first met the couple, Bibi was eighty-two and her husband was ninety-seven. She said she never thought she would die before he did.

I visited Bibi every week in the months before her death. Over the course of our time together she shared much about her life. Her marriage had been the cause of great unhappiness, as her husband was an uncaring and authoritarian man. She once hinted that there had been someone else in her life, but let this thread drop without revealing any details. A current source of distress was the estrangement of her younger daughter. Bibi knew it was because she had been critical of her daughter's relationship with a black man. Now Bibi regretted her

disapproval. She wanted to find a way to reconnect with her daughter before she died. It was never to happen.

As I entered the room where Bibi lay dying, I was surprised to hear the sound of live music. A music therapist from the hospice program was sitting by the bedside, a keyboard on her lap. She invited me to sit beside her, as she finished her session with Bibi. She began playing a lively Jewish tune, but Bibi put her hand up, motioning her to stop. In a voice now barely audible, she asked the therapist to play "something dreamy and romantic." The therapist asked her if she had something particular in mind. Bibi whispered: "You must remember this." As the therapist began playing the opening measures, Bibi's face was transformed, and I could tell from her gaze that she was transported away from her pain to some other place. Her mouth moved in time to the music, as though she were trying to sing. This was the last time I saw her. She died the next day.

A year later I received a card from Bibi's older daughter. She wanted to thank me for the help I had provided, and asked if we might meet sometime. There was something she wanted to tell me about her mother. A short time later we arranged to meet in a coffee shop. After exchanging pleasantries, she told me the following story:

Some time after she was married, Bibi fell in love with another man. He was the love of her life, and she planned to leave her husband to be with him. One day, she packed her bags, leaving her three children in the care of her mother. She was to meet her lover on a particular street corner, and they would go away together. When she arrived at her destination she saw a crowd gathered around someone lying on the sidewalk. On the way to meet her, Bibi's lover had died of a heart attack.

When she had finished the story, I told Bibi's daughter about my last visit with her mother. I recounted how Bibi had asked the music therapist for something "dreamy and romantic," and that the therapist had asked Bibi if she had anything specific in mind. Bibi's daughter wanted to know what song her mother had chosen. When I told her, her eyes filled with tears. She was silent for a moment, and then said, quietly: "That was their song."

Ring My Bell

What was I thinking when I called him? Shouldn't I have known better? I was married with two children, and I was certain that if he answered I would just hang up. I doubted I would have the courage to say hello. His machine picked up, and played the song "Ring My Bell."³⁷

*I'm glad you're home
Now did you really miss me
I guess you did by the look in your eyes (look in your eyes, look in your eyes)
Well lay back and relax while I put away the dishes (put away the dishes)
Then you and me can rock-a-bye*

You can ring my be-e-ell, ring my bell [etc.]

Then there was a message. I listened carefully, but I did not leave a message in return. I called the next day and the next, and every day for the next few weeks, but he never answered, and I never left a message. I knew he still lived in the neighborhood because I used to look him up whenever a new phone book arrived on my doorstep. The last time I had seen him was almost twenty years earlier.

One day I went out with my children to run some errands, and there he was on the street corner, deep in conversation with an older man. It was almost as though I had

³⁷ Anita Ward, an American singer and musician, best known for the 1979 chart-topper, *Ring My Bell*.

conjured him up. I thought about how Jane Eyre hears Rochester's voice calling to her, as though in answer to her prayers:

The coincidence struck me as too awful and inexplicable to be communicated or discussed. If I told anything, my tale would be such as must necessarily make a profound impression on the mind of my hearer: and that mind, yet from its sufferings too prone to gloom, needed not the deeper shade of the supernatural. I kept things then, and pondered them in my heart.³⁸

He didn't see me. My heart was pounding, and after hesitating for a moment I turned away. I said to my children: "See that guy? He's someone I knew when I was in high school." When I got home, I called him, and this time he answered. "Now that you've seen me, could I see you?"

I had left the relationship at seventeen, because I could no longer tolerate his demands – demands that I give up wearing red in favor of his preferred green; that I give back the watch my grandmother had left me, because he didn't believe in wearing watches; that I leave the bathroom door open when I went to the toilet, because he felt excluded by the closed door; that I lose my virginity, when was not ready to say yes.

³⁸ Bronte, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1848. 295.

Memorial

Do you think, when we intone the names of the dead, it releases them from the war-torn prisons of memory in which they have been held captive by the living? And if they are released, do you know where they go? Until we name them can they ever truly be free? All my life I have been harboring unnamed injustices in my soul. And if I can name them will they, too, be released? Is there another who can "see" what I have seen and "hear" what I have heard? That doesn't matter now. What matters is that there is someone who can listen to what I have been told.

Where shall I begin? Not at the beginning. I won't bore you with the injustices of my childhood. I have been over them so many times they no longer interest me. But one event, a turning point, stands out in my mind. Was it a rape? No, not a real rape. No one who was ever raped would call it that. Perhaps it was a psychological rape. The association of anger, expressed against the wall of my teenage bedroom in the form of a fist-hole, with my first sexual experience. I was so blinded by love and the need know that, yes, I would not be a failure as a female, that I said "yes" when I wanted – desperately - to say "no." No. No. NO. I am not ready for this. I am barely sixteen years old. I need time. Time to luxuriate in the discovery of my sexuality. Not the violent wall-punch that accompanied that "first time." Strange, it didn't even hurt (perhaps it hurt the

wall). I didn't bleed. That didn't happen until much later, with someone else, in a different time and place. But shouldn't I have known better?

I wish I had gone away to college. Looking back on it, I was afraid to go too far from home. I had been accepted early decision at Barnard, but because I lived within fifty miles of the school I couldn't get a room in the dorms. Instead, I lived with my grandparents, whose apartment was only a few blocks from the campus. Even though I was eventually able to move into the dormitory, I was miserably lonely throughout most of my years in college. I missed my close friends from high school and, as a commuter, it was difficult to make new friends. I went to a few meetings of SDS (Students for a Democratic Society³⁹), mostly hoping to meet people. It was early in 1968, and there was a sense of unrest on the Columbia campus. The day the students occupied the buildings, I became ill and ended up in the hospital. I returned to school the night of the bust, which I watched with a sense of horror from the window of my dorm, feeling like a helpless bystander. I was almost the only person in the building, and, to this day, I feel I missed being a part of something important.

I had met a German student at the campus guide service where I held a work-study position, and we fell in love. It was with this person that I first understood what it meant to have a fulfilling, sexual relationship – so unlike the “in-and-out” experiences I had had before. But his father, a Holocaust survivor who had stayed in Germany after the war,

³⁹ Students for a Democratic Society was a student activist movement in the mid-1960s.

and made a fortune in the clothing industry, wanted his son to marry an heiress. He threatened his son that he would disinherit him if he continued seeing me. Once again I experienced a painful separation.

At twenty-one, when I married Matt, I thought I would never have to feel this again. He was a “nice Jewish boy” from Long Island, and had little experience with women when I met him. I was neither physically attracted to him, nor passionately in love, but he was “safe,” and I was sure he would never do to me what my father had done to my mother. Little did I know that many years later, I would be the one to leave.

I threw myself into domesticity, trying desperately to create the secure home life I craved as a child. Although I had fashioned a sort of career as a food illustrator, I never really thought about earning enough money to support myself. I left that to my husband. I was thrilled when I became a mother, and focused my energy on raising my children; but underneath I was both a scared child and an immature woman, always yearning for an idealized, all-consuming love. That is what drove me to pick up the phone and call John.

*The night is young and full of possibilities
Well come on and let yourself be free
My love for you, so long than I've been savin'
Tonight was made for me and you.*

You can ring my be-e-ell, ring my bell [etc.]

I should have known from the beginning that something was not right. How could I have

known, when I saw him on the street corner, he had just gotten out of rehab? That for years he had been struggling with alcoholism? That when his mother was dying, he went to the hospital drunk and she told him not to come back, so he never got to say goodbye to her? That he was so emotionally damaged that he could never put another person's needs before his own? That the only way he knew to cope with frustration was to lash out, or withdraw into himself? That despite a career as the director of a substance abuse treatment program, he would eventually succumb to his own demon, alcohol? That twenty-five years after that fateful encounter on the street corner, he would abandon his wife and children? How could I have known? And yet, in retrospect, the signs were there from the beginning. On the surface, the story appeared so glorious, so romantic, so passionate, so unlikely, that if you saw it in the movies you wouldn't believe it was real. Those who knew me well would eventually come to ask why I stayed. A wise therapist said to me: "You have an enormous capacity to tolerate unhappiness." I thought I had spent my life trying to avoid it.

“Metabolizing Anger”

To grow up metabolizing anger and hatred like daily bread means that eventually every human interaction becomes tainted with the negative passion and intensity of its byproducts – anger and cruelty.

- Audre Lorde
*Freeing Tammy: Women, Drugs, and Incarceration*⁴⁰

Charlotte’s Story

“I know Joe. He isn’t that kind of man. Joe doesn’t do that kind of thing.” Joe has been dead for two years, but Charlotte still speaks about him in the present tense. “How come I put up with it all these years?” One day I said to him: “So are you falling for another kind of woman?” You know, she was that tall Scandinavian type with the straight blond hair - the polar opposite of me. He didn’t even look up, but he said yes. I got fat just to punish him. Can you believe it? I weighed over two hundred pounds.

When I first began working with Charlotte, the story of her betrayal belonged to her alone. Now it belongs to me. But of course you don’t say anything. After all, you’re a professional. You know better than that.

⁴⁰ Lorde, Audre, in *Freeing Tammy: Women, Drugs, and Incarceration*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2007. 63.

Charlotte, the elder daughter of Russian-Jewish immigrants, was born in Brooklyn eighty-five years ago. She had an older brother, but he died when Charlotte was only two. Her mother never recovered from his death, and Charlotte became her caretaker. Charlotte's father was a very handsome man, but emotionally distant. Charlotte is quite certain that her perilous search for love began with her father's neglect.

"It sounds crazy, but when I was young I thought I was the most beautiful girl in the world." You can see why she might have thought so. What you would not have guessed was that she was also a sickly child, who was hospitalized in her early twenties with ulcerative colitis, and underwent a colostomy. Charlotte was a spirited young woman and men flocked to her beauty. If she were interested in someone, she would tell him on the first date about her colostomy bag. She said it was never a problem.

When Charlotte was nineteen she met Joe. She was smitten, but in retrospect she doesn't think she was in love. Joe was ten years older than Charlotte. He was interested in her, but not ready to make a commitment. He came from an Italian immigrant family and still lived with his mother, whom Charlotte described as "truly crazy." Joe suffered from erectile dysfunction at a very young age, but Charlotte said it didn't really bother her. She was never

interested in having children, and despite his condition, she describes their early sex life as having been satisfactory.

Then Charlotte met Robert and knew real love for the first time. He was a budding young scientist who adored her, but “had his head in the clouds.” Within a short time they were married. However, Charlotte was restless and continued to see other men, including Joe. Eventually Joe said he was ready to make a commitment and, after four years of marriage, Charlotte left Robert to marry Joe.

Like Charlotte’s father, Joe was a handsome man. But rather than being emotionally distant, he was critical and verbally abusive. When Charlotte met him he was a pop singer and entertainer, and Charlotte became his manager. However, his heavy drinking ruined his career, and he left the entertainment world to go into business. That’s when he met the blond. Although money was not an issue, Charlotte had always worked hard and put money away on her own. This was fortunate because Joe’s boss was a vengeful man, who felt threatened by Joe’s role in the company and fired him without cause. Charlotte had saved enough money to keep them going, and she hired a lawyer to represent Joe in a suit against his boss. They won the case, but Joe was never able to get another job.

When Joe was diagnosed with cancer Charlotte tried to keep his spirits up. "Come on! We'll beat this thing! We won't let it get us down!" They had always lived lavishly, with a luxury apartment in the city and a beach house in the Hamptons, and entertaining was a big part of their lives. Charlotte continued to entertain, and took Joe out to the beach house as often as possible. But the cancer had metastasized and Charlotte knew he was dying, although they never talked about it. One of the last things he said to her, when he nearing the end, was: "We should have oral sex. Do it for us." Charlotte was incredulous. As she recounted the story, she said: "Can you believe it? He wanted me to go down on him, with a catheter and all. That's all men think about."

Charlotte has a chronic illness of unknown origin, in which clumps of abnormal tissue, called granulomas, form in certain organs of the body. The disease can affect almost any organ, but it most commonly affects the lungs. She often experiences shortness of breath and extreme fatigue, and more recently, chronic nosebleeds. But Charlotte has been sick all her life, and says this is nothing compared to the rage she feels at her late husband. "The worst part is that I can't tell him to his face."

As I stood up to leave at the end of our session, Charlotte, still seething about "the blond," said: "And you know how I got her phone number? In one morning, that's how. I could be a spy. Really. I could find out anything about anyone."

Only minutes before I went up to see her, I was standing in front of her building talking on the phone to a friend, telling her how I had gotten the phone number of my husband's new girlfriend. I had just uttered the words: "Really. I could be a spy."

When I began writing this story I still had a wedding band on my hand. Now, for the first time in more than four decades, the ring finger on my left hand is unadorned. When I married for the first time at twenty-one, I was looking for a kind of emotional security that I had not known as a child. I knew my husband would never do to me what my father had done to my mother.

There had been another argument, and my parents went into the next room to decide the fate of their marriage. My sister and I lay next to each other on our parents' bed, each in our own universe, rigid with fear, awaiting the outcome. We didn't exchange a single word, nor did it occur to me to comfort her. I was eight and she was only four, and no one had told me how to be a big sister. I tried to concentrate on the colors of the drapes – chartreuse, rust, and gold, the colors of 1950s "Danish modern" – but a song I had learned in school kept going round and round in my head. It recounted the ill-fated love of a girl who had given away her heart:

O Vreneli, my pretty one, pray tell me where's your home?

*"My home it is in Switzerland, 'tis made of wood and stone,
My home it is in Switzerland, 'tis made of wood and stone."*

*O Vreneli, my pretty one, pray tell me where's your heart?
"O that, kind sir, I gave away, but still I feel it smart,
O that, kind sir, I gave away, but still I feel it smart."*

*O Vreneli, my pretty one, pray tell me where's your head?
"My head I also gave away, it's with my heart," she said:
"My head I also gave away, it's with my heart," she said.⁴¹*

In my child's mind, I suddenly realized that if I continued to sing that song my parents would surely get divorced. So I literally changed my tune, and replaced tale of the doomed Vreneli with the *Marching to Pretoria*, whose lyrics promised harmony, rather than discord:

*I'm with you and you're with me
And so we're all together.
So we're all together
So we're all together
Sing with me, I'll sing with you
And so we will sing together
As we march along.*

My parents decided to stay together, and I believed that my magical thinking had made this happen. In years to come, I developed compulsive secret rituals, most based on the number four to represent the four members of my family, in a desperate attempt to keep my family intact. I hated those rituals, as they held me hostage in my own mind. I was ashamed of them, but I told no one. When I was sixteen I tried to break their hold on me.

⁴¹ *Vreneli ab em Guggisbärg* is a traditional Swiss folksong.

One day, instead of stepping four times on the rug at the bottom of the stairs, I only stepped on it once. That was the day we had the accident.

The Accident

My mother was driving, but it wasn't her fault. I wasn't hurt; she was seriously injured. Although she eventually recovered, this event in our lives became known as "The Accident" – a sort of landmark by which many things were calculated. "It must have been about two years after the accident," or, "Before I had the accident." The timeline of our lives was divided in half by "The Accident" – "Before the accident," and "After the accident." In those days no one understood that a car accident could cause Post-traumatic Stress Disorder.⁴² The first real nightmare I can remember was about the car. I dreamt I was sitting in the back seat, my father at the wheel, and my mother seated beside him. The car was going up a steep hill, and suddenly my father began driving at breakneck speed. I screamed for my mother to help, but she had turned into a witch and didn't seem to know I was in danger.

After the accident, I wrote a letter to the boyfriend who would someday become my second husband. He had been in the backseat with us, but he was not hurt:

⁴² See DSM-IV-TR for a full description of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder.

I see more and more each day the foundations that lie beneath this house, and I am far now from the disillusionment in which I used to live. Sometimes it is sheer hell; today was a paramount example. My mother has had an encephalograph taken which shows some brain damage that could ruin her vision if she does not stay immobile for a week or so. My father feels put out somehow that my mother is not allowed to do anything. My sister refuses to do any work, as does my father, and I am left with the burden. That doesn't bother me; it is my father's irresponsibility that does. My father wanted to go to Fire Island with a friend today, and Barbara wanted to go horseback riding. Barbara kept making all sorts of demands on both my mother and father, which got them both aggravated. Then the trouble began. My mother couldn't handle Barbara because she (my mother) has a severe headache which has caused her vision to become extremely out of focus, and any irritation makes it worse. She asked my father for assistance, and he proceeded to get furious at all of us. He would not help either my mother or my sister, and took much of his anger out on me. I had stayed out of it until he began yelling at me. I still tried to keep quiet. Finally everyone (except my mother) went downstairs, and I heard my mother start crying. I went to my father and said the least he could do was comfort her. He went upstairs, but came down in a few minutes saying he would like to talk to my sister and me. He told us we must take care of my mother. I made some comment about this being a great time for him to go fishing at Fire Island (sarcastically) and he proceeded to kick me and say I

should get the hell upstairs. I didn't move or open my mouth, so he slapped me and told me he owned the house and if I didn't like it I could leave. I didn't move so he walked out. Meanwhile my mother was upstairs crying, while my father took Barbara horseback riding and then went to Fire Island. I never like to take sides in this house anymore, but this time I felt my father was acting pretty absurdly and extremely inconsiderately. I couldn't help being on my mother's side...Too bad it has to be this sort of experience which teaches me what kind of atmosphere I would not want to live in again. I wonder if there is such thing as love without tension, or rather a warm environment without restrictions. I know we will be able to do it if we don't let ourselves slip into this sort of imbroglio.

How could I have know, with my sixteen-year-old's idealism, that one day he would treat me with the same hostile disregard my father had shown my mother – leaving me alone with an toddler and an infant, when I had pneumonia, to go away to a conference; or thinking I could take the subway home after brain surgery. For many years I tolerated this behavior, justifying it to myself and others (“Why do you stay with him?”) by explaining that he felt so helplessly unable to “fix” my distress, that he had no choice but to reject me.

When my parents' divorce was imminent, it became apparent to me that my rituals were not working. I got married at twenty-one and spent the next twenty years trying to

recreate the kind of domestic life stereotypical of the 1950s. It was 1969, and the world around me was changing rapidly. There were many doors open to me that had not been open to women of my mother's generation, but I was too scared to enter them. By marrying so young, I felt I had locked myself out of the most important door of all – the one that led to the kind of passionate love I had known as an adolescent. Everything I did was colored by this unmet desire. It was not just the need to be loved, but the pull to find an outlet for my own passionate feelings. When I was in my thirties, I left one husband for another, thinking this would put an end to my unbearable yearning. It did not.

Upon Interviewing My Mother

Whenever my parents argued I thought about how much better my life would have been if only my mother had married David. I had never met him, but it was something I just knew. I can picture myself at five, or ten, or twelve, lying in bed wishing. Of course, in my child's mind it did not occur to me that I wouldn't be here if she had. I pictured him as my mother described him – tall and very handsome, and so very talented. I was sure he must be a gentle and caring man. After all, she told me how he had cried on my grandmother's shoulder when she broke off their engagement to marry my father. That must mean that he cared deeply about my mother, and that was enough to convince me that he would have cared about me as well. I didn't find out until much later that my mother had sensed long before she ended their relationship that something was amiss. He was too involved in the goings and comings of his friend Freddy; but this was the 1930s, and no one talked about homosexuality in those days. My mother always told me it was all right to sleep with someone before you were married as long as you were in love. I just assumed that meant she had slept with David. It wasn't until much later that I learned they "did everything but."

I had been talking to my mother about interviewing her for over a year. Every time I mentioned it she half-heartedly agreed, but somehow we never got around to it.

When I thought about it I was often overcome with lethargy and couldn't get myself

to make the twenty-minute trip downtown to her apartment. I didn't feel the same excitement I experience when I am about to interview someone new. Yet I know that in order to understand my own yearning, I must also understand hers. I have spent my life trying to extricate myself from the tangled web of our relationship, but the harder I try, the more tangled it gets. She has told me the same stories a hundred times, and each time I feel a knot tighten in my stomach. Yet, I can't imagine life without her, and I know that one day I will miss her terribly.

I won't say that interviewing my mother was easy, but as the interview progressed I found myself able to listen to her in a way I never had before. Although some of the stories were familiar, there were others I had not heard. Suddenly I was really able to picture my mother when she was young, and to understand things about her I had never been able to figure out.

The interview took place in a hotel room we shared for a weekend. I had invited her to come with me and my younger children to celebrate the first birthday of my granddaughter, her great-granddaughter. We went back to the hotel after dinner, and I told my mother it was time. She changed into her nightgown and stretched out on the bed. I sat in a chair by the bedside. I explained to her that this was not going to be just a life history interview, but a history of her romantic experience. I felt stiff and uncomfortable. I knew I would have to ask her about sex. When I was in my thirties, married to my first husband, and with two little children, we rented a house

on Block Island for a month in the summer. My mother came to stay with us for a few days. We took her to see a beautiful remote beach, which could only be reached by climbing down the side of a cliff. When we reached the bottom there was no one else in sight. We had packed a picnic lunch, and while we were sitting on the rocks eating my mother looked up and saw two figures in the distance. She said: "That looks like David," and as they approached she said: "That is David!" What strange twist of fate had led me to meet him for the first time, walking hand-in-hand with his (third) wife, in that deserted place! My mother called to him and he and his wife came over to greet us. As my mother had always told me he was indeed very handsome – now a distinguished-looking, silver-haired man of sixty.

Over the next few days I had a number of opportunities to spend time with David. He and his wife were staying at a hotel on the island, and we often ended up at the beach together. I honestly don't remember if I sensed any chemistry between David and my mother. At that point in my life I was too caught up in my own yearnings to pay attention to hers. I was struggling to grow up, but I couldn't let go of the past. At least I was no longer looking to David to save me.

Prior to the interview my mother had never told me how David had hurt her by flirting with other girls in front of her, when they were at the National Music Camp. And, of course, there were his fixations on certain young men. By this time my mother and David were attending different colleges, but they planned to spend the

summer together, and everyone knew they would eventually get married. My grandparents adored David, and the families on both sides were overjoyed. But then the war started and David was drafted. My mother never said anything to David, but she described to me how wounded she had felt. I suddenly pictured my mother as young woman, suffering in silence, and I wanted to reach out and comfort her. I couldn't help but think of how she had suffered similarly in her relationship with my father. Because of the way in which she had idealized her relationship with David, I never knew it had also been a source of such distress. I always wondered how she could have forsaken a caring man like David, for one as seemingly unfeeling as my own father. Now, for the first time, I understood.

Before the interview I had no idea that my mother and David continued to see each other after their relationship had officially ended. My father was a television writer, and there were many people in the arts with offices in the building where he worked. After the war David got a job with a production company, and by sheer coincidence was given the office next to my father. He and my mother periodically had lunch together, but after a time they drifted apart.

A few years ago David came back into my mother's life. She works for the arts division of a non-profit organization, and contacted David when the board was looking for new members. David had become the head of the school of the arts at a major university, and he was well-known for his organizational talent. He declined

the offer but invited my mother to lunch. No longer actively mourning the death of the married man with whom she had been involved for twenty-five years after she divorced my father, she accepted David's invitation. As she said in the interview: "There was no question the electricity was still there."

My mother, a dedicated amateur violinist, often invites people to play chamber music at her apartment. She began inviting David to play clarinet quintets. She always offered dinner to her guests when they had finished playing, and David always accepted. One evening he lingered after the others had left. He followed my mother into the kitchen and put his arms around her. She turned her head as he tried to kiss her, and he released her from his arms. In that moment she decided she did not want to allow herself to succumb, worrying perhaps that she might be hurt again. That was probably the last time she would ever be in the arms of a man. She was already well into her eighties. Not long afterward she heard that David was ill and in the hospital. He had a brain tumor. Two years later he died. I have often wondered if I would have resisted, knowing that it might be the last time.

My mother talked about her lifelong connection to David:

Lefferts: I met David in high school and – in the New York high school. We were both in the orchestra. We were in the same grade but I don't think we were in any classes. But we were in the orchestra together. And we started dating and it was –

I think we really loved each other. We built a relationship that in some ways lasted through our whole lives.

Taylor: So who was – was David your first love or was there somebody –

Lefferts: My first real love, yes. Somebody I really, truly loved. And yes, and he was – I mean, I loved him in a way when I saw him again in the other years.

Taylor: Well, all my growing up I heard about him. And I always –

Lefferts: Yes. I remember you're saying, "Oh, I always wanted to meet you." I almost wanted the floor – the sand to drop me through. [Laughing.]

Taylor: But what happened to that relationship? And how long did it last?

Lefferts: It lasted until I met your father. It didn't really last because I went out with other guys and had romances, you know, in college.

Taylor: So you and David went separate – I mean, you went your separate ways after –

Lefferts: I graduated six months before he did, which led him to believe, by the

way – I had to correct him when I saw him again many years later – to thinking I was older than he. I wasn't; I was three months younger.

Taylor: How did you graduate earlier?

Lefferts: I graduated. He didn't graduate for six months after. Why, I don't know. Oh, I graduated earlier because I skipped a grade so I graduated just as I turned seventeen.

And then he went to Rochester and I went to Michigan. And we corresponded all the time. And then he got me a job – no, I got a job – he suggested I get a job at the National Music Camp after my freshman year, because he had one. And I got one and then he had me meet him in Detroit and we stayed at his relative's house. And they all thought we were going to get married.

Taylor: And during the year you were separated did you go out with other people?

Lefferts: Yes. And it's interesting, when I told him that I was going to marry George – we had a long walk in Riverside Park at two o'clock in the morning. Can you imagine doing that now? He – you know what happened? He went to Tanglewood and he was in a program there for the summer and I worked in the

City. He came home and called me up and he came over and as I greeted him at the door I told him I was engaged to be married. And he was absolutely horrified and that's when we took a walk and he tried to persuade me. And if he had only persuaded me not to marry your father that would have been enough. But he – except you wouldn't be here.

Taylor: Did you get over David?

Lefferts: Yes and no.

What it means to be a woman

Women talk about love. From girlhood on, we learn that conversations about love are a gendered narrative, a female subject. Our obsessions about love begin not with the first crush or the first fall. They begin with that first recognition that females matter less than males, that no matter how good we are, we are never quite good enough. Femaleness in patriarchal culture marks us from the very beginning as unworthy or not as worthy, and it should come as no surprise that we learn to worry most as girls, as women, about whether we are worthy of love.

- bell hooks

*Communion: The Female Search for Love*⁴³

In order to understand older women's perspectives on romantic love, I wanted to know how they learned what it means to be female, and what kinds of messages they received when they were growing up. All of the women answered by speaking about their mothers, and in some cases, their grandmothers. Sometimes the messages they received were explicit, but mostly they came through observation. The majority of the women learned to compare themselves unfavorably to males, and sometimes the lessons they learned as young girls were harsh.

Jimmie Lou Jackson grew up in a poor family, in the "rough country" of Eastern Kentucky. I asked Jackson about her early experience:

Jackson: I think it came – I remember when I was a child, I was at – my father was laying on the couch, my mother was doing the washing, I was out hanging up

⁴³ hooks, xiii.

the clothes, and my fingers were freezing to the metal clothesline. And I'm thinking – at the age of ten or so – this is not fair. This is not fair.

Taylor: It sounds like this came from your experience and what you saw.

Jackson: Yes. From watching. And my grandmother, I can see her on Sunday. She never sat down at the table. She was always up and serving somebody. And Mother told me, she said – when the boys would go out on a date – she said, "I would iron those white shirts for them to go, and if it didn't suit them they would throw it back." And she said, you know, they were younger brothers. I mean, she was – you know, she was seeing that.

Marvlous Harrison, an African-American woman who grew up in the South, felt she had had no real instruction. But the messages she got about romantic relationships were fraught with negativity:

Harrison: Well, you know, the funny thing is back in those days the parents didn't talk to you too much – they didn't talk to you too much about that. They would say don't let a boy do this, don't a boy do that, but they didn't even give you good reasons why not to. So it made you think if you sat down behind a boy on a chair you might get pregnant. You know. But they didn't explain what really actually happened.

Harrison married at sixteen, and, ten years and two children later, divorced her husband. In retrospect, she feels that if she had had some guidance she would not have chosen to get married so young.

Marriage and family were the primary goals set forth for most of the women with whom I spoke, although some ultimately chose not to marry, or, after unsatisfactory marriages, to remain single. However, even when it was a conscious choice not to marry, many of the women felt as though they had disappointed their mothers.

Lalla Grimes, a retired university administrator, described it as follows:

Grimes: I thought I was going to be my mommy over again. I thought I was going to grow up and get married and have a family. And it never occurred to me that that wouldn't be my path in life... Isn't that interesting? It was just like I kept living my life and then in my forties I turned around and looked behind me, looked over my shoulder and said, "Well, I guess I didn't do that, did I?" Gee whiz, how did I get here? But it was never sort of a conscious – life went on. There were always – pretty much always men in my life and whatever. But it never measured up to what I thought my parents had.

Although she never married, Grimes had a number of long-term relationships with men. She spoke of one lover in particular - a poet and painter with whom she lived for many years. He turned out to have a drinking problem, but Grimes' believed at the time that romantic love was the panacea that could remedy it:

Grimes: And I was such a little ignoramus. I didn't know what I was getting into. And I believed that the love of a good woman was going to just turn him around and everything was going to be just wonderful.

Mary Six Rupert, a dancer and former Rockette⁴⁴, was married twice, the first time at nineteen. Looking back, she reflects on the limitations of her earlier goals:

Rupert: Well, I mean, such a big goal was to get married. You know? I mean, that was like a big success story right there. You know, you're nineteen, you're married. You know, you're on your way.

And then I loved teaching and my goal was to be married, teach part time, take care of the house, probably have some kids. I mean, that's as far as the goal went. I never – it's so interesting now to look back – but I never – I never put a lot of time into thinking about a career for myself. It was to find a guy with a decent

⁴⁴ The Rockettes are a precision dance company based at Radio City Music Hall in New York City.

career and then support that.

And I have nothing against marriage or any of that. It's just that I kept trying it for all the wrong reasons and it just didn't work for me. And what I needed to do, I think eventually I had to do on my own. Because it tended to be my way – and I think I was just raised to believe this – that once a man came into my life then I sort of gave up a lot of my independence, my goals, my whatever, and suddenly it became about their career and their life. And so I needed to be sort of on my own to really get my life together.

Jeanette Gavaris, whose Russian immigrant parents divorced when she was young, said her mother was too busy with other men to take the time to teach her anything about being female. Jeanette said learned from movies and books:

Gavaris: I never learned how to be female. Are you kidding? No, no, no. My mother then went on to have two more children by her lover and it became – I was just like – I was shunted to one side. I don't remember much about my schooling or anything...Anyway, I learned from books and the movies. Come to think of it, yes. I was a big movie buff and a book buff.

Jeanette spent many years of her married life trying not to repeat her mother's mistakes. I asked her about her expectations as a wife and mother:

Gavaris: I was June Cleaver⁴⁵. You know, the little curtains and the ironing. I was a perfect wife.

Despite Gavaris's belief that she had a loving marriage, she felt boxed in by the "little curtains" of her traditional role. When her husband died, she experienced a degree of freedom she had never known:

Gavaris: Because you know, as long as you're married, Laurie, you know you're not your own person. You always have – you are beholden to somebody else. Somebody else has to come home, have dinner, whatever. You are tied in. All of a sudden, for the first time in my life, I was alone. I had – I lived alone. For the first time in my life. I went from my mother's house to Pete's house. And then even when he went to war I had the children. I was always –

Taylor: Taking care of somebody else.

Gavaris: That's right. That's right. So that when he died – I mean, it's almost terrible to say it, but I was freer.

According to hooks, even a girl who feels deeply loved as a small child, learns at a

⁴⁵ June Cleaver played an archetypal 1950s suburban mother in the television series *Leave It to Beaver*.

certain point that the world does not affirm her autonomy and independence, and she strives to refashion herself so that she will become worthy of another's love.

From the start, then, females are confused about the nature of love. Socialized in the false assumption that we will find love in the place where femaleness is deemed unworthy and consistently devalued, we learn to pretend that love matters more than anything, when in actuality we know that what matters most, even in the wake of the feminist movement, is patriarchal approval. From birth on, most females live in fear that we will be abandoned, that if we step outside the approved circle, we will not be loved.⁴⁶

In my own childhood the messages were confusing. Men were to be both revered and denigrated. You couldn't depend on them, but you couldn't live without them. A woman was only truly valued when her worth was seen through the eyes of a man. But a man who valued a woman as a human being, and not primarily as a sexual object, was not worth his salt. A woman could be competent, but her competence was seen as a threat. My mother never conveyed this to me explicitly, but her own mother, my grandmother, made no bones about it:

Lefferts: I was still extremely athletic, all through my developing years and I always was in competition with the boys; very much in competition. And I usually

⁴⁶ hooks. xviii.

beat them. And my mother drilled into me that they wouldn't like me if I beat them. And it had a very interesting effect.

Taylor: So where do you think those messages came from, that she was –

Lefferts: My mother, because that was what was believed: the men didn't like you if you could beat them at their own – they still don't [Laughs.]

There was one – one of our – the families had a squash court – just a one-wall squash court – and we used to play – the men played handball against it but we used tennis racquets and tennis balls. And we played the same rules that the handball was. But there was one boy who I couldn't always beat; I beat part of the time. But I mean, the two of us were the best players. And it must have had a very profound effect on me, that lecturing my mother kept constantly giving me about the boys wouldn't like me if I beat them at their own game, because we used to – it was whoever got a score of twenty-one won, but you had to be two points above. If it was twenty to twenty-one you had to play another point until it twenty to twenty-two or, you know. And we would go on and on tying and then getting one. And invariably in the end I lost. I never won that – I mean, it would go on – the game would go on and on and on and then I would lose. And I have to believe that since there is the law of averages I would have won fifty percent of the time and that that must have had a final effect on me.

And my mother always said to me, "You mustn't beat them at their own games. They won't like you if you do." And I thought that was outrageous – which it is – but she really drummed it into me and the result was that he and I would battle – he would get a point ahead and then I would get a point – but I always lost. In the end, I always lost.

Refrigerator Questions

More important, nothing was frightening with her mother around. She knew how to do everything – to turn a coat, to bargain at the market, to make a borscht out of nothing...

- Dina Rubina
*Liubka*⁴⁷

My mother was my lifeboat. She still is. When I was younger I took her for granted. Now, at my age, it is a luxury to have a mother at all, let alone a mother to whom one can still turn for advice. I call them “refrigerator questions.” “Ma, I’ve had this piece of chicken in the refrigerator for a week. Do you think it’s okay to eat it?” I don’t really need to ask these questions, but it’s still reassuring to be able to depend on her this way. A friend’s, whose mother’s dementia was so advanced that she didn’t recognize her own child, told me upon her death: “As long as she was alive, the world felt like a safe place.” I once read an interview with a 75-year-old woman whose 95-year-old mother died after slipping on a bath rug. Her daughter told the interviewer: “No matter how long your mother lives, it’s not long enough.”

My mother sat, night after night under the open staircase, in a teal-blue Danish modern chair, eating those damn “Indian nuts”, doing a crossword puzzle, or reading the newly published second-wave feminist literature – Simone de Beauvoir,

⁴⁷ Rubina, Dina. “Liubka.” In Peterson, Nadya L. *Russian Love Stories: An Anthology of Contemporary Prose*. New York: Peter Lang, 2009. 36.

Kate Millett, Betty Friedan. Yet, even today, my mother would never identify herself as a feminist. She seemed so far away from me then, but in those days I didn't know how to reach out. No one in my immediate family reached out. We were four separate entities, each orbiting in our own universe. As a child of the 60s I should have been reading those books too. She should have encouraged it. But my mother suffered alone, as I stood by watching, like a helpless bystander.

Ultimately, it was the literature of feminism that gave my mother the courage to leave my father. Yet, like so many of the women I interviewed, my mother would never identify herself as a feminist. In a recent conversation, I asked her to talk about her views on feminism:

Lefferts: Yes, well, that was one of the things – reading Normal Mailer made me sick. I don't mean The Naked and the Dead but some of those other books he wrote after that. I was extremely – Kate Millett's book⁴⁸ – reading it just rang all kinds of bells of what I had been experiencing and what I had seen. And interestingly enough, when I read – years later when I read – no, it wasn't years later. It couldn't have been years – when I worked for Karen Horney I – yes, that was just around the same – I read her books and, Jesus, I saw your father on every page. De Beauvoir. Simone de Beauvoir. And she also rang – it rang many, many bells. And I saw clearly how I had behaved in the face of the way he

⁴⁸ She is referring to Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*.

behaved. And it shook me badly and made me – I think it was before I – was it before or after I got divorced that I read those book?

Taylor: Well, it was – I don't know if you were actually divorced. I think it was before you got divorced – he was already not living there.

Lefferts: It was that whole period.

Taylor: I mean, I just – I remember you sitting and reading –

Lefferts: What happened is that I – well, I had this – no, the dream came later. I realized that I had to get out underneath – from underneath this – and I decided the only way to do it was not to work at home, to get a job outside the home because he was completely controlling me by my being at home. You know?

Taylor: Let me just ask you one more question and then we'll stop. Because I'm still interested in this sort of historical perspective and it's clear that the feminist literature had a profound effect on you, and yet, like many, many women I've talked to of – who were affected by the feminist movement, do not identify themselves as feminists.

Lefferts: I never was active in the feminist movement. I never accepted a lot of the crap that they did and I think what's happened to the – the disappearance of the feminist movement is disgusting. I think everything that they were opposed to has come back in spades. I think women are selling themselves under the table like crazy.

As I conducted the interviews for this thesis, I began to realize there were many older women like my mother, who would not identify themselves as feminists, but who had lived what I have come to call “feminist lives by necessity.” Many felt they were affected by the movement, but some said they were just living their lives.

I spoke to Jeanette Gavaris about her experiences:

Taylor: That's something that interests me because a lot of older women I have talked to lived in some ways a feminist life, at times, but don't identify as –

Gavaris: Yes, I suppose that's true. Yes. I suppose that's –

Taylor: But I'm curious to know how that might have affected you.

Gavaris: Well, it affected me but I didn't do anything about it. I read the books, agreed with them all. Betty Friedan and Gloria – I just saw Gloria Steinem the

other night on the Bill Mahr [show].

Like Gavaris, Mary Six Rupert feels that feminism must have affected her, but it wasn't foremost in her mind when she was trying to make it on her own:

Rupert: I think I had spent so much time with these other long-term – two marriages and another fairly long-term relationship – you know, I just thought that I need to put my priorities on the stuff that I want to do for myself. It needed to become very important to me because I had never considered it possible for me to see if I could do it on my own: support myself, get my own place to live, and not have to have that relationship of somebody taking care of me in any way.

Taylor: Do you feel as though in any way you were influenced by the feminist movement?

Rupert: I'm sure I was in some way but I never – I wasn't all-involved or identified so much with that. I think it all comes in to your mind. I mean, it's all going on, but I never was a – you know, like a woman-power kind of person. It was just sort of personal decisions that I felt like I wanted to make that were different than sort of what I had been raised to do.

Lalla Grimes sees her grandmother as having led a feminist life as a result of her life circumstances:

Grimes : And as I look back on my grandmother, she led a feminist life out of necessity. Her husband died when my mother was twelve. She went back to work as a seamstress. She made absolutely beautiful debutante gowns and wedding gowns in Birmingham, Alabama. Supported herself and her daughter – this was just – my grandfather died in 1929. So during the crash. she kept life together for them, held on to her home, educated her daughter. Sent my mother to college and launched her into the world.

Then Mommy was much more the traditional non-feminist, the stay-at-home, 1950s mommy. So when I think back on what my grandmother accomplished, it was amazing. But the ideal was to be a stay-at-home mom. Daddy didn't want her to work. That was his manhood and his projection of, you know, he can take care of his family. And she – she never wanted to really work. She had been employed as a librarian before they were married. But it was her ideal, too, to be a stay-at-home mom. To be a mother and a wife was the end-all and be-all for her.

Grimes goes on to talk about her own feelings about feminism. She remembers her

initial skepticism when Betty Friedan came to speak at her school:

Grimes : But I just assumed that I would get married and have a family. It never happened. I can remember Betty Friedan coming and speaking at Mount Holyoke when I was there. I was sort of incensed – what do you mean there's something wrong with being a stay-at-home mom? Of course that's just fine. I mean, I was really reactionary. And of course I have changed over the years and I have had my own career, never married, supported myself throughout, so that entire sense of what I was going to be never came to pass.

Grimes feels she benefited from feminism, without having participated in the movement.

But it didn't occur to me while it was happening, in the years when it ought to have been happening. I was just blithely going along, enjoying my jobs and seeing people and doing stuff. And then, as I say, at a certain point it's kind of, "Well, I guess I didn't do that, did I?" Where did that marriage go? [Laughs.]

Taylor: And in the '60s, after you came back [from Italy], at that point did you feel affected by the feminist movement? You were here in '68, right?

Grimes : I didn't start at Columbia until '69 so I came just after.

Taylor : So you missed that.

Grimes : And sometimes, Lauren, I say to myself, and I say to others, I think I slept through the '60s. I was doing my own thing and I wasn't that touched by it; and I wasn't that touched by feminism. I have been so fortunate in my life. I seem to come along at the right time to benefit from things without really – I shouldn't have because I didn't take responsibility for making them happen. So jobs and opportunities and possibilities opened up. When I first started working at Columbia, you were a secretary - or – and that was it. Period. They would call you an administrative assistant or something, but – and actually, in many ways, I ended up being a secretary all of my years.

Although she worked closely with some important feminist writers, Maristella Lorch does not identify herself as a feminist. But, like Grimes, she sees her grandmother as having lived as a feminist without knowing it. Lorch also commented on her experience as a woman under fascism:

Lorch: I never identified as a feminist.

Now you have read the pre-history [referring to Mamma in her Village⁴⁹, the book she wrote about her mother], what do I remember of this pre-history? I remember the character of my mother, a true family's tantelibrum [ph] – rather the tantelibrum [ph], a feminist without knowing that she was a feminist, a woman that asserted herself in her village, in her valley, and ended up by marrying out of her social class, a member of the family that pollinated the valley, who happened to be exiled to America by his family for refusing to marry a baroness [unclear], who happened to be his cousin.

Taylor: I had a question about those years at Barnard in the early '50s, because in the United States it was such a time of conservatism in terms of women's roles and here is a women's college. How did you, particularly, because you had lived a – whether it was characterized as a feminist life, in some ways it was a life where you developed yourself as a woman outside of the traditional roles, how did you as a professor and how did the students navigate that disconnect between women's education and the conservative values of the time?

Lorch: First of all, when you live in a battlefield – when you live the battle you just fight, and you don't know you are living a battle. You don't write in a diary

⁴⁹ Lorch, Maristella de Panizza. *Mamma in her Village*. New York: Ruder Finn Press, 2005.

"battlefield". So we were not aware. We suffered on our own skin the prejudices of the time. And I suffered it in my relationship with Ray. But before then, through the discovery of what Ray's married life had been, I got an idea of what the hypocritical society I had met at Barnard College and Columbia University. Barnard College, in spite of its great aura of openness and its housing characters like – what's her name? The great feminist; the author of Sexual Politics.

Taylor: Kate Millett.

Lorch: Kate Millett. Besides Kate Millet, my students. Erica Jong. Erica Jong was my most devoted student, from A to Z and graduate school. She went into the English department. But I have all of her books, from beginning to end. So Erica as the one, like Kate and Erica, were women who truly denounced – knew how to denounce literarily the hypocrisy of the society in which we lived. I could have denounced it if I had been an American, if I had lived like them before 1951. But I came in from beyond Gibraltar; I came in really from beyond Gibraltar looking at them from the closed sea that is the Mediterranean, in a country like Italy. Which had known a completely different freedom for the woman under fascism. Fascism had really – fascists underlined importance of the family, of birth rate, etc. and gave a deduction in taxes to people that had more than five children, etc., etc.

But at the same time women – we never had the impression of being – we were definitely discriminated against like in the rest of the world – perhaps not – but we never had the feeling of it.

Joan Moffett was not involved in the feminist movement, but she feels the 1950s marked a turning point for women:

Moffett: I mean, we weren't involved in it in those days. You either did your thing or whatever you wanted to do but as far as being part of a movement or anything like that, we weren't really – I don't remember Bean or Janet or any of us being involved in these things. We were just –

Taylor: Living your lives.

Moffett: Living our lives. And you know, it just –

Taylor: But you lived through, from the '50s, which was the sort of –

Moffett: That was a turning point.

Although much younger than Moffett, Lorna Lynch shares her view that what one might call living a feminist life it is just living one's life:

Lynch: I don't think I'm a feminist. It's just life. And you've got to make the most of what you've got with what you have. And I've learned that from my mom because I can remember, you know my mom would tell us stories, like when my dad wasn't around and she had six little mouths to feed and she didn't know where it was coming from.

Sybil Lefferts looked back on her relationship with the man who would become her husband, and wondered if she would have behaved differently, had she had what she called "feminist consciousness:"

Sybil Lefferts: He was still married and you know, I often wonder if I had had the feminist consciousness that I developed later in my life, whether I would have conducted myself in the same way. I don't know if I would because it was – because he was still married, he had young children. But you know, our attraction was so overwhelming that I once heard – actually, last winter, when we were in St. John [U. S. Virgin Islands], I heard Bob telling this tale to somebody who asked, and he said – what he said about it was, "It couldn't be helped." [Slight laugh.] He was always very succinct.

Taylor: I'm really interested in this idea that you might have –

Sybil Lefferts: I have no idea. But I might have thought about it differently.

Whether it would have moderated my behavior in some way, I don't know. I mean, who could say that. But I certainly didn't have any feminist consciousness at that time and it wasn't even something that was talked about, you know.

I was surprised to learn that my daughter, who identifies strongly as a feminist, hadn't always felt that way:

Taylor: One of the things that I wanted to ask you about is that it seems as though you have developed a sense of feminism in the last – well, certainly since you started college.

Calypso Taylor: Yes.

Taylor: And I wondered how that developed for you. And what it means to you.

Calypso Taylor: I, like many girls, rejected the label of feminism for a long time because I was like – I was like, you know, they take it too far. Blah, blah, blah. You know, sort of buying into all these straw man arguments that the media

makes. And the only reason that I realize that these are straw man arguments – and most feminists aren't like that. Most feminists are like, "I want to work with men, to like figure things out. We all live together on this earth. I just want equality." And then people are like how dare you. And you know, we're inclined to believe that of course that's not how it is, of course they're making outrageous demands. But they're really not. They're not. They're just asking that people be respectful of each other.

And at some point – at some point I was confronted with the fact that I have been brought up to believe that people should be respectful of each other, their belief is that people should be respectful of each other. These two things are not incompatible. And yes, I am a feminist. And I think my realization of that came from – actually, from a lot of reading I was doing on the Internet in these sort of, like – I was reading a series of essays on world building in science fiction and fantasy because at the time there was a fantasy comic that I wanted to do. Sort of like, you know, swords and sorcery. And I was reading this world- building stuff just to sort of get a better sense of what I wanted to do. And then I got really into it. And then a lot of it had to do with culture, and then a lot of it had to do with our own culture. And then suddenly I wasn't reading about, you know, world-building anymore, I was reading about – I was reading about the – well, on one level I was reading about how in, you know, your story set in fantasy land might be – you know, people might perceive race or gender

differently, but on another level I was reading an essay going: "Why do we perceive it the way we do? It's not what you think."

I wish that I had had the knowledge and emotional intelligence, at my daughter's age, to be able to think critically as she does. But I was too wrapped up in the pursuit of love to pay attention to questions of gender equality. I just knew I didn't want to end up in the same lifeboat as my mother.

Points of Connection

Well, I was not there to study them but to learn from and about them. It was what encouraged people to talk to me, knowing that they were helping instead of being helped.

*- Alessandro Portelli
They Say in Harlan County.⁵⁰*

Chase and Bell evoke the challenge of the subject-object dichotomy presented when we interview women and ask them to talk about their experiences as subjects of inequality.⁵¹ Traditional models of both interviewing and psychotherapy have relied on a top-down, unilateral approach, in which the interviewer or therapist is regarded as the “expert.” In the past few decades, however, we have seen interesting parallels in both fields, with movement towards an understanding and validation of the importance of intersubjectivity.

My social work students are always curious about therapeutic boundaries. How much of ourselves should we share with our patients? As an oral historian, this question is pertinent as well. In the preface to Signoret’s *La nostalgie n’est plus ce qu’elle était*, based on a lengthy series of oral histories with Maurice Pons, Pons describes his many roles as oral historian:

⁵⁰ Portelli, Alessandro. *They Say in Harlan County*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. 7.

⁵¹ Chase, Susan E. & Colleen S. Bell. “Interpreting the Complexity of Women’s Subjectivity,” In McMahan, E.M. & K. Lacy Rogers (Eds.). *Interactive Oral History Interviewing*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1994. 63.

I was aware of having played, throughout the course of our recorded acrobatic exercises of questions and answers, in turn and all at once (and often in an awkward and uncomfortable manner) the role of cop, confessor, psychiatrist, biographer, historiographer, political commissariat, secret agent, humbled scribe, education judge, witness to the bride, and godfather to the children...And I think that the two or three things I have learned about her are worth more than the two or three thousand she would have liked to learn about me.⁵²

A therapist colleague of mine invented the phrase “the ooh-ooh syndrome,” to describe those moments when a patient says something that really hits home, and you, the therapist, want to reply: “Ooh-ooh – if you knew what was going on in my life!” Many times in my years as a clinician, and more recently as an oral historian, have I experienced these “ooh-ooh” moments. The question arises as to whether or not to share one’s own material. While going through the painful breakup of my marriage, it was uncomfortable, week after week, to hear Mrs. C describe her daughter’s marital dissolution, whose details paralleled my own. Whether therapist or oral historian, learning to stay with painful material presented by a client or interviewee is a critical part of the work. The following two examples – one a vignette from my clinical practice, the other an excerpt of an interview – illustrate the power of the “ooh-ooh” moment. Although there are times, even in my clinical work, when self-revelation can be of help to a patient, in this first example I chose not to reveal anything of my own story, as I felt it would not be in the interest of the patient, or of the therapeutic relationship:

⁵² Signoret, Simone. *La nostalgie n'est plus ce qu'elle était*. Paris : Seuil, 1975. 7. (translation by Lauren Taylor)

Jane's Story

"You know my friend Edie - the one who has Parkinson's - she introduced us. I guess he just came along at the right time. Sixteen years we were together. I'm glad I listened to my friend Jessie, the older woman I told you about. She was very wise. When my husband and I got back together, she told me not to let Robert go."

I asked Jane if the affair helped her stay in her marriage. She said: "You bet! You think I could have survived without sex for sixteen years?"

Sometimes when I come to visit, Jane calls to me from the other end of the apartment, letting me know that the door is open and I should let myself in. At other time she comes to the door, dragging her bum leg as she walks. Jane has multiple sclerosis. She has her good days and her bad days. One can't help but notice her shiny red electric scooter parked near the entryway. Once she sits down you would never know she is handicapped. When Jane tells a story, her speech is punctuated with the words: "I don't know what to tell you," and "I don't know what to say." She doesn't mean it literally; it is just part of the rhythm of her narrative.

I am always struck by her beauty – the kind of beauty that must have turned a lot of heads when she was younger – perfect features, thick raven hair, peaches-and-cream skin. It’s hard to believe she is over seventy. Although she grew up poor, her husband made a fortune, and she got used to living in luxury. She has money worries now, but you can tell she still feels at home in a mink coat. What stands out the most, however, is her warm and welcoming demeanor. I am her therapist, but she calls me “Sweetie.” It feels completely natural coming from her.

Jane was born in Brooklyn, the younger daughter of Russian-Jewish immigrants. Her father had trouble holding a job, but there was always food on the table, and Jane’s mother held the family together. Jane met her future husband in high school, when she was only fifteen. They were inseparable, although Jane said he was more like a brother than a boyfriend, and she got married at nineteen in order to get out of the house. It was difficult at first, because they lived with his mother, who was not well. When she died, they got their own place and started a family. Jane’s husband went into business and Jane worked alongside him. The business flourished, and the couple bought a magnificent home in a wealthy suburb. Jane is a gregarious person, and they soon had a circle of couples with whom they socialized regularly. Like many of their friends, when the children were grown, Jane and her husband sold their house in the

suburbs and moved back to the city. A group of the wives - Jane among them - now divorced or widowed, remain close friends to this day.

When Jane was in her early fifties, she discovered that her husband was “running around” with other women. Jane got fed up and asked him to leave. They were apart for a couple of years, although he always returned home for holidays, and remained very devoted to his daughters. It was during this separation that she fell in love with Robert. After a couple of years, Jane asked her husband to come back, as she felt it would be better for the girls to have their father at home. Her younger daughter was a difficult child, and Jane was having a hard time taking care of her alone. Jane put her foot down about her husband’s running around, and he agreed to stop. However, she continued to see Robert, until she developed multiple sclerosis.

Seven years before he died, Jane’s husband was diagnosed with cancer. At first, he responded well to the treatments, but eventually the cancer metastasized, and, despite her own disability, Jane became a full-time caretaker. Her husband died a little over a year ago. Several times, when Jane was home taking care of him, the phone rang but there was no response at the other end of the line. Jane is almost certain it was Robert. On occasion, she has thought of calling him, but she doesn’t even know if

he is still alive. “Besides, if he is still alive, he would be an old man by now.”

When I began working with Jane, she was deep in grief. Although Jane’s husband was not an easy man to live with, Jane misses him, and she misses having someone to lean on. Her girls had a hard time adjusting to their father’s death, especially the younger one, who never married and was very attached to her father. Jane has done the work of being a new widow, and she is ready to move on. Except that she has a new worry on her doorstep – her older daughter’s impending divorce.

“You know, if my husband were alive, he never would have let this happen. My son-in-law made a promise, when my husband was dying, that he would always take care of the family. Twice my husband gave him money to start a business, and this is how he thanks us?” Jane’s thinks her son-in-law has “gone off the deep end.” “He’s really crazy. You never met a sweeter, more devoted wife than my daughter. How could he do this to her and the kids? My granddaughter is in medical school, and she was a straight-A student until this happened. She almost failed an exam - she was so upset when she found out what is happening at home. I hope he freezes his ass off in that house he bought in Nova Scotia!”

It was getting late when I got up to leave at the end of the session. Jane asked me if I still had more home visits to do. I said I did, and she said: "I don't know how you do it. All that running around. I hope your husband appreciates you." I couldn't help but be struck by the irony of this, as my husband is in the process of ending our marriage. I think to myself: "Ooh-ooh. If you only knew what is going on in my life!"

In this second example, I knew instinctively that to share my story would strengthen the intersubjective nature of the interview, however, I reserved the details of my story for after the recorded interview. This powerful point of connection came when Mary Six Rupert talked about her struggle with dystonia, a movement disorder that causes facial spasms:

Rupert: My transition out of dancing was quite different than most dancers, and it was horrible and it was overnight but it wasn't like one day I got up and said I am going to stop dancing. I got sick. So when I got sick, my career was done. And so I have dystonia, which is a movement disorder, and it came completely out of the blue. I was out on tour with the Rockettes and I was dance captain of that tour, and performing, and babysitting a whole company of singer/dancers. Susan Anton, you know, everybody was sort of my company. And a movement disorder

came on. And for me, sadly, had it been a movement disorder in my arm I would have been all right, but it's in my face. So that scared everybody. And so they immediately thought I was having like a nervous breakdown and my mind was going awry. And of course, none of that's real. And I didn't know what it was. So it was hard. I struggled along on the tour and tried to go to doctors and –

Taylor: How did it exhibit itself?

Rupert: It started in my forehead and my forehead would just grimace for no apparent reason. And I just thought it was stress and – you know, I was under a lot of stress.

Taylor: I had hemifacial spasm and that's why I had – I had brain surgery because of –

Rupert: Oh, you did?

Taylor: When we are done recording I will tell you my story.

Rupert: Okay. Well, anyway, it started there and then it went to – it sort of went from there. It went to my eyes and then it got really bad in my jaw. And I had jaw opening like – sometimes all day. Like my jaw was getting dislocated. And then it

went into head bobbing. And I mean, it just went from one thing to the other. I also have it in my diaphragm and I also have some effect in my vocal chords. Which, of course, ended my singing. So it was too bad because it didn't really affect my dancing. But it affected other people's perception of me. So even though I could get on stage with a line of Rockettes, and even though my face might be spasming, ninety-nine percent of the audience would never know. But they perceived me as having some – I mean, I'm sure you understand this, but until you have something wrong with your face, you don't realize how that affects other people.

Taylor: Oh, yes.

Rupert: Once again, if I had had something in my arm or whatever, people view that as a physical problem. If it's in our face they view it as an emotional problem, which it wasn't. And also as an intellectual issue. So it was very hard for me because I had moved myself – I had moved myself forward in the Rockettes to where I was now not only dance captain but I had assisted the director and two choreographers to put the tour together and so I was sort of moving myself out of being a Rockette and hopefully moving myself into a place at Radio City where I could choreograph for the Rockettes. You know, assist the directors that came in; that kind of stuff. And all that was done. They freaked out and they were like no, no, no. I mean, it was – it was – it was horrible in a way.

And the other thing is, I was so freaked out because I didn't know what was wrong with me – and neither did any doctors I went to.

Taylor: Oh, I know that story.

Brain Storm

In the winter of 2001 I developed troubling neurological symptoms that were initially thought to be signs of a stroke. Previously a healthy person, I was suddenly on a medical roller coaster. I was eventually diagnosed with a rare neurological disorder called hemi-facial spasm. An artery in my brain had gone astray, wrapping itself around my facial nerve and pushing my brainstem off to an angle. Although not life-threatening, over the next six years it caused increasingly intense facial spasms, and bouts of uncontrollable shaking which would send me to the emergency room. I learned that the only cure would be a complicated brain surgery, which could leave me deaf in one ear, and with permanent balance problems. Over the next few years I struggled to cope with the symptoms, trying a range of alternative therapies in an attempt to avoid the surgery. I learned a lot about non-Western medicine, but it did not help my condition. My husband could not cope with my stress, and offered no comfort. My children were baffled and frightened. The only real support came from the women in my life - mother and sister, my (female) neurologist, and my closest friends. This disorder rocked my sense of my womanhood to the core. My conception of myself as a desirable female was shattered. The idea of yearning for romantic love no longer held the same meaning for me. What man would ever want me again? My body was holding me hostage, and in the summer of 2007 I decided go

ahead with the surgery. I didn't care what side effects I might suffer; even if I died on the operating table, I just wanted it to be over.

I should have waited for the bus instead of walking the twenty plus blocks to my apartment that bitter cold night, but there wasn't a bus in sight. I had been working all day, and had gone right from work to a rehearsal of a parents' chorus at my son's school in the evening. I had eaten nothing since lunchtime. As I was walking home from the rehearsal I was cold, tired, and ravenously hungry. My mind was on eating dinner as soon as I got home. But about halfway there I began to feel a little sick, and by the time I reached the lobby of my building I could hardly stand up. I went into my bedroom to change my clothes and suddenly the floor seemed a million miles away. The left side of my body was tingling and my tongue felt thick. "Oh my God," I thought; I'm having a stroke." I was fifty-two years old. My grandfather was the same age when he had a stroke, and my aunt was fifty-six when she had hers. I called to my husband and he called my internist. I got in bed and waited. The doctor put me through a neurological workup on the phone and concluded that this was a hypoglycemic episode. He told me to drink some orange juice and call back in ten minutes. I started to feel a little better, so he advised me to eat something and make an appointment to see him the next day. Thus began the long medical odyssey

My internist was not particularly concerned about this “episode,” as I would come to call these increasingly frequent neurological events. He was convinced it was mild hypoglycemia, and advised me to carry cheese in my bag and eat a little throughout the day, as it would stabilize my blood sugar. I followed his advice, but returned to see him a few weeks later when a strange twitching began under my left eye and the corner of my mouth began to turn up involuntarily. The doctor said “stress,” and handed me a prescription for Zoloft. Although I work in a mental health clinic where I see up close the therapeutic effects of psychopharmacology, I am a pharmacophobe when it comes to treating my own anxiety. I never filled the prescription. The twitching persisted, but it was still intermittent and relatively mild.

*A couple of years into my six-year struggle with hemifacial spasm, when the symptoms were starting to become relentlessly present, I attended a cultural competency training workshop in which the participants were asked to stand up and form a circle. A list of adjectives was read by the group leader, and we were asked to step inside the circle each time we identified with one of these. When she spoke the word “disabled,” I teetered on the edge. The opening words of George Elliott’s novel *Daniel Deronda* came to me, but instead of Elliot’s: “Was she beautiful, or not beautiful?”⁵³ I said to myself: “I am disabled, or not disabled?” Early on in my experience with hemifacial spasm I was on a train,*

⁵³ Eliot, George. *Daniel Deronda*. New York: Harper & Bros.: 1876. 7.

when I noticed an attractive woman about my age who clearly had a more progressed version of the disorder. I wanted desperately to talk to her, but I was not ready to admit to myself that I would someday be in the same condition. I came to regret my decision. Had I spoken to her she might have been able to offer me support. I still think about her from time to time.

I had gone to Nashville for a few days to visit my sons. We were finishing dinner in a restaurant when I began to feel as though something strange was happening to my body. I decided to rest in the car for a few minutes until they were done eating. By the time they got back to the car I was shaking uncontrollably. They drove me to the emergency room, where I was given a battery of tests. My vital signs were normal, and I hadn't lost consciousness, so the conclusion was that I was having some kind of allergic reaction. The doctors gave me a strong dose of Valium and sent me home. I woke up the next morning feeling fine. I called the restaurant to find out what was in the Cajun chicken salad. The chef told me he used a lot of nutmeg. I have always been very sensitive to medications, and I knew that nutmeg in large doses could be psychoactive. This was confirmed, I thought, a few months later at Thanksgiving dinner, when I began to have similar symptoms. The sweet potatoes had nutmeg in them. I concluded that, although it seemed unrelated to the spasms, these "episodes" must be caused by an allergic reaction to nutmeg. No more nutmeg for me!

It was during a particularly anxious period of my life that all this had begun. Of course everyone thought it was stress. At first I thought so too, but I know stress, and after a while I had a sense that something else was going on. I called my doctor to ask if he thought I should see a neurologist. He didn't think there was any reason to go that route. He said: "It's really sad. We have this medication that could help you, but you won't take it." Two days later I was shocked to see his obituary in the paper. He had died suddenly of pneumonia. I asked another doctor for the name of a neurologist.

The report from my first MRI came back with the words "possible infarct." All the sings pointed to my having had a stroke. But the neurologist wanted an MRA to see if there was any soft tissue damage. Fortunately there was not, so it wasn't a stroke. The next step was to see a neuro-ophthalmologist. Something on the field of vision test appeared in the same spot as whatever was showing up on the MRI. On to a vascular neurologist.

Dr. M. was reassuring. The EEG ruled out partial seizures. He said the spot on my brain was only a venous angioma, a harmless cluster of small blood vessels - nothing to worry about. After taking a family history, he diagnosed my "episodes" as atypical migraines. Several members of my family suffer from migraines, and I have had ocular migraines since I was in my thirties. An

atypical migraine affects the body, but does not cause pain. This made sense, but unfortunately he could not explain the spasms. He suggested I see a movement disorders specialist.

Dr. F. took one look at me and knew immediately what was causing the problem. "Hemifacial spasm," he said brusquely. I wasn't surprised, as I had already begun to do some research on the Internet. This was one of the potential diagnoses I had discovered. He explained that an artery in my brain had gone astray and become wrapped around the seventh cranial nerve, my facial nerve. He explained that the condition is progressive, so that eventually even the muscles in my neck and shoulder would be affected. "There is a surgery for this," he told me, "but we don't recommend it." Because the eighth cranial nerve, which affects hearing, is so close to the seventh, it must be moved in order to reach the facial nerve. This could result in permanent hearing loss. As with any brain surgery, there could be other serious complications as well. Dr. F. recommended Botox injections, which would be administered every three months. They would temporarily paralyze the muscles around my eye. I would still feel the spasms, but they would be less visible to others. Unfortunately the injections could not be given around the mouth, as they would cause permanent drooping. Dr. F. said it was a simple procedure. "You should be glad that we have this treatment. Twenty years ago it didn't exist." I made an appointment for the following week. I went home and cancelled it. I was angry at the doctor's

uncaring manner. I was going to find another way to beat this thing. My friends thought I was crazy: "You mean you can get your insurance company to pay for Botox and you're not going to do it?"

I had a meeting for my work with someone I had never met, and I didn't want my face to start twitching. My sister gave me a Valium. All it did was make me sleepy. I decided to try acupuncture.

The smell of lavender permeated the air. I sat in the candle-lit waiting room feeling anxious but hopeful. The acupuncturist came to greet me. She took a thorough history and carefully examined my tongue. She showed me to the treatment room, and I lay on the table waiting. I had read so much about the powerful potential of acupuncture. I saw the acupuncturist weekly for a couple of months. The spasms did not subside, but my period, which had stopped six months earlier as a result of menopause, returned briefly. Over the course of the next few weeks, however, I found myself feeling more and more anxious as I approached her office. Sometimes when she inserted a needle it hit a nerve and caused me to jump. I decided I didn't need this added anxiety. I would find another way.

"No one is ever going to drill a hole in my head" became my mantra. I got a prescription for physical therapy, as the spasms were beginning to affect my

neck and shoulder. The physical therapist recommended I see the cranio-sacral therapist, who worked in the same office. The first couple of sessions seemed to bring some relief, but then the symptoms returned full-force. I sensed that the therapist was getting frustrated, yet I continued to work with her for over a year. At least it wasn't making things worse, and it did help me relax a little. Eventually she sent me to see her teacher, a serious woman who tried to unblock what she concluded were deep-seated emotional scars. Undoubtedly I have emotional scars, but unblocking them did not seem to alleviate the spasms. At two hundred dollars a session I could not afford to see her more than a couple of times.

On to another acupuncturist, a Chinese doctor who, according to the testimonials I read on his website, had helped dozens of people recover from the possible lasting neurological sequelae of lime disease with acupuncture and herbal medicine. I was sure he could help me, but the needles in my face made the spasms worse.

I decided to turn to the big guns of Western medicine – anti-seizure medications and anxiolytics. I had done some research and read that a small number of people with my condition had been helped by these pharmaceuticals. At that point my neurologist was willing to try just about anything I asked for. Neurontin, Baclofen, Lyrica, Klonopin, Xanax, just to name a few. The

anxiolytics made me sleepy, and the anti-seizure medications made me anxious. Meanwhile, my symptoms were getting worse. I had developed tonus, in which, with each contraction, the spasm locks the eye closed for several seconds. At this point the spasms were relentless. There were times when I felt like banging my head against a wall, just to stop this torture. I had always been a sociable person, sometimes even embarrassing my children by talking to strangers in the subway. Although I continued to work and teach, I was withdrawing from all but my family and closest friends. I dreaded running into neighbors in the elevator, and would rub my eye or hold my cheek in my hand to stop the spasms when I found myself in a situation which required that I talk to someone. My youngest son often would say to me: "Mom, your eye is going again," as though I didn't know.

I became obsessed with looking at the Hemifacial Spasm Association website, but I couldn't bring myself to join an online support group. I read the testimonials of those who had Botox, of those who had tried alternative therapies (with little success), and of those brave souls who had decided to go ahead with the surgery. I was still holding out for a non-surgical cure, but no matter what I tried, I couldn't stop the relentless spasms. I was having episodes of trembling a dozen times a day – not strong enough to send me to the emergency room again, but enough to send me into a panic. I joined a meditation group, and saw a hypnotherapist. Late at night I would often feel as

though I were going crazy. I wanted to get out of my own head. I had also begun to see flashing lights out of the corners of my eyes. I discovered I had torn retinas and needed laser surgery to keep me from going blind.

One night I awakened at three in the morning shaking so badly that I went to the emergency room. My temperature had dropped to 95 degrees, and even piles of blankets and intravenous Valium could not stop the shaking. My face was locked into a spasm and was so contorted it looked as though I were having a stroke. I was given even more tranquilizers. When I awoke twelve hours later, with no recollection of how I got home, I decided to find a surgeon.

Dr. S's manner was gentle and reassuring. He showed me a model of the brain and explained what would be done. A hole would be drilled in the back of my head behind the ear on the affected side. The seventh cranial nerve, or facial nerve, would be separated from the bundle of nerves in which it is embedded, and lifted away from the artery. Strips of Teflon wool would be inserted between the nerve and the artery to decompress the nerve (Teflon is used because it is non-absorbent). Various brain functions would be monitored intracranially throughout the surgery. I would need to take three months off from work for my recovery. Afterwards there would be no restrictions on my activity. It was fortuitous that I had been stubborn about having Botox injections all these years. Botox takes almost a year to clear out of the system,

enough so that it will not compromise the outcome of the surgery. The prospect of living with this condition for another year would have been almost unbearable.

The surgeon gave me my life back, and with it, a resurgence of romantic yearning. Although the symptoms persisted for almost a year, as my brain stem kept reflexively firing, I was eventually delivered from this nightmare. Not a day goes by that I don't think about my good fortune. But in the hierarchy of trauma, there is always someone who has suffered more. Because she has the condition bilaterally, Mary Six cannot have the surgery. She manages her condition with Botox injections and medications, and has "good days and bad days." I felt a sense of guilt in telling her my story. After all, it was her interview, and I no longer have to suffer as she does. But in the end it created a bond between us that we share to this day. Recently Mary and I were talking about this experience with a mutual acquaintance. Mary and I said we wished we had known each other when we were both going through the worst of it. Had I not taken the chance of sharing my experience, we might never have felt this bond.

It does not always work this way. As an interviewer, one must assess each individual and each particular situation before venturing to tell one's own story. But there are moments when it creates a profound human connection. This came unexpectedly, in

my relationship with Martha Jane Diana, who transcribed the interviews for this thesis.

Emjay's Story

Reflections of a Transcriber

In oral history much of the meaning is couched in how things are told as much as in what is told. Yet a passive mechanical transcript systematically betrays the form by turning eloquent oral performances into unreadable texts. There is no such thing as a neutral transcript: each comma is an act of interpretation... Thus, one must seek a compromise for which there are no set rules beyond good faith and the ear of the transcriber/writer.

- Alessandro Portelli
*They Say in Harlan County*⁵⁴

I hesitated for a long time before sending my interviews off to be transcribed. I had done some transcribing before and enjoyed the process, as I felt it helped me gain a deeper understanding of the interviews. However I found it painstakingly slow, and knew I would never get around to writing my thesis if I took this on myself. It never occurred to me when I sent my interviews to professional transcriber Martha Jane Diana (“Emjay”), that an affective point of connection would be established between us. I had read articles and chapters on the art of transcribing, and about the transcriber’s relationship to the material, but found nothing about a bond developing between the transcriber and the interviewer because of the content of the interview. I’m sure there is anecdotal evidence, but I didn’t come across any in the literature.

⁵⁴ Portelli.10.

Emjay and I have never met in person, but we have spoken over the phone. When she sent me the transcriptions, she would often include a brief comment on her reaction to the material. At a certain point, she wondered if she had overstepped her professional bounds, and asked me whether I would prefer that she stop. On the contrary, I found her personal relationship to the material compelling, and asked her if she would be willing to write something that I could include in my thesis. I was unprepared for the richly detailed narrative she sent me, and I asked her if she would permit me to present the text verbatim. In a subsequent phone conversation, Emjay said that while she usually maintains a sense of objective distance from the material she transcribes, the words of the women I interviewed struck a chord deep within her. Her reflections gave me a new perspective on the interviews as well, as though the intimacies the women shared with me came to life through the eyes of the transcriber.

Emjay's Story

While most transcription projects have interesting content, I usually approach them with the end goal in sight -- completion! -- and while maybe making mental note of interesting points/trivia, the content doesn't give me pause for thought. Not so with your content. I suppose because the subject is so right on point with me.

I am 61 years old -- born July 31, 1950, in a little town, Iuka, Mississippi, in the northwest corner of the state. I am the middle child and only girl. My older brother, Jimmy, is two years my senior, and my younger brother, Ricky, is five years my junior.

My mother and father -- Jane and Billy -- were both born in Iuka, also. They were married in their early twenties and moved to Washington, D. C. when they were first married. My older brother was born there. They then "came home" and Ricky and I were both born in Iuka.

Our family moved about a bit. When I was five we moved to Chicago for a short period, then returned to Iuka, then on to Tulsa, OK, where I started first grade. In the middle of the first grade we moved to Fort Smith, AK. Then you guessed it -- back "home". I attended second and third grade in Iuka and then we moved to

Tuscumbia, Alabama [only thirty miles up the road]. I started fourth grade there and we actually stayed there and I graduated high school and attended my first year of college there.

My senior year in high school, when I was 17, my mother was killed in an automobile accident. Our whole world went crazy. My father especially. He was a very good-looking man and you can't believe the women who brazenly sought him out and he responded. That left me to run the household and take care of my younger brother. I rebelled and moved to New York! That is when I was 19. My first years in New York were very interesting and my brothers tell me I should write a book about it -- but we'll see.

Anyway, I never especially wanted to get married and had a lot of friends -- platonic and romantic -- and a full enough life that I was hesitant to give it up just for the sake of being married. Back down in Alabama most folks couldn't understand that. I will never forget one day when I was back in Tuscumbia -- was only 21 at the time -- I ran into the father of one of my high school friend's father. He said to me, "You never did get married, did you?" in a tone of voice that implied it was too late now!

When I was 30 I met Mike Diana and once again my whole world changed. I fell head over heels in love with the man. Mike was twenty years older than I and at

first he was a bit self-conscious of the age difference but he overcame that. We got married after only a few months of dating and life was good. There were bumps in the road -- my father died of cancer a year after we were married and during his illness we came back to the South more than several times. Mike had three children from a previous marriage and we had what I think are more than usual step-children problems. We had gone to marriage counseling and were finally figuring out how to work around the warts and he up and died! It was sudden -- pancreatic cancer. He started feeling unwell in May and the doctor kept thinking he had Lyme's Disease because those were his symptoms and we had dogs. He died in October. (I was 39 at the time.)

I really fell apart and couldn't get a grasp for quite some time. I moved back to the South (one of the few regrets in my life, I think. I still miss NY -- or at least the memories of the years I lived there -- but it's just too hard to try to come back now. Too expensive and I'm at a point in life where I want to slow down and keep it simple, not speed up.)

After several years I met a man that made me feel wonderful all over. (Age 44). Yes, good sex. After a year, we "combined" our households and had an active and interesting life. This man was my age. The problem with this relationship was my family. We were an interracial couple and my family was none too pleased. My brothers were the worst. It caused a fifteen-year alienation and a burning of the

bridge that really will probably never be repaired. I was with this man for about three years.

Several years after that relationship split up, I remarried. (Age 50). For all the wrong reasons, I might add. Wonderful guy, treated me really well -- was 18 years my junior! I think he was looking for a mother and I thought I was Stella getting her groove back! After three years it just wasn't working -- the shine had worn off. We divorced.

I have had a couple of serious relationships since then but nothing I wanted to make permanent. I would like to have someone to grow old with -- I think -- but so far that person has not appeared and I am comfortable enough with my own company, and I guess selfish enough to want it my way -- that I'm flying solo. Again, I have enough friends -- more platonic than romantic at this point in my life -- to keep me company.

So, enough of the synopsis. Let me get to some specific points of some of the questions you asked others in your interviews and relate some of my thoughts and memories.

As to when I first became aware of being female -- I think I always was. I don't know if it is Southern culture, small-town culture, or particular to my family, but

as a child I pretty much always wore dresses, loved to put on my mother's lipstick, clomp around in her heels, etc. And having a brother two years older probably brought out the difference, also.

We had a large extended family with lots of cousins and we were close with the whole group. I knew five of my great-grandparents, the first of those five not dying until I was nine years old. So there were always plenty of adults around to reinforce the difference between what young ladies did/could and did not do!

I remember being very anxious to wear a bra, start my period, shave my legs, etc. Oddly enough, I don't remember when I actually started my period -- and believe me, I used to check my panties religiously for signs -- but I do remember when I first tried to use a tampon at the age of thirteen. I couldn't find where to put it and called my mother to come, like an emergency, to help me insert the thing. I was in tears thinking I wasn't formed normally. I had my first training bra when I was nine. No, I didn't need it but Judy, in my class, did and had one and I couldn't rest until I did, too. My father wouldn't allow me to shave my legs for forever and I can remember I used to sneak and shave the upper portion that didn't show, so he couldn't tell I had disobeyed, but it made me feel "womanly" to do this little thing.

There was one guy in high school that had been my boyfriend from grammar school and we went steady off and on all through high school. He was not my first

date and not the one I lost my virginity to, amazingly enough. I held on to my virginity until I was nineteen. In addition to messages from my family, there was a lot of peer pressure in my group to remain a virgin. Although I did find out in subsequent years that several of those girls had been very hypocritical!

Right before I moved to New York, as a goodbye to a former boyfriend, I had sex. It was truly the third time I had ever had full-blown sex. And yes, I got pregnant. So when I first came north I was pregnant, and didn't know it. It was devastating to me to miss a few periods. I tried denying it but finally went to the doctor. Three of them, in fact, not wanting to accept the truth. I worked for American Airlines at the time, in reservations, and had a truly wonderful supervisor. I went to her and told her my problem and she was wonderfully supportive. Abortion was illegal at the time, but she offered to help me go to Puerto Rico for an abortion if I wanted, took me to a doctor in NY that offered a black market abortion or black market adoption (meaning I could sell the baby), and also took me to Spence Chapin adoption agency. I didn't have faith in my family accepting my situation so that I could keep the baby -- this was 1969/1970 -- so I chose Spence Chapin and legal adoption. They were absolutely wonderful. I guess God was looking out for me after all because in addition to Spence Chapin and my supervisor at work, I had developed a network of friends that really helped me through that period in my life.

Amazingly enough, I kept the whole thing a secret from my family. Didn't even tell my brothers until after Mike had died -- I thought there was a chance my son would try to find me -- he never did. Or hasn't yet. And he would be 41 by now so I assume he won't. I have kept in touch with Spence Chapin through the years with my address in the event that he would try to make the contact and am registered with ALMA and the such. I don't think it is my place to try to find him -- even though at one point I gave that serious thought -- but I would want to be available if he ever searched.

I feel this is very scanty -- compared to the pages and pages of the others' revelations -- but my thoughts have dried up for the moment. We can talk more on the phone if you like and have questions or want more specific details. Hope that it is helpful.

The fact that when it came to the rubber meeting the road I had such a hard time sharing my thoughts is certainly reflection for a different subject, isn't it?

I finally put my finger on what may have made me feel so squirrely about sharing my thoughts. In listening to and reflecting on other folks' pasts not only did it bring up my related memories but it took me to other levels, more broadly about life in general, I suppose. I mentioned to you that I had lately been pretty introspective and to be quite honest, it is absolutely wearing me out! I'm sick of

myself and want to lighten it up. The past is the past -- think of it, learn from it if possible, then for God's sake, let it go! Now, this is where I start feeling squirrely. I'm not a philosopher or a psychologist and I think my thoughts are pretty dime-store and there isn't any merit in sharing them. I guess they are pretty tailored to my life. See, here I go -- pontificating!

Just wanted to share that observation and would be curious if others, in reflecting on their past romantic/love/sex lives and thoughts on being a female, also opened up a broader analysis!

In response to my questions in the interviews on feminism, Emjay offered her own views:

I did want to give my thoughts on feminism and the movement. I was not, and am not, what I would consider a feminist. I believe strongly in equal rights but I just as strongly believe there are inherent differences in the sexes, some physical and some environmental/cultural/emotional -- of course the emotional may be due to the cultural and environmental influences. I really hate to be categorized -- I don't believe gender, sexual preference, race, etc. should be used as categories but strictly as descriptions.

However, due to being a part of the generation where the feminist movement did

have an impact, I certainly reaped benefits. I had several instances where I was not the absolute first, but among some of the first women, in several positions. The first being on Wall Street. I was one of the first women ever to be in institutional fixed income sales (back in the 70's). I was absolutely awful at it and didn't have the killer instinct that it takes to be really successful so therefore didn't stay in it very long. But the interesting thing I wanted to point out -- there were three of us hired at the same time: one man, two women. The man was hired at literally twice the salary as we two women were, and he was given the best territory. It was actually said out loud that the man had a family and children, therefore needed more income than two single women. The job I had previously on a fixed income trading desk, my boss had no qualms in saying, in front of me, that he liked to hire women because they worked twice as hard for much less money! Sickened with the mentality of Wall Street, I started waitressing while I came up with a new life plan. I thought I really wanted to be a bartender but back in the late-70s, early-80s, New York didn't have many -- if any -- female bartenders. I finally found a bar that hired me -- Irish pub/restaurant in the East 70s. Again, I found out it wasn't what I had thought it would be -- absolutely hated it. Nowhere to run when it got uncomfortable. And actually understood why the field had been so restricted. Most bar patrons were men and if they tried to put the move on a female bartender and got rejected, it was pretty uncomfortable. So particular personality types could handle rejecting the patrons with tact -- I wasn't that personality type!

But in general, I think women have always had the spine to do whatever was necessary for survival and whatever positions they truly desired. The feminist movement didn't change or cause that just opened previously closed doors.

Going Forward

The time has come for female elders to rescue girls and young women, to offer them a vision of love that will sustain them on their journey...While romantic love is a crucial part of this journey, it is no longer deemed all that matters; rather, it is an aspect of our overall work to create loving bonds, circles of love that nurture and sustain collective female well-being.

- bell hooks

*Communion: The Female Search for Love*⁵⁵

The first time I ever conducted an interview, a question came to me that I have asked in almost every subsequent interview: “What kind of message would you give to young people going forward?” Because the interviews for this thesis were exclusively with women, I modified the question, asking: “What kind of message would you give to young women going forward?” The following are some of the responses I received:

Lalla Grimes was not optimistic:

Grimes : [Pause for contemplation.] Nothing very positive. I'm just – don't get born. I mean, I really...But basically I don't think that human life is very much worth it. I mean, by the time we're here we don't have a choice; we're here and

⁵⁵ hooks, xx-xxi.

you have to live it and make the best of it that you can. And I feel that I have done that. I think it's important to give to others. It's important to try to be nurturing and caring toward others.

Sybil Lefferts, too, expressed concern, but took a more objective view:

Sybil Lefferts: I have concerns. I am very appreciative of what technology has brought to all of us. I mean, I use a cell phone, I use a computer. I am delighted with all of that. But I see – everywhere I go, everybody is plugged in. Which I think makes for a very insular kind of existence. And I think – I'm concerned about our society and the absence of involvement in civic affairs and – I don't know, I just – I'm personally very – as many of us are – very upset about how – the direction we are going in politically. And why aren't we in the streets? You know? Why aren't we – or some equivalent.

On the other hand, taking the long view, I know the pendulum always swings and we will get past this. I don't know if I'll live to see us getting past it but – I think there is too much – I don't know, the whole thing about Facebook and people reporting to the world about everything that's going on in their lives, I wonder what that is really about. Why is there the need to do that? Is that the technology has created the need and I don't see the purposefulness of it. You know.

So it's just be involved and try to be healthy. Ask for help when you need it. As a social worker, I can always say, it's a sign of strength to ask for help. [Slight laugh.]

Jimmy Lou Jackson advocated for selfishness. This is what she meant:

Jackson: I would say be selfish. Because they teach little girls not to be selfish. I think to be – to stand up for yourself. And if you don't want children, don't have them. If you do want children, have them, but be sure you're ready to do that. If you want a husband, get one; if you don't want one, don't get one. And I think that really to me, the thing is don't put yourself in this female box that people want to put you in.

You know, there's the story about the little girl that was – they were asking her if she were a little boy what would she do. She said, "I'd just, I'd just, I'd just wanna..." And when they asked the little boy if he was a little girl what would he – he shuddered. So just, like I say, be selfish. Think about yourself.

Lorna Lynch talked about being true to oneself:

Lynch: Oh. I want them to know who they are and be true to it. Because the thing is there are so many different influences out there in the world that if you don't –

if you don't know who you are and what you want, you are so easily persuaded. And you are so easily influenced by society and whatever, even if you don't want to, because you are trying to find yourself. But as long as you find yourself and you know who you are and you are comfortable in your own skin – I mean, that's for me – I think you will be okay.

Joan Moffett stressed the importance of seeking out ways of staying involved:

Moffett: Be involved. I really mean that because you have seen how much I have been involved and all of the things I've done. I've always done something. I think you meet interesting people when you get involved, you do interesting things when you're involved. And what? Sit back – I mean it's all well and good, I was an English major, I read lots of books. That's all well and good, but get out and meet people and help somebody here or help somebody there... You shouldn't just sit back and let it happen to you, you have to be aggressive, and you have to go after some of these things, and be a part of it. Otherwise, you're not going to be a part of it. I mean, people aren't going to come to you. If you're just going to sit back and just think somebody will call me if they need me. No, no, that doesn't happen that way.

Jeanette Gavaris thought it was most important to have a good time:

Gavaris: To young women today. Let me think. What do I say to my kids? I say...go out there and have a good time. Laugh today. I can't think of anything else.

My mother talked about what she discovered in her own life:

Lefferts: I would say develop yourself – well, one thing – this is the most important thing that I found out. This is the important thing for me...Develop yourself, be your own person, be a person sufficient in yourself, where you don't actually need another person in order to have a full and rewarding life. But if you can find a man who is also that way, who does not – is not threatened by your being that way but appreciates it and who you appreciate – and you can enjoy things together, then that's a perfect relationship to me.

My daughter would send the following message to young girls:

And I guess I would say that whatever you – especially for young girls – whatever you feel you are supposed to be doing, there is no one actually, you know, making you do it. There is no one saying you have to be this way and there is no one saying girls have to be this way. And while they may think well, if I don't act like this, you know, boys will never like me – that kind of thing. There are sort of two sides to this – the side that acknowledges the reality is that those boys will

eventually grow up and – or at least the ones who you want to end up with – will eventually grow up and they won't necessarily want that anymore.

But the other more important side of it is that – is that you don't need them. And I know you feel like you do because – because ultimately I think girls feel like they need boys because the boys are the one who have the power and girls realize on some level they can get it through boys. You can seize that power without them. You don't need them to do it.

Perhaps the simplest, but one of the most compelling responses, came from Simone Darantière, who, at eighty-six, after a lifetime of trying to overcome the emotional scars of her childhood and failed marriage, said: *Tenez bon! Hold fast!*

All these women learned, through trying personal experiences, that the only way to feel fulfilled in life is to do it yourself. As hooks discovered:

The only person who will never leave us, whom we will never lose, is ourself. Learning to love our female selves is where our search for love must begin. We begin this journey to love by examining the ideas and beliefs we have held about the nature of intimacy and true love.⁵⁶

Like many of these women, I, too, have had to learn it the hard way. Now in the midst of the dissolution of my second marriage, I have taken a look at the role of nostalgia,

⁵⁶ hooks, 194.

idealization, and imagination in my own life. When I think back on the lifecourse of my yearnings, I see someone whose ideals were reflected in the eyes of others, of culture and society. I wanted to be 1950s model of the perfect wife; the ideal of the liberated sexual partner of the 1960s and '70s; the super woman of the 1980s, '90s, and beyond. As a very young child I had known who I was, and prided myself on my uniqueness. But somewhere along the way I lost my bearings and began to give away pieces of myself. I have only recently begun to reclaim them, and have learned that this reclamation is most effectively accomplished when one is part of a community. As Berlant has written:

'I didn't think it would turn out this way' is the secret epitaph of intimacy. To intimate is to communicate with the sparest of signs and gestures, and at its root intimacy has the quality of eloquence and brevity. But intimacy also involves an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about both oneself and other that will turn out in a particular way. Usually, this story is set within the zones of familiarity and comfort: friendship, the couple, the family form, animated by expressive and emancipated kinds of love. Yet the inwardness of the intimate is met by a corresponding publicness. People consent to trust their desire for 'a life' to institutions of intimacy; and it is hoped that the relations formed within those frames will turn out beautifully, lasting over the long duration, perhaps across generations.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Berlant, Lauren. *Intimacy*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000. 1.

Nostalgia, Imagination, and Idealization

Nostalgia

La nostalgia era stata una dimensione di tutta la sua vita cosciente, fin dall'adolescenza negli anni Cinquanta, in cui ascoltava racconti e leggeva romanzi carichi di rimpianto per un passato antico. Ma c'era qualcosa di favoloso, un'età dell'oro perduta in quella prima nostalgia. La ricerca per riacciuffare luoghi come le vecchie osterie e le loro sensazioni si era intensificata negli anni Sessanta, accompagnandosi con una vita da arrabbiati che nel ricordo conteneva un disagio, allora inconscio, per la prevalenza maschile.

- Luisa Passerini
*La fontana della giovinezza*⁵⁸

Nostalgia had been a dimension of her entire conscious existence, beginning in adolescence in the 1950s, when she listened to stories and read novels laden with regrets for a distant past. But there was something wonderful about it, a golden age lost in this early nostalgia. The search to recapture places as though they were old inns and their sensations had intensified during the 60s, accompanying a life of anger which in memory contained an unease, albeit unconscious, for male superiority.

I am endlessly fascinated, in both my clinical and oral history work with older women, and in my own life, by the continual process of accepting – or not accepting – the changes in female identity brought about by aging. When I was a social work student I spent a year working as an intern in a psychiatric ward. Brought together by circumstance and a common experience of depression, an unlikely friendship developed on the ward between a young woman in her twenties and an older

⁵⁸ Passerini, Luis. *La Fontana della giovinezza*. Firenze: Giunti, 1999. 18-19.

woman in her eighties. They spent hours together walking arm-in-arm in the halls of the ward. One day I overheard the younger woman ask the older: “At your age, what do you see when you look in the mirror?” To which the older woman replied: “I see an eighteen-year-old girl.” The older woman was not delusional; she was merely wistfully recounting an experience that many of us, getting older, have shared.

According to Ritivoi, nostalgia “expresses a crisis of representation that triggers a crisis of identity...”⁵⁹ Implicit in this crisis is the question of continuity and rupture. We fashion and refashion our identities through stories in an attempt to achieve some sense of continuity. Davis, who has written extensively on the subject of nostalgia, posits that the nostalgic “formula” is “almost ideal,” as it allows us to “quiet our fears of the abyss while bestowing an endearing luster on past selves that may not have seemed all that lustrous at the time.”⁶⁰

The word nostalgia derives its meaning from the Greek words *nostos*, which means “to return home,” and *algos*, meaning “pain.” Coined by the Swiss physician Johannes Hofer in the late 17th century, its original meaning referred to homesickness. It was

⁵⁹ Ritivoi, Andreea Deciu. *Yesterday's Self: Nostalgia and the Immigrant Identity*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002. 17.

⁶⁰ Davis, Fred. *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*. New York: The Free Press, 1979. 41.

first mentioned in a medical dictionary in 1755.⁶¹ Until the mid-19th century nostalgia was thought to be an illness, grouped with other *malédies de mémoire*.⁶² With the demedicalization of nostalgia, it took on meanings far greater than the idea of homesickness. Yet, for years to come it was still regarded with suspicion. Davis describes this phenomenon as *nostophobia* – a word coined by author to represent the opposite of nostalgia: fear of, or revulsion about, the past.⁶³

In the modern sense, we understand nostalgia to mean a fondly remembered, personally experienced past. We do not generally feel nostalgic for experiences of shame, trauma, or grief. Wyatt posits that the need to regard one's past as a "complete repository of things that have happened, even though they are now unknown"⁶⁴ is an inevitable, inexorable part of being human, and insures the continuity of the self:

Such conviction represents the continuity of the self, which is an indispensable aspect of experiencing oneself as an integrated person, or "being normal." The sense of a meaningful continuity is therefore as "true" as it is necessary. We need the feeling of order and continuity so as to cope with the unending onslaught of external and internal experiences. We therefore have to impose our order on their flux and, if one cannot grasp continuity, make it up in some

⁶¹ Von Haller, Ibrecth, and Eberhard, Johann Peter. *Onomatologia medica completa oder Medicinisches Lexicon: ... das alle Benennungen und Kunstwörter, welche der Arzneywissenschaft und Apotekerkunst eigen sind, deutlich und vollständig erkläret*. Original in the Bavarian State Library: A.L.Stettin, 1775.

⁶² Ritivoi, 19.

⁶³ Davis, 15.

⁶⁴ Frederick Wyatt, "The Reconstruction of the Individual and Collective Past," in Robert W. White (Ed.), *The Study of Lives* (New York: Atherton, 1963), p. 319.

*fashion ourselves. The sureness of "I was" is a necessary component of the sureness of "I am."*⁶⁵

The nostalgic past is remembered comparatively. Nostalgia romanticizes the past by locating within our memories an earlier, more pleasing, version of the self, against which we measure the present self, often finding it lacking. Commenting on the need to remember this earlier, more acceptable self, in order to maintain continuity, Davis writes:

*Inasmuch as the feeling of discontinuity must finally find its existential base, as it were, in some earlier apprehension of continuity, those discontinuities which in their onrush prove too prolonged, disparate, or unassimilable, would in short deprive nostalgia of its homey, warmly remembered material as it requires to play the beguiling game of celebrating the past so as to better endure the future.*⁶⁶

Davis identifies three categories of nostalgia:⁶⁷

1. First Order or Simple Nostalgia – a fairly cheerful remembrance of the past in the context of a slightly negative attitude toward the present. Recognition that the past is gone and return is impossible.

2. Second Order, or Reflexive Nostalgia – prompts an analysis of one's experiences, in which the person considers questions regarding the accuracy and relevance of the content of reminiscing.

⁶⁵ Wyatt, 319.

⁶⁶ Davis, 49-50.

⁶⁷ Davis, 29-30.

3. Third Order or Interpreted Nostalgia – even more analytic than second order – poses the question: “Why am I nostalgic, and what does my nostalgia signify for me as an individual?”

According to Davis, Second and Third Order nostalgia both introduce nostalgia as a “psychological filter” used to establish a sense of personal identity. Nostalgia becomes a form of “autobiographical memory.”

Unlike fantasy, nostalgia seeks to represent the “truth” of the past, although this truth is likely altered when we remember it at different times in our lives. We are most apt to feel nostalgic at those junctures in the life cycle which require changes in our identities. The demand for new adaptations may originate either internally or externally. When I interviewed one of my women’s groups – a group composed of women in their seventies and eighties - for a teaching film about women’s issues across the lifespan⁶⁸, I opened with the question: “Was there a defining moment when you first felt old?” Despite the prevalence of several age-related medical conditions, that moment was typically defined in relation to others – forced retirement, a passing comment by a stranger, someone getting up to offer a seat on the bus.

Martha, a member of the group, recounted the following incident:

⁶⁸ Taylor, Lauren. *Social Work Practice with Women*. Columbia University School of Social Work, 2005.

I was on the bus one day and there was a crowd. And I was getting ready to get off the bus, and there was a woman standing in my way, and I was attempting to get off the bus. And I heard someone say: "Let that old woman out!" And it was the first time that I realized that other people viewed me as an old woman. And it was very upsetting.

Although Martha was ultimately able to accept her new identity, Tova was not:

When something happens to me I say "Oh well. This is what they mean by old age." And then there's another part of me that refuses to accept that.

Instead, Tova sought refuge in nostalgia. She contacted an old flame with whom she had had an affair fifty years earlier. Despite his clear statement that he was no longer interested in a romantic relationship with B, she persevered, believing that she would eventually win him over. In order to sustain this effort, she fashioned an identity based on nostalgic memory.

“Reach for the stars”

Tova’s story

From the outset I sensed that Tova was a “difficult” person. Whenever she sat down in the treatment room, she insisted I move my chair closer to her; then asked me to move it away. Her anger was visceral, but there was something compelling about her. An attractive and youthful seventy-five-year-old woman, Tova came to see me in the aftermath of 9/11. She had watched the whole thing on television, and “of course I turned away.” A friend, noticing the persistence of Tova’s anxiety, suggested she contact our clinic.

Tova was born and raised in Brooklyn, the only child of a Russian immigrant parents. Her father deserted the family when Tova was three years old. The only time he ever made contact with the family again was when Tova was ten. He wrote a letter from Chicago in which he stated that Tova was not actually his child and he was therefore absolved of all financial responsibility for her. After he left, Tova and her mother moved in with an aunt and uncle, a childless couple who doted on Tova. But when Tova was seven her mother had a falling-out with the aunt and uncle, and mother and daughter moved into a small apartment of their own. Her mother worked long hours in the Bronx as a dress-maker, and Tova became a latch-key child as there was no one to look after her

when she came home from school. Her mother constantly gave her mixed messages. She would tell her she should “reach for the stars,” at the same time blaming her for her father’s desertion because Tova was “just like [her] father.” When Tova was five years old, a man in her neighborhood enticed her to come to his apartment by offering her candy. He sexually abused her and told her not to tell anyone. Tova thinks someone must have seen him with her, because when she came home her mother told her never to go with strangers. Tova’s mother never said another word about it. When Tova was twelve the superintendent in her building fondled her in the stairwell.

Tova is an extraordinarily talented artist, who won a scholarship to a prestigious art school when she was only sixteen, but because of the disturbing subject matter of her paintings she has had difficulty finding places to exhibit her work. Galleries and museums, concerned that people would be offended, were loath show the stylized portraits of silver-screen era movie stars, set against detailed depictions of Nazi death camps. There are Vivian Leigh and Clark Gable, locked in a romantic embrace in front of the tracks leading to Auschwitz - “Arbeit Macht Frei” on the gate behind them, like the neon sign on a movie theater kiosk. Even Betty Boop makes an appearance, looking seductive in her blue evening gown, as we notice dozens of discarded shoes and valises of prisoners, painted in the colors of Renaissance art, piled high around her. Tova’s mother lost all her siblings in the camps. She never let Tova forget.

The Holocaust was a powerful theme in Tova's life. Although she did not have a religious upbringing, she was strongly identified with her Jewish heritage. Much later she became observant, and somewhat dogmatic in her approach to Judaism.

Tova never finished art school. Her high school sweetheart decided to go to Israel to avoid the draft, and asked Tova to go with him. They married before they left, and shortly thereafter Tova became pregnant. The young couple went to live on a kibbutz, where Tova gave birth to a son. Tragically, when the baby was six months old, Tova's husband developed meningitis and died four days later. Tova stayed in Israel for another year, and then decided to come back to the US. She never allowed herself to mourn his death. Her life was chaotic and her relationships with men were often unstable. She had two more children, both out of wedlock, and eventually married again, but not to the father of either of her two younger children. Her second husband had a serious drinking problem, and Tova eventually left him. She lived on welfare for a period of time, until she got her life together and went back to school. When she graduated she was able to find work as a graphic designer, and support her three children.

When Tova and I began working together, she was living in a small apartment in a low-income senior residence. She had turned the bedroom into a studio, and slept on a pull-out sofa in the living room. For several years before she

moved there, she had been living with a man in his large house in the suburbs. That relationship, which had been a relationship of convenience for Tova after her divorce, was no longer fulfilling, and she decided to leave. She stored her belongings in boxes in the basement of her daughter's home in New Jersey. But Tova's daughter was moving to Chicago, and asked her mother to go through her things and decide what she wanted to keep. In one of the boxes, Tova found a bundle of letters she had received almost fifty years earlier, from Bill, a young man with whom she had had a brief, but passionate affair. At the time she was pregnant with someone else's child, but it did not dampen the ardor of this young man. The affair ended when Bill moved to California to go to graduate school. He asked Tova to go with him, but she already had one child at home and another on the way, and her mother was in poor health. She felt she could not leave New York. He wrote to her often, his letters full of passion and praise. But gradually the letters stopped coming, and Tova's life was taken up with the care of her young children. As she sat and read the letters so many years later, she was overcome with a desire to find him again. She remembered the name of the brother of a friend of his, with whom she had some professional contact in her years as a graphic designer. She found his name in the phone book, and called to see if he knew how she could get in touch with her former lover. That night, phone number in hand, Tova left Bill a message. The next day he called her back.

Bill was living in California when Tova contacted him. In the intervening years he had been married five times, and had two sons with whom he had distant relationships. His last wife, with whom he had spent the most time, was disabled and eventually died. His other marriages ended in divorce. He made it clear to Tova from the start that he was not interested in getting involved in another intimate relationship. He hinted at some physical issues, but never disclosed what they were. But Tova was used to getting her way. She invited him to New York, and much to her delight he accepted, but with the caveat that they would just be "friends." She offered him the guest bed in her studio, but secretly hoped he would succumb to her charms. She bought sexy lingerie and filled her apartment with flowers. Bill stayed for several days, but continued to assert that he was only interested in a friendship. When he left, Tova felt frustrated, rejected, and angry. She was determined not to give up.

Over the next couple of years Tova and Bill corresponded regularly by email. Some of her friends advised her to break off the relationship, as it was becoming an obsession and interfering with her life. She was so emotionally exhausted that she was unable to paint. Others encouraged her to enjoy the friendship, even if it would always remain platonic. Tova alternated between these two extremes. Sometimes she would write an angry email, giving Bill an ultimatum, and sometimes she would try to restrain herself from writing at all. But the harder she tried, the more her yearning for this man tormented her. She

made a trip to California to see him, but came back profoundly disappointed after he made arrangements for her to stay in a hotel. Her friends tried to cheer her up by suggesting that he might no longer be able to “perform” sexually, but was embarrassed to let her know. She tried Internet dating, thinking that if she could find sexual fulfillment with someone else, she could let go of her desire for Bill. But when other men expressed interest, she pushed them away. Bill is the only one she desires, and she is still reaching for the stars.

Landman cautions us that “to reflect on the real, unsentimentalized past is to open oneself up to regret, feeling sorry about past mistakes, misfortunes, and missed opportunities.”⁶⁹ Nostalgia allows us to appreciate our former selves, while filtering from consideration the unpleasant or shameful aspects of our experiences, allowing us to rehabilitate, through a process of normalization, “marginal, fugitive, and eccentric facets of earlier selves.”⁷⁰ In her attempt to rediscover her identity as a desirable sexual woman, Tova discounted an aspect of her earlier self which she regarded as shameful. In fact, when she had had the original affair with Bill, she was pregnant out of wedlock with the child of another man. The discomfort with this aspect of her story emanated, not only from an internal sense of shame, but also from Tova’s perception of what others might think of her. Davis asks us to consider

⁶⁹ Landman, Janet. *Regret: The Persistence of the Possible*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993. 6.

⁷⁰ Davis, 44.

nostalgia, although often felt to be intensely private, as a social experience having implications for the social sphere of our lives as well.⁷¹ According to Randall, our stories are continually being “co-authored” by others, and we can become “destoried” by the constraints of society.⁷² As Cole noted: “Growing old cannot be understood apart from its subjective experience, mediated by social condition and cultural significance.”⁷³

Imagination

*Oh! While long buried recollections start,
Linked as with adamant about our heart;
Thy last, best gift, Imagination, pour!
The fond remembrance of those gone before –
The hope to meet – though here we meet no more.*

- Luisa Frances Poulter
*Imagination*⁷⁴

Nostalgia requires imagination. In order to revisit the past, one must engage in a process of reconstructing it through imagination. According to Hudson and Jacot, imagination is a central function of the brain, which invests the Other with “almost

⁷¹ Davis, vii.

⁷² Randall, William L. “Storied Worlds: acquiring a Narrative Perspective on Aging, Identity, and Everyday Life.” In Kenyon, Gary, Phillip, Clark, & Brian de Vries (Eds.). *Narrative Gerontology: Theory, Research, and Practice*. New York: Springer Publishing, 2001. 41.

⁷³ Cole, Thomas R. *The Journey of Life: A Cultural History of Aging in America*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992. xxii.

⁷⁴ Poulter, Luisa Frances. *Imagination; a poem in two parts. With other poems*. London: Saunders, 1841. 93.

magical significance.”⁷⁵ They go on to posit that the imagination needs dissonance, and it “wITHERS in the face of differences that are either non-negotiable or so easily negotiated as scarcely to qualify as differences at all.”⁷⁶ Ben Ze’ev and Goussinsky reflect on the two-sided nature of this dissonance:

*One of our greatest advantages over animals is our capacity to imagine circumstances that differ from our present ones. However, the capacity to imagine, which unchains us from the present, chains us to the prospects of the possible. Imagination is a two-edged sword: It is a gift, but one that bites. The great human blessing – that is, our capacity to be aware of possible scenarios – is also our fundamental curse, as it affords us the realization of our profound limitations as well as our imminent death.*⁷⁷

Person believes that romantic love is an act of the imagination, and underscores the impact of cultural values on the notion of falling in love.⁷⁸

*Romantic passion, mythic in its power over contemporary lives, draws on a shared fantasy with, a specially endowed, irreplaceable, and unique Other. While the individual imagination acting on early life experience decisively influences the lover’s choice of the beloved, the underlying impulse to fall in love is shaped by the culture’s loves stories, fairly tales, and lyrics, and by its fundamental values.*⁷⁹

The act of imagining allows us to transform the Other into an object of desire.

Mitchell posits that this “imaginative transformation” is a necessary part of a

⁷⁵ Hudson, Liam and Jacot, Bernadine. *Intimate Relations: The Natural History of Desire*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995. 1-2.

⁷⁶ Hudson and Jacot, 14.

⁷⁷ Ben Ze’ev, Aaron and Goussinsky, Ruhama. *In the Name of Love: Romantic Ideology and its Victims*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. xiv.

⁷⁸ Person, Ethel. *By Force of Fantasy: How We Make Our Lives*. New York: Basic Books, 1995. 209.

⁷⁹ Person, 209.

process in which our perception of the Other is “spiced with illusions of fantasy to create a sweeter offering.”⁸⁰ Psychologists and philosophers have come to realize that perception is not a passive endeavor, but rather, an active process of synthesizing discontinuous and sometimes dissonant sensations and images, into a comprehensible whole. Whereas in the past, imagination and fantasy were regarded as potential threats to the true nature of our perceptions, they are now regarded as an integral part of the process. According to Boym, reflective nostalgia has the capacity to access multiple planes of the imagination. Reflective nostalgics are aware of the distance between identity and resemblance, and this distance drives them “to tell their story, to narrate the relationship between past, present and future.”⁸¹ This process is beautifully described by Maristella Lorch in one of our interviews, as she talks about bringing imagination and the self into an exploration of the future:

It is also the ocean of life, yes. It's the ocean of life - that is a very good point. It is the ocean of life which – we don't even dare to think about it when we are twenty already...Life is a magnificent forest ahead of us that we explore with the best of us – the most creative – looking to – into it, there is a chance to explore it. People

⁸⁰ Mirchell, Stephen A. *Can Love Last?: The Fate of Romance Over Time*. New York: W.W.Norton & Co., 2002. 104.

⁸¹ Boym, Svetlana. “Reflective Nostalgia: Virtual Reality and Collective Memory.” *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books, 2001. 50.

that have less strength and less imagination, they take one step at a time without even imagining what may come after.

This projection of imagination into the future is, by nature, a projection of the remembered past.

Idealization

Idealization is a lens through which the imagination perceives the Other. The role of idealization is perhaps more salient than any other aspect of the imagination in the realization of romantic love. H.G. Wells coined the term “*Lover-Shadow*” to signify the image each of us holds in our minds of the idealized Other. Wells believed that this “*other consciousness*” is almost as essential to our lives as our own self-consciousness. He described the *Lover-Shadow* as “*a continually growing and occasionally more subtle complex of expectations and hope: an aggregation of lovely and exciting thoughts; conceptions of encounter and reactions picked up from observation, descriptions, drama; reveries of understanding and reciprocity...*”⁸²

Writing from the perspective of a psychoanalyst, Person believes that romantic

⁸² Wells, H.G. *H.G. Wells in Love: Postscript to an Experiment in Autobiography*. Wells, G.P. (Ed.). Boston: Little, Brown, 1984. 53.

fantasies are an attempt to rediscover the perfect mother, who would “love unerringly and unceasingly.”⁸³

Although idealization has often been regarded with disdain, Singer posits that narrative histories all demonstrate how idealization and imagination are creative potentialities, rather than modes of falsification:

*Idealization and imagination are ways of experiencing the world afresh. They are attempts to make sense of it, to decide what matters in it. They determine what shall be accepted as meaningful and important in life, not only because of appraisive goodness to be found but also because one has learned how to bestow value upon some person, thing, or ideal.*⁸⁴

Mitchell agrees that idealization may allow us to connect with aspects of the imagination that would otherwise be unavailable to us, but he cautions that the “serviceability” of idealization occurs only when idealizing narratives are co-constructed.⁸⁵ When the idealization is one-sided, it may lead to unrequited love. Mitchell has concluded that enduring romance is a contradiction in terms, as it is inspired by idealization, which is, by nature, illusory.

Idealization is destabilizing, and even when the idealized narrative is shared, we are torn between the seductive allure of passion and the need for stability. Sometimes

⁸³ Person, 106.

⁸⁴ Singer, Irving. *Feeling and Imagination: The Vibrant Flux of Our Existence*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001. 68.

⁸⁵ Mitchell, 113.

the pull towards safety can lead to a rupture in the relationship. This story, as told to me by Diane, a woman in her late seventies, provides such an example:

Until I met Al I didn't know what I was missing. My husband – you know, sex on Saturday nights. In and out – that's all. I was never in love with him. On Fridays we would meet after work, and have Chinese food. Then we would do the shopping for the week. BORING! But with Al it was different. I knew something was missing in my marriage, but until I met Al I didn't know what it was. Al taught me everything. You know that feeling when you can't wait to tear each other's clothes off? When you're hungry for each other and you can't get enough of each other? Like in the movies. Boy, do I miss that. We would rent a hotel room at lunch time and heat up the bed. Or sometimes we would drive out to the Island (Long Island). In those days there were still woods on the other side of the bridge. We would drive right into the woods and 'heat up' the car. Once, Al got out of the car to take a pee. Nothing unusual about that. There was a broken tennis racquet next to the car. I remember he held it up and said 'tennis anyone?' He paid for my nose job, too. That was 1957. We were together eight years. I was drinking a lot in those days and I did something stupid. I called his wife and told her what was going on. She gave him an ultimatum. Al was furious at me and refused to see me again.

Ben Ze'ev and Goussinky believe that the unfinished business of romantic relationships, such as Diane's, only serve to increase excitement.⁸⁶ Person posits that some people who longed for love, or fantasized great love affairs earlier in life, may turn off the fantasy in mid-life, instead finding vicarious excitement in the fantasies embedded in the narratives of popular culture.⁸⁷ Although I have come across this phenomenon in my clinical work, many of the women with whom I have spoken, both in a clinical setting and in oral history interviews, find these fantasies reemerging in old age. This reawakening can come unexpectedly, as it did for Diane:

"Leaves of Grass." You know, I found it on a high shelf. I knew it had to be somewhere in the apartment but I guess I just never looked for it. I'm taking the books off the shelves now because I'm having the dining room painted. I opened it, and on the front page he had written how he wished he could express his love for me as poets do. When I opened that- it started. The machine started to move again - after all these years! Oh, it brought back memories.

In Western culture we turn to romantic love to fulfill many unmet needs and longings. We fantasize not only about a lover, but about romantic love itself. According to Person, sustained idealization may be more important than the

⁸⁶ Ben Ze'ev and Goussinsky. 163.

⁸⁷ Person, 18.

intensity of passion. For some people, even the memory of a lost love “may provide the sweetness of an entire life.”⁸⁸ In the words of Jean Jacques Rousseau:

*J'ai remarqué, dans les vicissitudes d'une longue vie, que les époques les plus douces jouissances et des plaisirs les plus vifs ne sont pourtant pas celles dont le souvenir m'attire et me touche le plus. Ces courts moments de délire et de passion, quelque vifs qu'ils puissent être, ne sont cependant, et par leur vivacité même, que des point bien clairsemés dans la ligne de la vie. Ils sont trop rares et trop rapides pour constituer un état ; et le bonheur que mon cœur regrette n'est point composé d'instant fugitifs, mais un état simple et permanent, qui n'a rien de vif en lui-même, mais dont la durée accroît le charme, au point d'y trouver la suprême félicité.*⁸⁹

I have observed that, in the vicissitudes of a long life, the periods of the sweetest enjoyment, and the liveliest pleasures, are not, however, those whose remembrance most wins or touches me. These short moments of delirium and passion, however lively they may be, are no more, and from their vivacity even, than very distant points pricked on the line of life. They are too rare and too rapid to constitute a state; and the happiness my heart regrets is not composed of fugitive instants, but whose duration tempers the charm to a degree of reaching, at last, supreme felicity.

⁸⁸ Person, Ethel. *Dreams of Love and Fateful Encounters: the Power of Romantic Passion*. Washington, D.C.: America Psychiatric Publications, 2007. 268.

⁸⁹ Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Les confessions*. Paris: Bry, 1856. 133.

Many Wonderful Women

I interviewed many wonderful women for this thesis, all of whom shared their stories with unusual self-reflection and candor. The women ranged in age from 61 to 96 (one woman chose not to reveal her age), with the exception of two. I included portions of an interview with a forty-six-year-old home health aide, who has been a participant observer in the lives of many older women. I also interviewed my daughter, as I was interested in her dual perspective as both a young woman looking to the future, and a descendant of the generations of women in my family. It was necessary to narrow my selection from the vast quantity of material I had gathered; I used the stories of the following women:

Betty Lefferts, 89, was born and raised in a suburb of New York City. She is currently working as Senior Vice President of the Arts and Culture Sector of the National Executive Service Corps. She plays the violin in an orchestra, and is still playing tennis.

Calypso Taylor, 22, was born and raised in New York City. She is a student at Hunter College, majoring in Political Science and minoring in Studio Art.

Jeanette Gavaris, 91, was born and raised in New York City. When she was young she worked as a secretary for the Works Progress Administration, but left the work world to stay home and raise her family.

Jimmy Lou Jackson, 68, was born and raised in a small town in the hills of Kentucky. She worked as a lab technician for many years, but left that career to become an artisan and jewelry designer. She is the owner of Hot Flash Beads, a studio/store in Berea, KY.

Joan Moffett, 82, was born and raised in a suburb of New York. She retired from the real estate business, but has remained active as a board member of several organizations in her community.

Lalla Grimes, 68, was born in Louisville, KY, but grew up in both New Jersey and Connecticut. She retired from a long career as an administrator at Columbia University.

Lorna Lynch, 46, was born and raised in St. Vincent, an island in the Caribbean. For many years she has worked as a home health aide for older adults, and is currently studying to be a nurse.

Maristella Lorch, 92, was born and raised in a small village in the Italian Alps. She is Professor Emerita of Italian at Columbia University, and founder and Director Emerita of the Italian Academy for Advanced Studies.

Martha Jane Diana, 61, was born in Mississippi, but raised in several states, as her family moved often. She is a transcriber, and transcribed the interviews for this thesis.

Marvlous Harrison, 96, was born and raised in the South, but moved to the North at the age of fourteen. She retired after thirty years at the American Jewish Committee, where she rose from switchboard operator to office manager. She worked tirelessly for the Civil Rights Movement.

Mary Six Rupert was born and raised in Dallas, Texas. She is a dance teacher and former member of the Rockettes.

Simone Darantière, 85, was born and raised in France. She is a retired schoolteacher and radio journalist, and lives in Paris.

Sybil Lefferts, 80, was born in Chicago, the daughter of musicians. She had a long career in the social service sector, and more recently, as a jazz singer.

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